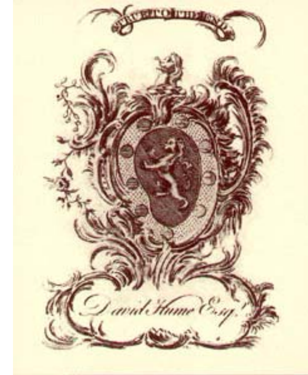

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Hume Studies Volume XXI, Number 2 (November, 1995) 255-274.

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HUME STUDIES
Volume XXI, Number 2, November 1995, pp. 255-274

Hume's *Natural History of Religion*

MICHEL MALHERBE

Even though *The Natural History of Religion* has been said to be one of the first books in the history of religions, it is not much studied for interpreting Hume's philosophy taken as a whole. Nevertheless, its structure is quite clear: after specifying the purpose of the work by distinguishing between the question of the foundation of religion in reason and the question of its origin in human nature, Hume goes over the story of the evolution of religion, from polytheism—its primitive form—to theism (sections I-VIII). He then develops a comparison between these two kinds of religion, evaluating them from several points of view, and closes with a rather whimsical conclusion emphasizing the necessity of scepticism in these matters.

The *Natural History* is written in an easy style and the reader enjoys its progression. Hume uses the same method of composition as the one he had tested with success in several of his *Essays*: a claim is put forth; then the proof is provided, which mixes some historical material with more abstract arguments; finally, several general considerations are stated, which are supposed to be profitable to the public. But if we try to understand the text more systematically and attempt to rationalize its composition or its argumentation, we cannot help feeling at a loss to determine Hume's real intentions and to precisely evaluate the *Natural History's* general import. Of course, it could be said that we ought not overestimate the meaning of the *Natural History* nor look for more than what could be appreciated by an eighteenth century reader, i.e., look for more than what can be expected from

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an essay which tries to catch the attention of the public, borrows a large part of its content,[1] and follows lines of argument which were not uncommon at that time. But we are twentieth century commentators: we have read the *Dialogues*, and we can consider Hume's philosophy as a whole. Besides, the subject is religion, and nobody is indifferent to religion, and, we should add, nobody in the eighteenth century was dispassionate concerning religion.

Several questions about the work arise at once: What is the scope of the preliminary foundation/origin distinction? Why does Hume associate a doctrine bearing on historical facts with a comparative evaluation? How are we going to understand a conclusion so little consonant with the rather dogmatic development of the work?

I do not intend to provide a systematic analysis of the *Natural History*, but rather to catch some of its difficulties by concentrating on its *title*, which not only tells us the object (religion), but also designates a certain scientific or philosophical *genre*, and thus should reflect Hume's method, if not his intention. How can such a text qualify as a *natural* history? Can we not, by commenting upon this appellation, define the method employed by Hume? And since method is the way towards some end, could we not thus try to delineate the real aims of the text?

Except for the foundation/origin distinction, a distinction that he also does not comment upon, Hume offers no clue to the understanding or to the justification of his method.[2] The reader is committed to his own appreciation. Therefore, I would like to take up an indirect line of proceeding: using a comparative method, I will offer three definitions of natural history, or rather, three main meanings which are more or less consistent parts of this rather intricate and plainly polysemic concept[3] in the eighteenth century. I will then assess the applicability of each of these definitions to Hume's work. The oldest meaning of "natural history" is the one derived from Aristotle and renewed by Bacon; it is still valid and viable in 1750, even if its epistemological import and its philosophical sense are changing. The second meaning takes into account one of those invisible, but real, changes: we are at a time when a historical conception of natural history is emerging and is going to reorder the old concept, from top to bottom. The third sense comes later than the *Natural History of Religion*, and is a kind of *post hoc* rationalization, promoted by Dugald Stewart, according to which Hume's or Smith's "natural history" would be a kind of conjectural history.

I

It is evident on a first reading that Hume's text is more concerned with the causal explanation of religion than with the empirical collection and description of data concerning various religions in various places and various times. The material is drawn from what is to be expected from any *honnête*

homme trained in classical education; in a way this reminds us more of narrative histories—which mix relations, observations, and commentaries—than of scientific descriptions. The few empirical data are introduced as mere illustrations. There is, indeed, a kind of classification of the various forms of popular religion, following a genetic order and providing the matter for a comparison through which a pathology of religion is drawn, reminiscent of medical natural histories. But, from a strictly scientific point of view, all this is very unsatisfactory; and it is doubtful whether Hume was in any way interested in such a method. Hume's *Natural History* does not comply with the simplest requirements of natural history. It is a causal or a philosophical history.

But this observation should be pondered more carefully. It cannot mean the mere opposition between natural (or historical) description and causal explanation. For we should bear in mind that the search for causes had rarely been expelled by philosophers from the collecting of phenomena, and that scientific natural histories used to be contrasted with anecdotal histories, the former seeking causal explanations, the latter prompted by curiosity. The old debate between the empirical and the systematic conceptions of natural history was still alive in 1750.

More than a century earlier, Bacon dismissed both the rational method, which *a priori* prescribes a theoretical construction to phenomena, and the empirical method of a merely narrative history, motivated only by utility or the curiosity for wonders or strange things. Bacon had vindicated the idea of an inductive natural history, which would collect and order any kind of phenomena—natural or artificial—provided this material was the basis for the discovery of causes. A fact is not a positive reality that stands alone; it is an effect, and every effect calls for a cause. This inductive natural history is not only the collation of unanalyzed and undiscussed facts; it is also the first step towards scientific explanation. All knowledge begins with the senses. But the sensible world is not the scientific world, i.e., the world which, being known to be true, is the real world. Thus, the method of natural history must order and classify phenomena in a way that is favorable to the invention of causal explanation and to the discovery of abstract natures. Description is the beginning of explanation. Ordering and classifying are the first acts of an evolutive method that is essentially inductive.[4]

At a time when mathematics was about to prevail as the true method of a renewed natural philosophy, Bacon did not succeed in promoting his inductive epistemology. But his philosophical failure was a public success. Although they distrusted the power of Baconian induction as an efficient way to attain knowledge, philosophers of the Royal Society, fighting against an *a priori* conception of natural philosophy, retained the idea not only that science had to rely on a plentiful and ordered natural history, collecting descriptions as well as experiments, but also that natural history was to

provide the human mind with experimental hypotheses, since the knowledge of real essence was impossible. By contrast with the numerous narrative natural histories which were written on any subject, their only purpose being to please, the Baconian claim that classification is the very beginning of explanation was still a motive of experimental philosophy, which spread out from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth, from England to the Continent. In the 1750s, while a certain decline of mathematics and a certain disrepute opposed to its supposed fruitfulness could be observed, and while the important development of the mechanical arts was mainly motivated by mercantilism, the Baconian spirit—even if it was more the spirit of Baconianism than of Bacon himself—could prevail as an epistemological alternative.[5] Criticism of mathematical or theoretical formalism did not mean a neglect of scientific explanation.

This can be seen quite clearly in Buffon's natural history. In his preliminary discourse *De la manière d'étudier et de traiter de l'histoire naturelle* (1749), Buffon opposes the use of systematic methods that anticipate the uniformity of nature and submit the laws of nature to arbitrary laws framed by the human mind. Natural history must collect objects or phenomena; it then compares them and inductively endeavors to draw out of them mutual relations or *rationes* capable of throwing some light on the secret and unknown operations of nature. Of course, the ultimate point that the human mind can reach is the discovery of some general facts, more-or-less coordinated, knowledge of real causes being impossible. But with the greatest emphasis Buffon defends the right of such a method to be regarded as scientific. There are two kinds of truths: mathematical truth, which proceeds through definitions and formal substitutions of identical expressions; and physical truth, which, not arbitrary, does not depend on ourselves but is founded on facts (and not on suppositions). Thus, there are two models of science. Natural (or experimental) philosophy, taken as real knowledge of nature, must follow the inductive method:

> Lorsque les sujets sont trop compliqués pour qu'on puisse y appliquer avec avantage le calcul et les mesures, comme le sont presque tous ceux de l'histoire naturelle et de la physique particulière, il me paraît que la vraie méthode de conduire son esprit dans ces recherches, c'est d'avoir recours aux observations, de les rassembler, d'en faire de nouvelles, et en assez grand nombre pour nous assurer de la vérité des faits principaux....[6]

Buffon's natural history was only concerned with natural philosophy and included the history of man only insofar as man could be studied as an animal endowed with particular properties, living in a certain terrestrial environment. But, it is clear that, on the one hand, when one goes from natural to moral

philosophy, the inductive process has to be enhanced, since in moral philosophy the mathematical model is even less applicable than in natural history. On the other hand, phenomena are so intricate that the discovery of truth is all the more dependent on analytical description and inductive reasoning.

The extension of natural philosophy from natural to moral phenomena was indeed generating several difficulties. Of course, moral phenomena had been introduced into natural histories for a very long time. Sixteenth century travellers' tales freely mixed geographical, biological and ethnographical descriptions. In the seventeenth century, natural histories displaying natural and historical curiosities or marvels multiplied in an attempt to satisfy an insatiable avidity for more-or-less accurate reports or narrations. But what could be easily done in popular natural histories could no longer serve when the purpose of natural histories was to be scientific. Contiguity of phenomena in travellers' tales had to give way to a causal order, which implied that the relationship between natural and moral phenomena should be carefully considered.

First, the evidence for the distinction between natural history and civil history was waning; the moral phenomena under study were no longer confined to political events and had to be dealt with in the light of physical, economic, and social considerations (see, for example, the debate on the role played by climates). At the same time, as the history of particular human societies was broadening to include moral phenomena, it was becoming more dependent on a general or common history, conceived on analogy with the general history of the earth. The project of a history of man, distinct from biblical history and covering every nation's history, could be pursued. Consider the beginning of Lord Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), which extends to all aspects of human life, from biological facts to moral duties:

> The human species is in every view an interesting subject, and has been in every age the chief enquiry of philosophers. The faculties of the mind have been explored, and the affections of the heart; but there is still wanting a History of the Species, in its progress from the savage state to its highest civilization and improvement.[7]

Second, and consequently, the duality of the physical and moral natures of man had to be treated directly, and not discarded, thanks to the distinction between a natural history that described the physical being and condition of man, and a political history that related the political events of such-and-such a nation. Henceforth, the duality was internal to man's unity of being. The result was that one could narrate the temporal history without giving up the causal ambitions of natural history, and, consequently, political histories

could be naturalized. A natural history of man,[8] applied to every aspect of mankind, could melt temporal history and natural history, history and causality, description and explanation. The phrase *the natural history of man* designates the inquiry concerning the relationship to be defined between the physical being of man and his moral or intellectual existence, a relationship that conjoins body and soul, corporeal power and refined sense of duty, and so forth.

Of course, the unity of man's being had to be granted, which depended not only on the fact of man's concrete existence, but also on a philosophical principle. The incipient anthropology was bound up with philosophical reflections on the nature of man and had to connect data provided by natural and civil histories with reasoning concerning the principles of human nature. Take, for instance, the passage where Hume refers to our "present experience concerning the principles and opinions of barbarous nations" in America, Africa, or Asia, in order to state that, by its origin in human nature, religion was at first polytheist (NHR 27–28). Hume employs a widespread argument that linked the ethnological data and historical facts. The two could not have been connected without the idea that the same mankind is involved in every place and every time, or without the idea that the difference between a savage and a well-educated Scotsman is the gap between the physical condition of man and the full development of his faculties, which must be overcome through the blessings of civilization. In more general terms, the duality between the physical and the moral part of man's being must be reduced by the tenet of the natural and historical progress of mankind.

Such a principle is not so easily agreed upon, because it includes the above duality. Such a principle must reconcile the scientific ambition of a causal explanation inferred from carefully collected data with a philosophical principle of finality applied to human history, a principle which seems to be required when one considers the moral aspect of man. For if the related history was merely causal, it would say nothing of the ends of human history, but would only allow certain general facts to be stated. Again, consider Hume's very common argument that "the mind rises gradually from inferior to superior" (NHR 27). Such a principle is either a general fact set down from empirical and general observation (and means that inferior *produces* superior), or it is taken as the philosophical idea of man's achievement (and means that the inferior part is in one or another way permeated by the superior part of human being). The more scientific the principle is, the less strong it might be philosophically.

Many authors reacted against the risk of this reductivist turn of natural history, so evident, for example, in La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745) where a materialist thesis concerning the soul is associated with a (supposedly) scientific requirement of objectivity, to be observed in the description of data: human data ought to be described naturally—not

morally—just as they are, not as a philosophical or religious system would like them to be.[9]

The debate bore not only on the import of man's nature and history, but also on the method of natural history itself when it was applied to ethical or religious data. Is it not the risk that, looking for causes or explanations, such natural histories would cease looking for reasons or justifications? More precisely, can a moral or religious phenomenon be apprehended just as a matter of fact, in its material existence or historical evidence?

A clear illustration of this question and of the resistance of moral philosophers to the factual accuracy required by scientific natural history may be found in Trenchard's *Natural History of Superstition* (1709), which is the first natural history expressly concerned with religious data.[10] It could be said—and was said by orthodox philosophers—that, unlike natural phenomena, moral and religious phenomena are mainly representations in the human mind; and that the fact of representation is not yet the fact of the reality of what is represented. For instance, the fact of superstition has to be established not only by the observation of what happens in the mind or behavior of mankind, but also by an argument that avers the fact. Indeed, if the many marks of superstitious behavior were not discussed, it was often opined that there was no real superstitious faith, and that, ultimately, in every man's heart the true principles of theism were engraved. Superstition, it was argued, could not be a genuine system of religion, but only some pathological affection of men's representations. Against this kind of reasoning bearing on the reality of facts, and upheld as well by theists as orthodoxy, Trenchard goes about establishing the historical and common reality of superstition, and thereby transforms the purpose of natural history. Men's representations are not mere accidents, but are effects to be explained by causes. And the causes of superstition are ignorance and curiosity:

> I take this wholly to proceed from our ignorance of causes, and yet curiosity to know them, it being impossible for any man so far to divest himself of concern for his own happiness.[11]

Although this claim is not new at all, one must be aware of Trenchard's emphasis on the fact that such natural causes as ignorance and concern for one's own happiness are sufficient causes for generating superstitious beliefs, and that, even if it is not true, a superstitious system of religion can be real. In a rather confused manner, Trenchard is first led to delineate Hume's future distinction between the foundation and the origin of religion, and then quite knowingly, by producing the matter of a reasoned natural history, to prove the natural character of the generation of superstition: the efficacy of ignorance and anxious curiosity can be verified by the description and analysis of the psychological, physiological, and social processes by which errors and

illusions are generated in human minds and spread out in human societies. Natural history, then, is not only opposed to the deductive way of philosophizing, it also offers a critique of any religious *a priori* system.

Thus, when applied to moral phenomena, natural history becomes a rather evolutive *genre*. It still retains the spirit of a causal explanation duly grounded in careful empirical information; but besides the project of extracting some general facts, regular enough to be taken as principles, there is from the methodical point of view the obligation to set down the reality of facts, in such a way that causes may be searched for, and, from the philosophical point of view, the obligation to state from which principle the unity of man's nature can be derived or whether any such principle can be established.

Can we say that Hume's *Natural History of Religion* is a natural history, thus complexly understood?

Hume's reductionist bent is apparent: his purpose is to refute, or rather to *reduce*, the grounds of the religious claim that pure theism would be imprinted in human nature and that, even under the cover of superstition, it would have been the only religion of mankind. The fact of polytheism (or of popular theism) must be established; it must be shown that the first religion of mankind was polytheism. But, however empirical and historical the required method may appear, it is quite clear that Hume has not written a natural history. The balance between the concern for empirical observation and the search for causes, characteristic of the eighteenth century natural histories, is missing: the descriptive part is absent. There is no collecting of empirical or historical data. The text seems to be deprived of the sense of what a fact is, natural or historical. Should we say that Hume is only concerned with producing the historical, but general, fact which is to support his whole argument in favour of the primitiveness of polytheism? But he is satisfied with setting forth that "'Tis a matter uncontestable, that about 1700 years ago all mankind were idolaters" (NHR 26). The Jews' theism stands for nothing; nor do the sceptical principles of some philosophers!

> The north, the south, the east, the west, give their unanimous testimony to the same fact. What can be opposed to so full an evidence? (NHR 26)

What could be opposed, we should add, to so indistinct and so uncritical an evidence? No historical checking; no taking into account of the various classes of religious phenomena which could be (and were already at that time) distinguished. Furthermore, the inductive process which should be employed, going from the facts toward the causes or the principles, is superseded by argumentation which is mainly deductive. For instance, the inquiry about the various forms of polytheism in section V is governed by so strong a deductive

argumentation that it does not permit any real collecting and analysis of historical material. In a word, it seems that the to-and-fro motion which gives natural history both its empirical and methodical features and which proceeds from accurate descriptions strengthened by the inductive process to general laws which are supported by historical information, is missing in Hume's text. Too anecdotal and too abstract, Hume's *Natural History* cannot be called a scientific history, even if we judge it according to eighteenth century standards. It is a philosophical history.

II

It seems that Hume's *Natural History* retains the reductionist value, but not the method, of eighteenth century natural histories of man. But could we not consider it from another point of view and claim that the title of Hume's text ought to be taken quite differently, i.e., as stating a historical matter which cannot be settled in any other way than the deductive? Hume's deductivism should not be a surprise, since the facts that are supposed to be his subject-matter cannot be the object of an empirical method.

The inquiry bears on the origin of religion, and the answer is to be obtained through the answer to another question: what was the first religion of mankind? Now, in order to answer such a question historically, we have to trace back the history of man before the very beginning of any recording of human history. And since there can be no testimony concerning the first religion of mankind, there is no escape, except through a theoretical or argumentative answer. Whatever the answer was, polytheism or theism, both parties in Hume's time willingly agreed that the testimony of history shows us that most ancient mankind was polytheist: but this observation could not be taken as the immediate proof of an *original* polytheism; and it could be claimed that historical polytheism derived from an original theism (as the Bible teaches us). So, on Hume's side, there was an apparent contradiction; if he wants to oppose the idea that pure theism was the original religion of mankind, he has to offer facts against what would then appear to be an *a priori* decision. But he himself cannot lean on historical or empirical facts which would have been observed or would be observable. The only possible method is argumentative.

This debate was not new when Hume was writing *The Natural History of Religion*. It began as early as the first part of the seventeenth century and it had appeared under different questions, such as the one of the religion of Egypt. I will sketch it, using an argument borrowed from an author who played a very important role in this matter and with whose writings Hume was acquainted.[12]

In a very long chapter of his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), Ralph Cudworth tries to refute the objection that we do not have an idea of God

> because all the nations of the world heretofore (except a small and inconsiderable handful of the Jews) together with their wisest men and greatest philosophers, were generally look'd upon as *Polytheists.* (C 208)

This objection is set forth by Cudworth, after claiming that atheists themselves have an idea of God and that they are liars, if they pretend that they do not have such an idea within their minds. The whole argument of the book pertains to a rational theology that states that God's existence could be derived from his onto-theological predicates. The polytheistic objection is a *de facto* objection opposed to an argument which is both rationalist and religious. Cudworth refutes the fact, or rather the meaning of the fact, in a theoretical way, through the critical examination of the Ancients' testimony. Since pagan polytheism, unless it had been a disguised atheism, could not logically uphold the theory of "many un-made self existent deities," this theory being "irrational in itself and also plainly repugnant to the Phenomena" (C 210), it will be demonstrated, by means of a careful study of the Ancients' texts, that they could not consistently think or mean anything else but the true idea of God. The core of the argument is a matter of semantics.

> Wherefore a God in general according to the sense of the Pagan theists, may thus be defined as an Understanding being superior to Men, not originally derived from senseless Matter, and look'd upon as an Object for men's Religious Worship. (C 232–33)

If this is granted, it is not difficult to conclude that, at bottom, ancient polytheists retained the idea of a pure God. Either they were talking nonsense or they were asserting the existence of a Supreme Being and of derived inferior divinities, which are in fact mere idols. And after having especially examined Zoroaster's and Orpheus' polytheism, Cudworth analyses the Egyptians' polytheism at length (since they are the most ancient people in the world), before reviewing the Greeks, the Romans, and so forth.

In Cudworth's book, then, rational interpretation overrules fact; or, more precisely, to the facts provided by historical testimony, Cudworth opposes the real meaning of the testimony itself, i.e., the true theism. Facts here are texts; and if the fact of polytheism is averred by texts, the true understanding of polytheism must be displayed through critical interpretation of these texts.

The importance of the *True Intellectual System* lies in its place in the history of hermeneutics. Cudworth was a formidable adversary, but two kinds of refutation could be set in opposition to his theoretical argument. Both are committed to restore the power of facts against the influence of reasons, given that there is no record of the original religion of mankind. Quite fortunately

for us, these two arguments are respectively expressed in Hume's *Natural History* and Président de Brosses's *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (1760). We know that there is a direct link between the two texts since de Brosses reproduces the content of Hume's text in the third section of his book, and justifies his borrowing through a later correspondence with Hume.[13]

Against those who, following the old interpretative tradition derived from Plutarch and Porphyrus, advocate a figurative approach which reduces polytheist tenets and forms of worship to allegories, De Brosses is endeavouring to prove the antiquity of fetishism[14] and its anteriority to theism and even polytheism; to achieve this purpose, he appeals to a historical method. Instead of using an interpretative principle posed beforehand, one ought to rely on the history of peoples to understand mythology; one would then discover that mythology is the relating of the deeds of the dead. But fetishism is still more ancient, since, worshipping animals or material things, it belongs to more unrefined and primitive minds. To appreciate the importance of fetishism, we need only refer to facts, such as they are related either by travelers or ancient historians, compare present fetishism of modern nations (section I) and fetishism of ancient peoples (section II). Of course, the Egyptians are the oldest people to whom we can go back through history. But there is no *a priori* reason to underestimate relations that they have delivered to us. The comparison of religions (and mainly their cults), and of the different ages of mankind, will show easily that fetishism is a universal fact, one of those *faits généraux* to which Buffon referred. When once this universal fact has been allowed, one can search for its causes in human nature (section III). And in this more hypothetical part, De Brosses partly leans upon Hume's analysis. As for the objection that fetishism is absurd or insane, it can be answered that "il n'y a point de superstition si absurde ou si ridicule que n'ait engendré *l'ignorance* jointe à la *crainte*." Moreover, a form of worship is a practical behavior, and practical behaviors are not unintelligible.

De Brosses' method is clearly historical: collect facts as exhaustively as possible, take them as they are (if they have been collected in faultless conditions), compare them, identify a general fact, and then risk an hypothesis concerning causes. In this respect, *Le culte des dieux fétiches* is one of the very first books in the history of religions. Rather cautiously, motivated by a prudence which is both religious and scientific, De Brosses does not pronounce on the original religion of mankind and seems to allow that men, before the Deluge, had received immediate instructions from God himself. As for the religion of barbarous and unrefined nations, we must rely on ethnographical and historical testimony.

By comparison, we can discern how different Hume's method is, and try to delineate his intention and the reason why his text aroused such an echo, mainly in France.

In the first sections of *The Natural History of Religion*, we can find De

Brosses' argumentative pattern, but reduced to its main lines. In section I, the fact of the primitiveness of polytheism is established; in sections II and III, the causes of polytheism in human nature are inquired about. But section I provides us with an account which cannot be held as an historical proof, but is an argument mainly relying on the science of nature of man:

> It seems certain, that according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers.... (NHR 27)

> But farther, 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 idolatry.... (NHR 28)

In order to prove his claim, Hume produces several likely arguments, the evidence of which is not derived from historical or anthropological information, but from a kind of consensus among the learned.[15] Here probability is less inferred than requested, upon reasons worth approving. Sections II and III are written in the same way.

In order to justify Hume's procedure, we can observe that De Brosses confined himself to the most ancient religion, but not to the very first religion of mankind, since Adam was directly instructed of God by God himself. It does not matter if this was prudence or conviction from De Brosses. The important thing is that the origin question is not really examined. De Brosses states that fetishism was the most ancient religion of mankind, more ancient than any historical record; and he does that by using a historical method. Then he seeks the causes of fetishism in human nature. Hume seems to have followed the same line (before De Brosses himself). But, here, we are concerned with an origin which is beyond any historical inquiry whatever, in every sense of the word *history*: the very prime origin of religion in human nature.

The origin in human nature cannot be stated historically nor described empirically (i.e., according to an empirical method). The only reason for taking the first beginnings of religion as historical is that religion is an effect which could not have been produced: "the first religious principles must be secondary" (NHR 25). In this sense, religion cannot be held as a primitive instinct or an idea imprinted by the Creator into the human mind; and it can be said to be dependent on various accidents or causes which, "in some cases" "by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances" may prevent it. But, inversely, religion necessarily (except in these very particular circumstances) follows from human nature: "these are the general principles of polytheism founded in human nature and little dependent on caprice and accident" (NHR 48). This union of circumstance and necessity explains that the Humean inquiry bears on both the principles of human nature and on the secondary

causes. And this union is original because it proceeds from man's *être au monde*. Man lives and tries to survive in a world which he depends on and which is a constant threat to his own happiness, if he is not able to dominate it. Fear of unknown causes is necessary in a state of ignorance. Of course, mankind can change, from ignorance to knowledge; and this is the circumstance the name of which is *civilization*. Religion is the result of the relationship between passions and reason, in a world that man has to subdue.

Every man, whether he is a philosopher or not, knows that, since he is a living being. Such is the evidence of origin. But this evidence not only has been hidden by those who advocate an original theism, it is not kept in our consciousness, since we are living in a civilized condition. Hume's argumentation aims to join human history and human nature; but this joining cannot be reached through historical (even indirect) information or method, since it is a necessary effect of human nature rather than an event, however ancient. Rather than an historical inquiry, Hume's account of the origin of religion presents the theoretical or philosophical conditions of any history of religion.

III

Hume's natural history, or history rooted in human nature, is indeed a theoretical history. In a now well-known passage, Dugald Stewart shows sensitivity to the difficulty in philosophically qualifying the kind of writing that Hume practices. While accounting for Adam Smith's *Dissertation on the Origin of Language*, appended to the second edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Stewart observes:

> In Mr Smith's writings, whatever the nature of his subject, he seldom misses an opportunity of indulging his curiosity, in tracing from the principles of human nature, or from the circumstances of society, the origin of the opinions and the institutions which he describes.[16]

This philosophical *genre*, to which he gives the name of *Theoretical* or *Conjectural History*, "an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of *Natural History as employed by Mr Hume*," is used in subjects about which little information is expected from history or from collecting the observations of travelers.

> We are [then] under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture.... In such inquiries, the detached facts which travels and voyages afford us, may frequently serve as land-marks to our speculations: and sometimes our conclusions a priori, may tend to confirm the credibility of facts, which, on a superficial view, appeared to be doubtful or incredible.[17]

And among other examples of "this species of philosophical investigations," Stewart refers to Hume's *Natural History of Religion.*

The whole description of this theoretical and conjectural history at first seems perfectly fitted to Hume's text. But one thing remains obscure: why should this theoretical history to be held to be a *conjectural* history? It cannot be said to be conjectural as we can say that the results of De Brosses' investigations are conjectural. And there also is a second question; why does such a history deserve the qualification *natural*?

It is clear to the commentator who is considering *The Natural History of Religion*, that the conjectural character does not concern only the origin of religion, but the whole story, from the origin of polytheism and the origin of theism from polytheism to the flux and reflux of these two forms of religion. Stewart had perfectly underlined this aspect:

> In examining the history of mankind [or other histories], as well as in examining the phenomena of the material world, when we cannot trace the process by which an event *has been* produced, it is often of importance to be able to show how it *may have been* produced by natural causes.[18]

Dugald Stewart is suggesting that conjecture is to be used as a substitute for a direct and scientific method when the use of such a method is not possible. It is true that, when one proceeds from political history which is mainly a history of events, easily related if not quite so easily explained, to the history of morals, religion, and social life, which are so intricate and so total phenomena, that it is much more difficult to discern distinct events and to ascribe definite causes.

But much more can be drawn from the idea of a conjectural analysis: far from being, *faute de mieux*, a means for a substantive explanation, the causal principle to which conjecture appeals governs, as a rule, the whole related history. This principle explains history, from its origin to its end, and encloses it in a system that prescribes its nature and its progress. Thus, in Hume's *Natural History*, the history of religion is ruled by two distinct, but complementary principles: on the one hand, the constancy principle of human nature, i.e., the passions which do not change in any time or in any place, and, on the other, the progress principle of human understanding, moving from inferior to superior, from rough ideas of Divinity to more refined conceptions. At least, in popular religions, this second principle is still under the rule of the first, since in vulgar understanding it does not succeed in getting free from the passions, so that if theism can spring from polytheism, it quickly switches back to polytheism, through the worship of saints and the need for representations or idols. There is no real progress in the history of religion: it is doomed to repeat itself endlessly, as long as a learned theism, which cannot

emerge from this history, has not been set down. Therefore, such a natural history can be said to be conjectural in the sense that it offers a general explanatory model and draws what the eighteenth century French philosophers called a *tableau*. This model is universal and cogent for any particular description of religions: in one argument, it contains all the forms of religion (except learned theism); and these forms, being causally delineated, are as many types of religious phenomena as can be historically collected.

There remains the other question: Why can this conjectural and theoretical history be said to be a *natural* history?

The first answer is that such a history is not supernatural. This observation should not be ignored, even if it is negative. Almost a century before, Bossuet had framed a very influential model with his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*. The purpose of this *histoire universelle*, which was not held conjectural by the French Bishop, since it was founded on the truth of revealed religion, was to gather particular histories of various countries and ages, to coordinate them into a single scheme, and provide his royal pupil with a general framework, a "*grand spectacle*":

> vous voyez tous les siècles précédents se développer, pour ainsi dire en peu d'heures devant vous: vous voyez comme les empires se succédent les uns aux autres; et comme la religion, dans ces différents états, se soutient également depuis le commencement du monde jusqu'à notre temps. (*Discours*, introduction)

In such a *tableau*, the principle of religion allows the historian to avoid the scattering of particular histories, to embrace the whole history of mankind, from its origin in the Creator's will to the present time, and to illustrate the permanence of true religion. In contrast with this picture of divine necessity infusing human history, Hume's work displays the universal history of human nature in its practical relationship to the terrestrial world, a history which is both contingent and causally connected, appearing as devoid of any purpose. The uniform principle, which is here human passions and which can be extracted from the whole experience of human beings, is applied to religion itself, which thus becomes an effect, instead of a principle.

Rationalistic theism had taken up Bossuet's argument, even if it agreed that human nature was not God's light, but passion and reason. According to such a rationalistic theism, the origin of religion is potentially its foundation. The vulgar give themselves up to the instinctive and immediate tendencies of human nature, whereas philosophers stick to exact reasoning and are anxious to state the truth of religion. But nature and reason are essentially identical and between the two there is only a difference of development or manifestation; so that, naturally or rationally, all men are led to the belief in the existence of one unique God, the seeming diversity of religions being derived

from the merely historical effects of superstition; superstition that will be rooted out when philosophers have rationally restored the true and universal religion, i.e., theism.

One can, by contrast, better understand the philosophical weight of the foundation/origin distinction that, in *The Natural History of Religion*, is the general condition of the whole Humean analysis, since it forbids that origin and foundation should be confused any longer either in the evidence of a necessary and rational representation or in the immediacy of an inner sentiment. Reason is not the essence of human nature. In a sceptical science, principles are indeed necessary causes, but without any rationality: by the progress of understanding, fear becomes flattery, polytheism, led to excess, becomes a formidable and unintelligible theism, etc. In other words, religion is not God's existence, a matter of rational or revealed evidence; it is a faith in the existence of many or only one Divinity; it is a worship offered to the unknown causes of our happiness and misery. Religion is a historical fact, because it is a human fact. And man is not at first a rational animal: he is "a barbarous necessitous animal." To the *de jure* universality of rational or revealed theism, whose history would relate the vicissitudes, Hume substitutes the natural universality of human nature. Warburton was right: Hume's argument proceeds from naturalism.

Thus, Hume's *Natural History* opposes rational (or revealed) theism, by posing two major facts which are conjectural facts, because they are theoretically set forth. First, it is a fact, which can be neither rationally nor religiously reduced, that polytheism preceded theism and the latter derived from the former. Secondly, it is a fact that polytheism is a real religion, so that, on the one hand, the diversity of religions cannot be denied, and on the other, all religions have the same practical nature (even natural religion, when it is more than a mere philosophical doctrine concerning the origin of the world). Both facts conjoined in the light of a science of human nature make possible a history of religion that Hume did not write.

IV

It is clear that Hume's contemporaries well enough understood the import of his work on religion. More than Warburton's excessive reaction, the reception of the text in France proves it. As soon as May or June 1757, Diderot wrote these words to Président De Brosses:

> Vous avez raison. Le fétichisme a certainement été la religion première, générale et universelle. Les faits doivent nécessairement être d'accord avec la philosophie... Vous avez complété la démonstration de *l'Histoire naturelle de la religion* par David Hume. Conaissez-vous ce morceau? Il est tout à fait de vos principes.

The *Natural History* was translated in the third volume of *Les Oeuvres philosophiques de M. D. Hume* (Amsterdam 1759). And besides the third part of *Le culte des dieux fétiches*, mentioned above, we can refer to Rousseau's *Emile* (1762): "Le polythéisme a été leur première religion, et l'idolâtrie leur premier culte."[19] Lastly, in the article "Religion" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (June 1764), Voltaire declares:

> Un autre savant beaucoup plus philosophe [que Warburton], qui est un des plus profonds métaphysiciens de nos jours, donne de fortes raisons pour prouver que le polythéisme a été la première religion des hommes, et qu'on a commencé à croire plusieurs dieux avant que la raison fût assez éclairée pour ne reconnaître qu'un seul Etre Suprême. J'ose croire au contraire que....[20]

If the greatness of a text is to be judged by its impact on the history of ideas, *The Natural History of Religion* is undoubtedly a great text.

Nevertheless, the polysemic meaning of 'natural history' suggests that eighteenth century authors were too familiar with this notion to have a distinct or critical idea of it. Undoubtedly they too easily understood something that is no longer clear to us.[21] Let us come back for the last time to Hume's dissertation. What does he mean when he says that religion has its origin in human nature? Natural history, applied to religion, does not offer reasons which would support or contest the idea of a rational religion or, at least, of a religion consonant with reason. But it is neither an empirical or "historical" history of religion: not only does it not relate the succession of historical religions, but also it does not collect the empirical data without which a scientific natural history aiming to discover general facts cannot be achieved. Causal principles are here drawn from human nature such as it is given by a science worked out elsewhere. Therefore, we cannot say that Hume's dissertation provides us with a scientific explanation, as we could say about De Brosses' book. But, then, if it is neither rational nor empirical, if it is neither foundational nor scientific, what can it be? We will accept Stewart's qualification and say that it is theoretical and conjectural. But it is not theoretical in the sense that, by substitution, it would afford a conjecture on something for which there is no empirical proof. It is ascribing the origin of an effect, religion, in human nature, according to a certain terrestrial condition of mankind. The difficulty is this: how can we talk about origin? Origin is a factual principle, not a rational principle. But the fact here cannot be established empirically, nor can the causal explanation that it supports be historically verified. Of course, such a genetic explanation affords a critical means against rationalistic accounts of religion and authorizes an evaluation of religions. But the philosophical status of Humean natural history remains philosophically unclear, even if, as we have tried to show, it retains several

features and values of eighteenth century natural histories. Undoubtedly, because it is the product of a sceptical philosophy.

NOTES

This paper uses A. Wayne Colver's edition of Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), cited in the text as NHR.

1 Warburton charges Hume with reproducing an argument from Bolingbroke. "The design of the first essay [on natural religion] is the very same with all Lord Bolingbroke's, to establish naturalism, a species of atheism, instead of religion: and he employs one of Bolingbroke's capital arguments for it. All the difference is, it is without Bolingbroke's abusive language" (quoted in Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume,* 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970,] 323). This accusation is not quite false. For instance, the Humean description of mankind on the first origin of society, and of the first motives which led it to religion, are clearly reminiscent of Section II of Bolingbroke's second Essay, *Essays addressed by Mr Pope,* II, *Works* IV (London, 1754), 14 ff.

2 The term 'natural history' appears only in the title. It never occurs in the *Treatise* or the *Enquiries.*

3 In her paper devoted to this question, Paulette Carrive distinguishes four main senses: Buffon's, La Mettrie's, Hume's, and Stewart's. We will meet all these different meanings in the following analysis. See Carrive, "L'idée d'Histoire naturelle de l'humanité chez les Philosophes Ecossais du XVIIIe siècle," in *Entre forme et histoire,* edited by O. Bloch, B. Balan, and P. Carrive (Paris, 1988), 215–16.

A. Skinner, in his "Natural History in the Age of Adam Smith," *Political Studies* 15 (1967): 32–48, contents himself with stating the main features of the method and the object of natural history, but does not analyze the concept itself. The best paper concerning the spirit of natural or conjectural history in the Scottish Enlightenment is H. M. Höpfl's "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of British Studies* 17–18.1 (1978): 19–40. Höpfl underlines the fact that, if many works conformed closely with conjectural history, their authors were not able to distinguish this history from other sorts of history (especially narrative history). He concludes:

> Conjectural history, by constructing paradigmatic sequences of events which exhibited such connecting principles of nature, ordered the chaos. It has to be concluded, that the employment of conjectural history was at least as much for the sake of trying to make sense of the human world, as for the practical purpose of making that world more controllable.

See also A. Thompson, "From l'Histoire naturelle de l'homme to the natural history of mankind," *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 9 (1986): 73–80.

4 See Michel Malherbe, "L'histoire naturelle inductive de Bacon," *Estudios sobre historia de la ciencia y de la tecnica* (Valladolid, 1988), 45–66. In his suggestive paper, Craig Walton attempts to regenerate the old *experientia literata* of Bacon in the idea of a Humean natural history of morals. See Walton, "Hume's England as a Natural History of Morals," in *Liberty in Hume's* History of England, edited by Nicholas Capaldi and Donald W. Livingston (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 25–52.

5 See R. C. Cochrane, "Francis Bacon and the Rise of the Mechanical Arts in Eighteenth Century England," *Annals of Science* 13 (1956): 137–56.

6 Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, Premiers Discours. *De la manière d'étudier et de traiter de l'histoire naturelle* (Paris, 1749).

7 Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1774).

8 The word can be found in Shaftesbury's *Complete Works,* edited by Gerd Hemmerich and Wolfram Benda (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1981), vol. 2, 1, 26–28.

9 "Celui qui voudra connaître les propriétés de l'âme, doit donc auparavant rechercher celles qui se manifestent clairement dans les corps, dont l'âme est le principe actif," Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *l'Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (Paris, 1745), chap 1.

10 See Paulette Carrive, who emphasizes the link between Trenchard and Hume's texts in "Le Caton anglais, John Trenchard (1662–1723)," *Archives de philosophie* (1986): 377ff.

11 John Trenchard, *A collection of tracts* (London: F. Cogan, 1751). Also in Bodelian Library, collection of texts, 171, vol. 1, 380–81.

12 Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: R. Royston, 1678); cited hereafter in the text as C. When reading the *True Intellectual System,* one cannot help supposing that Hume had Cudworth in mind. As usual, explicit decisive marks of such a fact cannot be afforded. But there is a kind of sympathy between the two texts.

13 On this topic, see Madeleine David's papers: "Lettres inédites de Diderot et de Hume écrites de 1755 à 1763, au Président de Brosses," *Revue philosophique* (1966): 135–44; "Histoire des religions et philosophie au XVIII siecle: le Président de Brosses, David Hume et Diderot," *Revue philosophique* (1974): 145–60; "Le Président de Brosses historien des religions et philosophe," in *Charles de Brosses* (Genève: Bibliotheca del Viaggio in Italia, 1981), 123–40. According to David's studies, the chronology is as follows:

1757 First draft of *Le culte des dieux fétiches,* in the form of a dissertation read (without much success) at l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres. De Brosses submits his text to Diderot's examination, who compares it to Hume's dissertation.

1759 The translation of the *Natural History of Religion* is published and turns out to be a success.

1760 *Le culte des dieux fétiches* is published (section III: "un célèbre écrivain étranger, de qui je tire ces réflexions...). De Brosses sends a copy of his book to Hume, who does not receive it.

Hume does not discover De Brosses's text before the end of 1763 and is informed of De Brosses's sending. Correspondence begins. The two men meet, during Hume's stay in France.

14 Charles De Brosses, *Le culte des dieux fétiches* (Paris, 1760). De Brosses invented the word. "J'appelle en général de ce nom toute religion qui a pour objet de culte les animaux ou des êtres terrestres inanimés" (61).

15 Some of these arguments are very old and very common ones. For instance, the argument that "the causes of objects, which are quite familiar to us, never strike our attention or curiosity" (NHR 27–28) appears in Bolingbroke (*Works* IV, 10–11), and was already in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (II 38).

16 Dugald Stewart, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith*, in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 295.

17 Stewart, 293.

18 Ibid.

19 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, part IV, in *Ouvres completes*, edited by B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, IV (Paris, 1969) 552–53.

20 Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris, 1764).

21 Walton's idea of a Humean natural history of morality (see note 4) could be explored, but it is subordinate to the understanding of the exact status of morals in Hume's philosophy.