Thomas Holden. ***Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism.***
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Thomas Holden. *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 246. ISBN 978-0-19-957994-5, Cloth, $50.00.

The main thesis developed and defended in this superb book is that Hume implicitly "denies the existence . . . of a morally assessable god" (8), not just the existence of an overall "morally praiseworthy god" (8). Holden characterizes these as "strong" and "weak" moral atheism, respectively (7–9). While the idea of Hume as a moral atheist is not new, Holden's case for that proposition makes two new and important contributions to the discussion of the issue. The first is his detailed piecing-together of points made by Hume in various writings into two arguments for "strong" moral atheism and his attribution of the arguments to Hume. He calls them the "argument from sentimentalism" and the "argument from motivation," respectively. Both arguments are based in Hume's moral psychology, but there is no text in which he either endorses them or even sets them forth as such. In light of this lack of direct textual support, Holden's painstaking reconstruction of the two arguments and his convincing case for seeing both of them as Hume's arguments, thus for seeing Hume as a "strong" moral atheist, are important contributions to Hume studies. The book's second new (albeit with a qualification mentioned below) and important contribution to discussions of moral atheism in Hume is Holden's point that these are Hume's only arguments for moral atheism, "strong" or "weak." This puts him at odds with commentators who maintain that either the author of sin argument in Section 8 of the first *Enquiry* or the evidential argument from evil (a.k.a. the argument to divine indifference) in Part XI of the *Dialogues* supports attributing moral atheism to Hume.

Holden begins his case with a detailed description of moral atheism and a convincing rebuttal of an anticipated objection based on the aforementioned lack of direct textual support (chapter 1). But a potentially more damaging objection awaits. It is that moral atheism, being a theory about the essential nature of the deity, is effectively a form of natural theology and, as such, incompatible with Hume's skepticism. The key to Holden's response to this objection is his distinction between two ways of inferring things about the deity, in effect, two kinds of natural theology, "core" and "liminal" natural theology, respectively. The former is traditional natural theology and includes Cleanthes's version in the *Dialogues*. The latter, by contrast, contains no theorizing or inference-making about the nature of the first cause as such. This is because it is restricted to inferring characteristics that would be attributable to any unknown entity whatsoever (29). Parenthetically, we find liminal natural theology in Cleanthes too, when, in Part IV of the *Dialogues*, he argues that the deity could not be both a mind and immutable, since

nothing could. Such a conclusion, then, although applicable to the first cause, is not about it specifically. Holden's point is that core natural theology, by claiming to achieve insight into the "distinctive or species-specific intrinsic character" (116) of the first cause, is indeed at odds with Hume's skeptical principles but that liminal natural theology is not (chapter 2). Pre-emptive "big-picture objections" (14) met, Holden sets about developing the positive core of his case, the detailed working-out of both the "argument from sentimentalism" (chapters 3 and 4) and the "argument from motivation" (chapter 5) and their attribution to Hume. This done, he turns to examining "two well-known arguments for weak moral atheism that have often been attributed to [Hume]" (210)—the evidential argument from evil and the "author of sin" argument—and rejects them. Discussing the three forms of the argument from evil that we find in Hume, the logical, inference, and evidential forms, Holden maintains that Hume does not endorse the evidential form of the argument, so his discussion of it does not reflect an endorsement of moral atheism (chapter 6). Insofar as the "author of sin" argument is concerned, Holden maintains both that it is not endorsed by Hume and that it does not support moral atheism anyway (chapter 7). Holden concludes his investigation by briefly drawing together the various facets of his case for moral atheism in Hume (Conclusion). Rounding out the book, there is a useful bibliography and an index.

As noted, the core of Holden's case is the conjunction of the "argument from sentimentalism" and the "argument from motivation." Very briefly, the key to the former and to its attribution to Hume is the conjunction of two points: first, his claim, in a letter of June 30, 1743 to William Mure, that the deity "is not the natural object of any Passion or Affection" (52–53); and, second, as Holden states Hume's point, that moral concepts are determined by "the characteristic sentiments of approval and disapproval that humans naturally feel toward different sorts of character trait" (49). The key to the "argument from motivation" and to its attribution to Hume is his idea, again in Holden's words, that "morality . . . is an anthropological phenomenon root and branch, and quite unintelligible outside of . . . [the] human context" (120). An embryonic form of the latter argument was set out as Hume's argument by Bernard Williams in "Hume on Religion" (*David Hume: A Symposium*, ed. D. F. Pears [London: Macmillan, 1963], 77–88), as Holden notes, but the developed version in this book is the benchmark for future discussions. Holden's reconstruction of the two arguments is a first-rate piece of scholarship and his case for their being Hume's arguments is convincing.

The book has two interesting sub-plots: Holden's previously noted opposition to the reasons that other scholars have given for reading Hume as a moral atheist and his argument that Hume thinks the logical form of the argument from evil is successful (150–57). For reasons of space, let us look only at one part of one sub-plot, Holden's dismissal of the evidential argument from evil as a basis for attributing

moral atheism to Hume. Holden notes that the argument appears to run afoul of Hume's skepticism (170, 173) and cannot be saved as a form of liminal natural theology (170–71), that it is vulnerable to some of the very objections that Philo himself brings against the design argument (171), thereby calling Philo's consistency into question, and that, for good measure, it is "an embarrassingly weak argument" (175). Holden's conclusion is that, at a minimum, any attribution of the argument to Hume will need to come up with a plausible "distancing mechanism" (175) to cope with the first three of those points. He himself endorses Klaas Kraay's reading of the argument ("Philo's Argument for Divine Amorality Reconsidered," *Hume Studies* 29 [2003]: 283–304) as a "parody" of core natural theology in general and of Cleanthes's version in particular (175). (Earlier, noting Holden's point that the arguments from "sentimentalism" and "motivation," respectively, are Hume's only arguments for moral atheism, I called the point new, but with a qualification. The qualification is Holden's endorsement of Kraay's "parody" interpretation.)

Very briefly, here are three points for discussion. First, the pivotal idea in the "argument from sentimentalism" is that the deity is not a natural object of the passions, understood in the strong sense that normal humans are "constitutionally incapable" of moral sentiments toward the first cause (109). As a "possible tactic" in defense of this point, Holden suggests that the first cause is not "picturable or imaginable" (111). Under various God-of-the-philosophers descriptions, for instance, "the original cause," this seems plausible enough. But it seems less plausible under descriptions of the deity that would matter a lot more to some Christian believers than "the original cause," for instance, "the redeemer who died on Good Friday," used in conjunction with other such descriptions, images, stories, rituals, or prayers that promote feelings of proximity and familiarity. Secondly, on the "parody" interpretation of the evidential argument from evil, Holden describes Hume's purpose as showing that if the core natural theologian embarks on a venture such as Cleanthes's, "then we can generate theological systems . . . willy-nilly" (178). However, on that interpretation, wouldn't we expect more extravagant and novel hypotheses than, or in addition to, the four actually offered? If so, then perhaps Hume's aim here is to show that engaging in core natural theology invites the "scandalously unorthodox" (178) indifference hypothesis in particular. Prima facie, this suggestion supplies a plausible "distancing mechanism" of the sort required by the author. Thirdly, if weakness in the evidential argument from evil is evidence that Hume does not endorse it, perhaps a similar point applies to his version of the logical argument, where success carries the very heavy burden of proving logical impossibility.

This book is a major achievement. New and seminal ideas are developed in it and set forth with great clarity and economy. In addition to its value to scholars

of Hume, the book would be quite suitable for upper-level undergraduate courses in either Hume's moral philosophy or his philosophy of religion.

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