

Part IV

Hume, *Dialogues concerning
natural religion*

Chapter 11

Introduction

11.1 Readings and homework

- Readings:
 - Morris, William Edward, "David Hume", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2001 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2001/entries/hume/>.
 - Richard H. Popkin, Introduction to our edition of the *Dialogues*
- Study questions:
 1. What are the main works of David Hume?
 2. What is the main thesis of the *Dialogues*?
 3. Did Hume publish the *Dialogues* during his lifetime? Why?
 4. What is natural religion? What is fideism?
 5. What is the argument from Design?

11.2 David Hume,(1711-1776)

The following course notes are relying heavily on Prof. Warren Schmaus course notes.

11.2.1 Life

- raised as a Calvinist in Scotland.
- Precocious kid. His parents wanted him to do Law. He decided to become a “Scholar and a philosopher” (*My Own Life*).
- attended Edinburgh University, where he became familiar with the writings of John Locke, who had defended an empiricist theory of meaning and knowledge
- abandoned traditional Calvinist beliefs by the time he was twenty
- result of his studies: wants to open a “New scene of thought”
- Because of his reputation as a skeptic and atheist, Hume never held any academic position.

11.2.2 Hume’s Major Works

The *Treatise*

A Treatise of Human Nature, Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects (1739)

- three parts:
 - a. Of the Understanding
 - b. Of Passions
 - c. Of Morals
- Hume “castrated” his work from the introductory essay on miracles to please Bishop Butler.
- Hume says that the book “fell dead born from the press”: ignored, ridiculed, misunderstood
- In fact, Hume acquires **a reputation of skepticism and atheism** which was to last until his death.

Enquiries

- *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)
 - a. re-works first part of *Treatise*
 - b. includes chapters "Of Miracles" and "Of a Providence and a Future State," in which he argues
 - 1.) that there is no evidence for such beliefs – testimony argument
 - 2.) and that they are little better than superstitions
- *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) reworks part three of the *Treatise*.

Other works

Hume wrote on a broad range of domains:

- Essays on Politics
- *The natural History of Religion*
- a 6-vol. *History of Great Britain*

The posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779)

1. begun 25 years earlier
2. resumed in 1775 when he realized he was dying

11.3 Hume's Philosophy

Whereas in his times Hume was known for his reputation as an atheist and skeptic, he is known recognized among the philosopher as one of the major contributors to empiricism.

11.3.1 Empiricism

The main point of empiricism is that **all knowledge is founded on experience and observation.**

Empiricism is directed against all kinds of highly sophisticated rational systems, that go beyond the experience (Big systems of philosophy in

the 17th: Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza). According to the empiricist, these philosophies are far from any applications and ill founded.

On the other hand, Hume recognized the insufficiency of the **accounts of morality** that are only based on sentiment (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson). These philosophies lack a clear account on just reasoning. To this aim, some metaphysics is needed.

Hume's method is then to produce a true metaphysics, well founded on the observations and experience. From there, a true account of morals, politics and religion could follow in the same manner.

Main points of Hume's empiricism:

- All the materials of thinking are *perceptions*
- Perceptions are derived either from sensation (inward sentiment) or reflection (outward sentiment)
- Perceptions are divided into *impressions*, vivid and lively, and *ideas*
- Crucial Copy Principle: ideas, complex or simple, are nothing beyond experience. Simple ideas are feeble copies of impressions. Complex ideas are composed of simple ideas.
- The Copy Principle can be used for discarding (philosophical) notions without any cognitive content. The test is the following: *if it is impossible to assign any idea to the term, then we have good reason to be suspicious about its cognitive content.*
- Connection of ideas through *association*. Great invention of Hume to avoid any appeal to any rational principle. The principles of association are *natural operations of the mind*.
- Three principles of association at work when we connect ideas: resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect
- Causation is a particularly important topic. *Hume shows that causation cannot be proved by any a priori reasoning.* Rather, it is discovered by experience:
 - on the side of the external impressions, as the repetition of the conjunction of two objects
 - on the side of the internal reflections, as a feeling of determination

Both are indispensable to define causation.

Applying his empiricism to other philosophical issues, Hume goes on proving that these philosophies that are founded on a priori reasoning are ill founded. Knowledge is founded on experience. This is recognizing our limits as human beings, the limits of human understanding.

Thus, Hume is **not** a skeptic in the sense that he denies the possibility of any knowledge. He rather proposes to **acknowledge our epistemological limits as human beings**, and to build a limited but well founded philosophy.

11.3.2 Hume on religion

- Along the lines just described, the *Dialogues* are devoted to proving that all the rational, theoretical or a priori arguments for God's existence are empty.
 - a. Demea: abstract metaphysical arguments, based on reason
 - b. Cleanthes: design argument, based on observation

Most of the book is devoted to the design argument – only Part IX is devoted to the metaphysical arguments

- Note that these names are taken from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, a Stoic work on the same topic
- The *Dialogues* are a complex work. Much academic work has been done to figure out who is speaking for Hume.
 - What we know for sure is that Hume has strong views against the traditional religion and superstition throughout his life.

Even towards the end of his life, Hume

1. told his friend the economist Adam Smith that he would like to see that "strange superstition, Christianity," eliminated, but doubted that it would ever come to pass
2. James Boswell, who visited Hume on his deathbed, found him still negative about Christianity

Since Philo is insisting on distinguishing "true" or "philosophical" religion from "superstition", one is tempted to take that Hume is hiding behind him.

- That said, Philo seems to defend a form of **fideism** in the last chapter. So, some take it that Hume was a fideist

1. fideism seems to be consistent with Hume's general philosophical position that we are unable to provide sufficient justification for any of our beliefs, whether:

- a. scientific
- b. philosophic
- c. religious

2. So that they think that when Philo expresses a fideist position, he is again speaking for Hume

- However, Philo seems to make a profession of **Christian faith** at the end (89) as well, and we know that Hume was not a Christian. A lot has been written on this last section. We will have to come back to the issue of Hume's position in here.

That said, the main point remains the critic of the rational arguments for the existence of god for they go far beyond what we can learn from experience.

Let us put Hume's views in context.

11.4 Philosophy of religion in the eighteenth century

11.4.1 Theism

Main Tenets

- 1. has perhaps been the dominant philosophy of religion in the European Christian tradition
- 2. belief in a personal god
- 3. rests on revealed religion
- 4. accepts miracles described there
- 5. regards God as continually active in the world,

11.4. PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY 133

Problems with Theism

During the Renaissance, several factors began to undermine theism

1. as a result of the Protestant Reformation 200 years earlier, Christians were encouraged to read and interpret the Bible for themselves
2. during the Reformation, the discipline of hermeneutics or Biblical criticism came into being to help readers interpret and understand it
3. as a result of the invention of the printing press, there were a lot more Bibles around to read
4. when people began reading the Bible they noticed, among other things, that only a small part of humankind was included
 - a. no mention of East Asians, Amerindians, etc.
 - b. many of these peoples had ancient civilizations pre-dating much of what takes place in the Bible
 - c. these peoples also had very different religions
 - 1.) some were not monotheistic
 - 2.) in some cases, it was debatable whether a system of beliefs and practices counted as a religion at all
5. with the Scientific Revolution, many of the miracles in the Bible began to look implausible

Thus, as the Bible was more widely read, more people began to raise questions about it

11.4.2 Deism

Main Tenets

1. rejects revealed religion, including the miracles in the Bible
2. **a priori arguments:** based on reason – Enlightenment's legacy
 - a. Arguments based on reason have traditionally begun either with the necessity of a first cause or with the idea of a perfect being
 - b. Arguments based on evidence are the natural religion arguments
3. in Deism, God is regarded as the first cause, who created world in accordance with immutable laws
 - a. but does not intervene in his creation
 - b. God did the job right the first time and does not need to perform miracles
 - c. to appeal to miracles was thought to be not only unscientific but demeaning of God

Problems with Deism

- Roughly, if you can use nice rational arguments for proving the existence of God, you open the door to arguments in favor of the opposite: Deism was weakened through philosophers such as Hume and Kant analyzing the arguments based on reason and showing their weaknesses

- A second problem is the relationship and respective importance of faith and reason in Religion.

11.4.3 Natural Religion as an answer

Natural religion especially began to make a comeback, especially in Protestant countries, beginning in the 17th century

1. theologians hoped to bring people to religion through natural religion arguments
2. through natural religion, scientists hoped not merely to reconcile science with religion but to use science as evidence for religion
3. Newton, for example, saw evidence of God's design in the planetary orbits
4. **a posteriori arguments**: based on observation

What is Natural Religion?

- **A. Natural religion consists of two parts:**
 1. argument to design
 - a. emphasized how structures can only be explained in terms of the purposes they are supposed to serve
 - b. e.g., lens and iris of eye
 2. argument from design
 - a. order and complexity we observe in nature could not have arisen from nature itself
 - b. argument frequently made analogies with man-made objects like watches
 - c. argument was supposed to establish not only the existence, but the wisdom, power, and goodness of God: he has adapted structure to function because he cares for us

11.4. PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY 135

- **B. some versions of natural religion built the whole argument around human beings**
 1. that is, showing that God created everything for the purposes of human beings
 2. examples: horses for us to ride, trees for shade
- **C. this argument goes back thousands of years**
 1. Plato's argument that the order and harmony we see in the world could only come from a mind
 2. Aristotles principle that natural objects are to be explained in terms of final causes or purposes just like human-made objects
 3. Galen argues that human body must have been divinely planned
 4. In India, in about the 10th century,
 - a. the Hindu scholar Uduyana defended a version of the design argument in his book, the *Kusumanjali*
 - b. Ramanuja criticized this work, arguing that God did not create the world the way a human being makes a pot or basket
 5. and in Europe, in the 12th century, by Saint Thomas Aquinas
- **D. and of course it has recently made a comeback in the US in the form of the so-called Intelligent Design movement**

Problems with natural religion

However, the natural religion tradition began to encounter problems, ironically through the very encouragement it gave to the study of natural history

1. human-centered version confronted the problem of species that seemed utterly useless and even harmful to us
2. also, the fact that some species live by killing others raised problems for the idea of a benevolent God
 - a. tried to explain this away in terms of predators actually doing a favor to old and sick, which is false
 - b. also, through the idea of maintaining a "balance of nature"

3. parasites, such as intestinal worms, were another problem
 - a. some tried to argue that they were a punishment for sin
 - b. which is hard to accept in the case of animals with parasites
4. fossils
 - a. if organisms could go extinct, what about God's perfection?
 - b. some tried to argue that fossils are not organic remains
5. developments in embryology were also undermining natural religion
 - a. an important tenet of the design argument is that brute matter could never organize itself
 - b. preformationism makes the same assumption
 - c. however, preformationism had become untenable with the development of the microscope
 - d. with the collapse of preformationism, there was no longer any guarantee of the fixity of species: that is, no reason for offspring to resemble their parents exactly

11.4.4 Fideism

- rejects any attempt to argue for the existence of God based on reason or evidence
 - a. holds that religion rests on faith alone and accepts irrationality of faith
 - b. it is a Romantic approach to religion, emphasizing an emotional commitment to it
- Christian fideism
 - a. argued that the human mind was incapable of reaching any sort of truth
 - b. thus we should abandon reason and accept truths of revealed religion on faith

11.4. PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY 137

- fideism grew to be the major philosophy of religion, at least among Protestants

Philo makes a fideistic profession of faith towards the end of the Dialogues, but it is not clear whether he represents Hume's views.

11.4.5 Summing up

	Grounds for existence of God	What God is	Miracles	Intervention
Theism	revelation	person	Yes	Yes
Natural Religion	a posteriori arguments	Intelligent designer	No	No
Deism	a priori arguments	First cause	No	No
Fideism	act of faith	No idea	Yes	yes

