

Part IV

Hume, *Dialogues concerning
natural religion*

Chapter 7

Introduction

7.1 Readings and homework

- Readings:
 - Richard H. Popkin, Introduction to our edition of the *Dialogues*
 - 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/>.

- 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 the Design Argument?

7.2 David Hume,(1711-1776)

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

7.2.1 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.

7.2.2 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.

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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

7.3 Philosophy of religion in the eighteenth century

7.3.1 Theism

Main Tenets

- has perhaps been the **dominant philosophy** of religion in the European Christian tradition
- belief in a **personal god**
- rests on **revealed religion**

- accepts **miracles** described there
- regards God as **continually active**

in the world,

Problems with Theism

During the Renaissance, several factors began to undermine theism

- as a result of the **Protestant Reformation** earlier, Christians were encouraged to read and interpret the Bible for themselves
 - a. during the Reformation, the discipline of hermeneutics or Biblical criticism came into being to help readers interpret and understand it
 - b. as a result of the invention of the printing press, there were a lot more Bibles around to read
- 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
- 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

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7.3.2 Deism

Main Tenets

Deism:

- **rejects revealed religion**, including the miracles in the Bible
- **a priori arguments**: based on reason – Enlightenment's legacy
Arguments based on reason have traditionally begun either with the necessity of a first cause or with the idea of a perfect being
- 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, the main problem is that, in philosophy, 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 thus 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. Not all religious people like the idea that faith depends on rational arguments.

7.3.3 Natural Religion as an answer

Natural religion especially began to become very popular, especially in Protestant countries, beginning in the 17th century

- theologians hoped to bring people to religion through natural religion arguments

- through natural religion, scientists hoped not merely to reconcile science with religion but to use science as evidence for religion
- Newton, for example, saw evidence of God's design in the planetary orbits

So: what is natural religion? It consists in claiming that we can derive the existence and the nature of God from **a posteriori arguments**, i.e. arguments based on observation

What is Natural Religion?

- **Design Argument**

Roughly, the Design Argument derives the existence of God from the order and complexity of the world.

The 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

- **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

- **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. **Aristotle's** 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

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5. and in Europe, in the 12th century, by Saint Thomas **Aquinas**

- **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. **A world for humans?**

Human-centered version confronted the problem of species that seemed utterly useless and even harmful to us

2. **A world of benevolence?**

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. **A world of rewards?**

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. **A perfect world?**

A big problem: fossils

- a. if organisms could go extinct, what about God’s perfection?
- b. some tried to argue that fossils are not organic remains

5. **Fixed species?**

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

7.3.4 Fideism

Fideism:

- **Against arguments**

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

- **Success**

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.

7.3.5 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

7.4 Hume on religion

- The *Dialogues* are devoted to prove that **all the rational, theoretical or a priori arguments for God's existence are flawed.**

a. Demea: abstract metaphysical arguments, based on reason – Deism

b. Cleanthes: design argument, based on observation – Natural Religion

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.