# 1

# Hume

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In the final section of Hume's 1779 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1947, hereafter DNR), Philo, the character who is widely believed to speak for Hume, claims that the dispute between theists and atheists is merely verbal. In other words, he denies that there is any genuine disagreement between atheists and theists. At most, he claims, theists and atheists have religious beliefs that differ in degree, rather than in kind. It is, of course, hard to see how this could possibly be right: surely there is more than a verbal dispute between someone who believes that God exists and someone who believes that there is no God. How could two beliefs be more flatly and plainly opposed than these?

Philo claims that the dispute between theists and atheists is merely verbal because it concerns "the degrees of any quality or circumstance" (DNR 12.7 217).[1] He explains: "Men may argue to all eternity, whether Hannibal be a great, or a very great, or a superlatively great man, what degree of beauty Cleopatra possessed, what epithet of praise Livy or Thucydides is entitled to, without bringing the controversy to any determination" (DNR 12.7 217). Similarly, he suggests, the dispute between theists and atheists is about whether the cause of order in the universe is very much like a human mind or intelligence or very little like a human mind or intelligence. Philo argues:

> That the dispute concerning Theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous, will appear upon the slightest enquiry. I ask the Theist, if he does not allow, that there is a great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible difference between the *human* and the *divine* mind: the more pious he is, the more readily will he assent to the affirmative, and the more will he be disposed to magnify the difference: he will even assert, that the difference is of a nature which cannot be too much magnified. I next turn to the Atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest; and I ask him, whether, from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world, there be not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of Nature, in every situation and in every age; whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought, be not energies

*A Companion to Atheism and Philosophy*, First Edition. Edited by Graham Oppy.

> that probably bear some remote analogy to each other: it is impossible he can deny it: he will readily acknowledge it. Having obtained this concession, I push him still further in his retreat; and I ask him, if it be not probable, that the principle which first arranged, and still maintains order in this universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature, and, among the rest, to the economy of human mind and thought. However reluctant, he must give his assent. Where then, cry I to both these antagonists, is the subject of your dispute? The Theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: the Atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination? (DNR 12.7 217–218)

One reason why Philo's claim is puzzling is that it is hard to know whether it is intended sincerely, and, therefore, whether it really represents Hume's views. For one thing, Philo's remark occurs just after what is widely known as Philo's Reversal, which comes at the start of the concluding section of the *Dialogues*. After spending much of the *Dialogues* engaged in a relentless attack on the evidential force of the argument from design for the existence of God, Philo suddenly seems to change directions. He now proclaims:

> That the works of Nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art, is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy. But as there are also considerable differences, we have reason to suppose a proportional difference in the causes; and in particular, ought to attribute a much higher degree of power and energy to the supreme cause, than any we have ever observed in mankind. Here then the existence of a DEITY is plainly ascertained by reason. (DNR 12.6 217)

Commentators disagree about what to make of remarks like these, and views range from treating them as sincere and expressing Hume's considered view to dismissing them as thoroughly ironic.

How seriously one takes the remarks about the dispute between theists and atheists being merely verbal depends at least in part on how one understands Philo's Reversal. This is because the claim that the dispute between theists and atheists is merely verbal seems to depend immediately on Philo's sudden insistence that the natural world *does* provide some evidence that the cause of order in the universe bears some, perhaps remote, analogy to a human mind. It is because Philo claims that atheists and theists *agree* that there is some degree of probability that there is some analogy between the cause of order in the universe and a human mind that their dispute is merely about the degree of a quality. In particular, their disagreement is about just how close or remote the analogy is.

Philo's claim is puzzling, though, for other reasons as well. First, why should disputes about the degrees of a quality be merely verbal? A dispute about whether Cleopatra was beautiful, very beautiful, or extremely beautiful is a dispute about what language most aptly describes her beauty, but it needn't be *merely* verbal. The subjects to such a dispute could genuinely disagree about just how beautiful she was. Similarly, surely someone who thinks that the analogy between the cause of order in the universe and a human

mind is very close disagrees genuinely with someone who claims that the analogy is very remote, and not merely about what language best describes the cause of order in the universe.

Finally, the atheist and the theist also disagree about how *probable* it is that the cause of order in the universe bears some analogy to a mind. What the theist takes to be very probable, the atheist takes to be much less probable. Hume seems to hold that this is another disagreement about the degree of a quality – in this case, the degree of probability. One possibility is that Philo assumes that the degree of probability and the degree of resemblance are not independent but systematically related. Both the atheist and the theist ought to allow that as the degree of resemblance decreases the probability that there is this degree of resemblance goes up.

What should we make of all this? It is tempting to begin a discussion of Hume and atheism by asking whether Hume was an atheist or an agnostic, or perhaps even some kind of theist. However, approaching the topic in this way risks overlooking some of Hume's more provocative and significant contributions to the philosophy of religion. Instead, we should start by considering what Hume thinks theism and atheism are: what makes one a theist or an atheist, and what is the significance of the difference between theism and atheism? One result of this investigation is that Hume does not view the distinction between theism and atheism as *the*, or perhaps even *a*, fundamental division in people's attitudes toward religion. Hume has a quite different way of thinking about religious attitudes, one that is perhaps unfamiliar to us, and one which, as we'll see, tends to emphasize different aspects of religion and religious experience.

This chapter has four parts. In the first, we consider various ways that Hume seems to distinguish between theism and atheism. I argue that we can best appreciate Hume's contribution to the philosophy of religion by recognizing in his work a range of forms of theism, rather than a sharp divide between theism and atheism. In the second part, we consider what Hume means by the phrase "true religion" and consider what Hume's attitude toward true religion is. In the third part, we consider Hume's position on the question of whether we have any evidence for the existence of a benevolent or morally good God, and I argue that Hume takes a harder line on the question of whether there is a moral God than he does on the question of whether there is a God with something resembling human intelligence. In the final part, we consider Hume's famous argument concerning miracles, with a particular focus on the relevance of this argument to theism.

## Theism vs. Atheism

Philo's claim that the disagreement between theists and atheists is merely verbal presupposes that theism and atheism are both essentially tied to questions of cosmology. The dispute, whether merely verbal or not, is about the nature of the cause of the universe. This can be contrasted with religious belief in general. In the *Natural History of Religion* (NHR), Hume describes religious belief as the belief in "invisible, intelligent power" (NHR 2.1 37). But one can believe in such power, or powers, without having any views about cosmology. In fact, Hume refers to some polytheists as "superstitious atheists", since they believe in gods – invisible, intelligent powers – but have no views

about cosmology at all and "acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity" (NHR 2.4 44). Hume considers such polytheists to be atheists because they simply have never given any thought to the origins of the universe.

Theism, for Hume, then, is essentially a view about the origin or cause of the universe. One might think that a theist, for Hume, is someone who holds that the cause of the universe is a necessary being with the traditional divine attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect benevolence. However, there is good reason to think that this is not Hume's view. For starters, in the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes, who defends the argument from design, gives up quite easily on the view that the divine attributes are infinite or perfect (DNR 11.1 203). He also denies that the deity is absolutely simple (DNR 4.3 159), and he argues that the claim that anything, including the deity, exists necessarily is incoherent (DNR 9.6 189). Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that Cleanthes is, in Hume's mind, a genuine theist, so it follows that Hume does not think genuine theism requires belief in a being with infinite attributes of any sort, nor belief in a being who exists necessarily.

This is further confirmed by Hume's remarks about superstitious monotheists in the *Natural History of Religion*. Hume suggests that most monotheists do not genuinely believe in the infinitude of God. He asks: "Will you say, that your deity is finite and bounded in his perfections; may be overcome by a greater force; is subject to human passions, pains, and infirmities; has a beginning, and may have an end?" (NHR 7.1 56). Hume thinks that most monotheists dare not answer such questions affirmatively, but "endeavour, by an affected ravishment and devotion, to ingratiate themselves with him [God]" (NHR 7.1 56). In cases like these, Hume continues, "the assent of the vulgar is merely verbal … they are incapable of conceiving of those sublime qualities, which they seemingly attribute to the Deity" (NHR 7.1 56).

At the other extreme, merely believing in the existence of God seems not to be sufficient to make one a genuine theist. This is suggested by Tom Holden's claim that Hume uses the name "God" as the proper name for whatever is picked out by the definite description, "the cause or causes of order in the universe" (2010, pp. 6–7). However, believing that the name "God" (understood in this way) has a referent hardly makes one a theist. Only those who deny that there is *any* cause of order in the universe or who simply have no views about cosmology, like the atheistic polytheists, lack a belief that there is some cause or causes of order in the universe. Holden observes that treating the name "God' in this way allows Hume to confidently assert that there is a God, while remaining entirely noncommittal on the question of what God's attributes are.

What sort of belief about God's nature – between these two extremes – would make one a genuine theist? One proposal is suggested by Lorne Falkenstein, who argues that for Hume, 'true' or 'genuine' religion is belief in a God who is worthy of worship (2009, p. 188). A genuine theist, then, would be someone who believes in a God – an original cause of order in the universe – who is worthy of our worship. A God worthy of worship is a morally good God, not merely a very powerful or highly intelligent one. In this case, Philo's concession at the end of the *Dialogues* falls short of genuine theism, because he does not concede that it is probable that the original cause of order in the universe is morally good. We'll consider in more detail Hume's views about divine benevolence in the third section.

A different proposal about what Hume thinks constitutes genuine theism is suggested by Andre Willis. Willis (2014) also argues that Hume is a genuine theist, of a

sort, or at least that there is a form of genuine theism that is congenial to Hume's views about religion. Willis holds that "the 'God' of genuine theism is distinct from human beings (contra Hegel's Geist), takes no particular concern with human happiness or morality (contra Leibniz), takes no interest in the redemption of the world (contra Edwards), and has no anthropomorphic characteristics and attributes (contra Clarke)" (p. 83). This sort of theism amounts to a "basic belief in purposive order of the principles of human nature" (p. 83). Thus, the sort of genuine theism that Willis ascribes to Hume is much thinner than the theism of Cleanthes, who believes in an anthropomorphic God who is concerned with human happiness and morality.

Willis is right that Hume does at times seem to have a view of nature and particularly of human nature that is teleological. For example, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, when he introduces the role of custom in explaining how we form beliefs about unobserved matters of fact, Hume writes: "Nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever" (EHU 5.1.2 41). Similarly, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume describes the principles of the association of ideas as a gentle force, and continues, "nature in a manner pointing out to every one those simple ideas, which are most proper to be united into a complex one" (T 1.1.4.1; SBN 10–11). In passages like these, Hume seems comfortable thinking about nature as having an authority or purpose in doing things. Of course, how seriously one should take such remarks, and what, if anything, in Hume's view, justifies thinking of nature in this teleological way, are difficult questions that I won't attempt to settle here.

Nevertheless, it is less clear whether such a general belief in purposive order could, in Hume's view, constitute a form of genuine theism. There are two main reasons Willis gives for thinking that it does. First, Willis argues that this belief in the purposiveness of nature grounds a religious outlook or attitude. (I'll turn to the specific sort of religious outlook that Willis thinks Hume recommends in the next section.) Second, if we take seriously Philo's suggestion that the dispute between theists and atheists is a dispute about the degrees of some quality, one can understand the genuine theism Willis finds in Hume as on a spectrum, a spectrum that includes both belief in a God with the traditional attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect benevolence, and who exercises particular influence and control over our lives in response to our behavior and attitudes (including our religious attitudes), as well as a general belief in a purposive order of nature, including of human nature. In other words, Hume seems to think of religion in terms of a range of theistic views or forms of theism, rather than in terms of a sharp boundary between theism and atheism. Whether Hume actually endorses some version of theism, as Willis suggests, is controversial, but, as we'll see, Hume is much more firmly opposed – for both epistemological and moral reasons – to some forms of theism than others.

## True Religion

What Hume means by the phrase "true religion" is another difficult interpretative question, one related to, but nevertheless distinct from, the question what constitutes theism for Hume. Hume's writings on religion are peppered with approving remarks

about true religion. For example, in the final section of the *Dialogues*, Philo claims: "But in proportion to my veneration for true religion, is my abhorrence of vulgar superstitions" (DNR 12.9 219). Cleanthes replies to this when he claims:

> Take care, Philo, ... push not matters too far: allow not your zeal against false religion to undermine your veneration for the true.... The most agreeable reflection, which it is possible for human imagination to suggest, is that of genuine Theism, which represents us as the workmanship of a Being perfectly good, wise, and powerful; who created us for happiness; and who, having implanted in us immeasurable desires of good, will prolong our existence to all eternity, and will transfer us into an infinite variety of scenes, in order to satisfy those desires, and render our felicity compleat and durable. (DNR 12.24 224)

In the essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," Hume describes superstition and enthusiasm as two different corruptions of true religion and claims, "*That the corruption of the best things produces the worst,* is grown into a maxim" (E 73). Finally, Hume introduces the *Natural History of Religion* by claiming: "The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion" (NHR Introduction 1 33).

What does Hume think true or genuine religion is? Passages like these pose at least two distinct problems. First, there is the question what Hume thinks true religion is. Of course, one possibility is that "true religion" means different things in different contexts. It seems highly probable that what Cleanthes takes to be true religion in his reply to Philo is quite different from the form of religion that Philo says he venerates. Another possibility is that Hume means something fairly minimal by the phrase "true religion," such as "whatever form of religion turns out to be true." If this is right, then it is, perhaps, an open question what true religion is, and Hume does not intend the phrase to have any substantive content. The second problem is the question of whether Hume is sincere in his praise of true religion. This seems clearest in the introduction to the *Natural History of Religion*. It sounds as though Hume here endorses some version of the argument from design for the existence of God, but it may well be that this endorsement is ironic.

One way of understanding the question what "true religion" means is simply what sort of belief about the nature of God is either true, or at least best supported by the evidence. This is how Don Garrett understands the question. Garrett (2012) argues that what Hume means by "true religion" is no more substantive than the content of the very thin form of deism that Philo seems to endorse in the final section of the *Dialogues* (pp. 216–219).

A different way of understanding what true religion is concerns what religious attitudes or practices are appropriate. This seems to be what Hume has in mind in calling superstition and enthusiasm *corruptions* of true religion. They are corruptions because they involve morally pernicious attitudes and practices, not merely false or unsupported beliefs about the nature of God (though they may also involve such beliefs). This way of thinking about true religion is much more general than asking whether there is a God or what God's attributes are.

Does Hume think that any form of religious practice or religious attitude is appropriate? Philo makes a remark at the end of the *Dialogues* that suggests a negative answer: "*To know God,* says Seneca, *is to worship him.* All other worship is indeed absurd, superstitious, and even impious. It degrades him to the low condition of mankind, who are delighted with entreaty, solicitation, presents, and flattery" (DNR 12.32 226). Philo's point here seems to be that any worship beyond a purely intellectual admiration of the cause of order in the universe is impious precisely because it supposes that God is influenced by our praise.

Hume's use of the phrase "true religion" might also be interpreted in connection with his discussion of what Cleanthes calls the "proper office of religion" in the *Dialogues* (DNR 12.12 220). Cleanthes claims:

> The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives. When it distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere, and has become only a cover to faction and ambition. (DNR 12.12 220)

Thus, the proper role of religion is, in Cleanthes's view, to serve merely as a reinforcement of moral behavior. True religion, then, might be characterized by its connection to morality: true religion conceives of God as merely pleased by virtue and displeased by vice.

It is a recurring theme in Hume's writings on religion that every form of religion as it is actually practiced strays from this proper role. Religions invariably characterize God as pleased by more than just virtue and displeased by more than just vice. Philo responds to Cleanthes by claiming "the vulgar … are utterly incapable of so pure a religion as represents the Deity to be pleased with nothing but virtue in human behavior. The recommendations to the Divinity are generally supposed to be either frivolous observances, or rapturous ecstasies, or a bigoted credulity" (DNR 12.15 221).

This is confirmed by the *Natural History of Religion*, where Hume claims that if

> a popular religion were found, in which it was expressly declared, that nothing but morality could gain the divine favour; if an order of priests were instituted to inculcate this opinion, in daily sermons, and with all the arts of persuasion; yet so inveterate are the people's prejudices, that, for want of some other superstition, they would make the very attendance at these sermons the essentials of religion, rather than place them in virtue and good morals.[2] (NHR 14 3 81)

Again, we see Hume emphasizing the vast differences between different forms of theism: he emphasizes how far actual religious practice is from what Cleanthes considers the proper office of religion.

Willis (2014) reads Hume as advocating a form of true religion that does not require belief in a God who is specially concerned with human morality or behavior. On Willis's reading, true religion can be morally salutary even without involving belief in a God who approves of virtue or disapproves of vice. Willis argues that Hume's genuine

theism – belief in the purposive order of nature – grounds a genuine religious outlook. Willis argues: "patient acceptance of the order and regularity of experience – particularly when experience does not seem ordered and regular – is a kind of peacefulness. We can understand this sort of equanimity, a trait normally associated with religious faith, as an effect of true religion" (2014, p. 56). In short, Willis claims that Hume's genuine theism leads to a religious outlook that cultivates "a sense of equipoise, stability, and humility" (p. 56). Willis argues that the belief in the purposive order of nature is a form of genuine theism in part because it grounds a religious outlook toward the world, one that makes us more hopeful, balanced, and accepting of the world around us. Thus, Willis reads Hume as endorsing a form of true religion that is both contentful and morally salutary.

## Divine Benevolence

The questions about what constitutes theism and what true religion is, in Hume's view, fit together closely with the question of whether the cause of order in the universe has any moral qualities. While Philo seems to concede at the end of the *Dialogues* that there is some probability that the cause of order in the universe bears some remote analogy to a human mind, he does not concede that the cause of order in the universe is morally praiseworthy. Tom Holden argues that Hume is a moral atheist, in the sense that he denies that the cause of order in the universe has moral attributes. Holden (2010) distinguishes between weaker and stronger forms of moral atheism: according to the weaker form of moral atheism, the cause of order in the universe is not morally praiseworthy; according to the stronger, the cause of order in the universe is not morally assessable at all. Holden argues that Hume is a moral atheist in the stronger sense: the cause of order in the universe, whatever it is, is like a rock or a tornado; just as it makes no sense to claim that a rock or tornado is moral or immoral, it makes no sense to morally assess the cause of order in the universe (pp. 6-8).

Holden claims that Hume's argument for strong moral atheism depends on his moral sentimentalism, in particular the claim that something can have moral attributes only if it is a natural object of our moral sentiments. Holden claims that Hume denies that the deity or cause of order in the universe is a natural object of our moral sentiments, from which it follows that the cause of order cannot have moral attributes at all (2014, p. 51). The strongest textual evidence for this argument comes from a letter Hume wrote to William Mure, in which he claims that the deity "is not the natural object of any Passion or Affection. He is no Object either of the Senses or Imagination, & very little of the Understanding, without which it is impossible to excite any Affection …" (quoted in Holden 2014, pp. 52–53).

A different argument for moral atheism is given by Philo in the penultimate section of the *Dialogues*. Philo argues that the existence of natural evil and suffering in the universe can be accounted for by four hypotheses. He argues:

> [H]ere may *four* hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that* they are endowed with perfect goodness; *that* they have perfect malice; *that* they are opposite, and have both goodness and malice; *that* they have neither goodness nor malice.

> Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles; and the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (DNR 11.15 212)

Philo argues that the empirical evidence most strongly supports the conclusion that the cause of order in the universe has neither goodness nor malice towards his creation.[3]

Hume's aim in giving this argument seems to be to emphasize a crucial epistemological difference between the conclusion that the cause of order in the universe probably bears some remote analogy to a mind – the conclusion that Philo surprisingly seems to endorse in the final section of the *Dialogues* – and the conclusion that the cause of order in the universe is morally good or praiseworthy, one that Philo adamantly refuses to endorse. The crucial epistemological difference is this: as weak as the evidential support for the claim that the cause of order in the universe resembles a human mind has been shown to be by Philo's arguments in the *Dialogues*, it is still stronger than the evidential support for the claim that the cause of order in the universe is morally good. This is because the evidence does not support the claim that the cause of order in the universe is morally good at all, but rather most strongly supports the claim that the cause of order in the universe is morally indifferent. In short, Philo's position at the end of the *Dialogues* is that the argument from design provides extremely weak support for an extremely weak conclusion, but there is not even this much evidence to support the view that the cause of order in the universe is morally praiseworthy.

If this is right, we can again best understand Hume's views about divine benevolence in terms of his emphasizing the distance between various forms of religious belief. In contemporary debates, we tend to think that accepting that there is empirical evidence of intelligent design in the world is already well on the way to accepting a robust form of theism. While Hume is rightly remembered for his comprehensive attack on the argument from design, he should also be remembered for driving home the great differences between the "true religion" that Philo venerates and the range of theistic positions that he rejects and disdains.

## Miracles

Hume's treatment of miracles is one of his most controversial and influential parts of his philosophy, certainly of his philosophy of religion. Hume argues that belief in a miracle is always irrational. He claims that rationality requires that one proportion one's belief that a miracle has occurred to the strength of the evidence that it has occurred. And he argues that the evidence that a miracle occurred must take into account both the probability of the event's occurring and the probability that the testimony that it has occurred is mistaken. Interestingly, he focuses solely on cases of testimony about miracles; he doesn't consider the case where one seems to witness a miracle oneself. Hume argues that since a miracle is a violation of a law of nature, we have very strong evidence that a miracle has not occurred. In fact, Hume argues that we always have such strong evidence that a miracle has not occurred that it must always be more probable that the testimony is mistaken than that the miraculous event has occurred. If so, then it is always irrational to believe in miracles.

Some commentators take Hume's argument to be essentially over at this point. If this is right, then Hume's argument is an *a priori* one: given that a miracle is a violation of a law of nature and that we always have conclusive evidence that a law of nature has not been violated, then it is impossible to have a preponderance of evidence in favor of a miracle's occurring. Objectors may complain that Hume's argument starts off poorly: if one is willing to concede that a miracle is a violation of a law of nature and that laws of nature are (at least) exceptionless regularities, then it simply seems to follow that miracles do not occur. After all, a regularity wouldn't be a genuine law of nature if there were exceptions to it. It may seem, then, that Hume's argument has nothing really to do with what sort of *evidence* we might have for or against miracles, but merely depends on conceiving of what a miracle is in such a way that it is impossible for miracles to occur. As Alexander George puts it, "this characterization immediately rules miracles out of existence by linguistic fiat" (2016, p. 1).

One way of avoiding this difficulty is to propose that a miracle is not a violation of a law of nature but a violation of something that one *believes* to be a law of nature. Thus, one might suggest, as George does, that Hume has an epistemological conception of a miracle: whether something is a miracle depends in part on what one takes the laws of nature to be (p. 3). If this is right, then evidential considerations do play a role. The question becomes whether the evidence for a miracle could be strong enough to make it rational to believe that something one previously believed to be a law of nature is not. This seems to set up the debate in a fairer way, since people's views about what the laws of nature are can rationally change in response to new evidence.

One advantage of this interpretation of Hume's argument is that it helps us make sense of Hume's appeals to empirical psychology and historical examples in arguing that testimony about the occurrence of miracles does not give us sufficient reason to believe that a miracle has occurred. Thus, George argues persuasively that Hume's appeals to such empirical considerations helps show that belief in miracles is irrational, but neither because Hume defines "miracle" in such a way as to entail that miracles are impossible, nor because he argues *a priori* that it is always more probable that testimony concerning a miracle is false than that the miracle occurred. Thus, on George's interpretation, Hume's claims, for example, about the role that the passions of surprise and wonder play in giving us a tendency to believe testimony about miracles are empirical evidence of a psychological bias that ought to be corrected for in evaluating testimony about an alleged miracle. Similarly, Hume claims: "It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors" (EHU 10.2.7 119). Such historical considerations are supposed to give us additional reason to discount the evidential value of testimony concerning miracles.

In whatever way one understands Hume's argument and its force, it is clear that he holds that belief in miracles is irrational. What is less clear is the *significance* of this. One might think that the rejection of rational belief in miracles and the rejection of any form of theism are of a piece. However, this seems to me to be a mistake. Hume claims in the *Natural History of Religion* that many theists deny that God intervenes in any way in the causal order established at the beginning of the universe. He writes: "Many theists, even the most zealous and refined, have denied a *particular* providence, and have

asserted, that the Sovereign mind or first principle of all things, having fixed general laws, by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws, and disturbs not, at every turn, the settled order of events by particular volitions" (NHR 6.2 52). In other words, such theists deny that there are miracles that are violations of laws of nature caused by God's will at all. If this is right, then Hume's target in "Of Miracles" is not the rationality of theism in general, but only a specific version of theism. Again, Hume distinguishes between different forms of theism, in this case those that allow that God intervenes in the causal order and those that do not.

At the same time, Hume's argument in "Of Miracles" does have wider implications for religious belief in general. In particular, Hume may be responding to Locke's claims about the role that miracles play in providing evidence for divine revelation. Locke holds that miracles provide a special and perhaps even indispensable form of evidence for divine revelation. He claims that "[t]he holy Men of old, who had Revelations from GOD, had something else besides that internal Light of assurance in their own Minds, to testify to them, that it was from GOD. They … had outward Signs to convince them of the Author of those Revelations" (*Essay* IV.xix.15 705).[4] In short, miracles, in Locke's view, serve as the outward signs that help confirm that something is a genuine case of divine revelation. Locke claims that it is witnessing a miracle and testifying to this that helps distinguish cases of rational belief in revelation from the irrational belief of the religious enthusiast. This suggests that Hume's attack on the rationality of belief in miracles has a further implication: it suggests that, if Locke's account of revelation were right, then belief in revelation would always be irrational too. In this way, Hume's attack on miracles can be read as an attack on revealed religion in general.

## Conclusion

Hume's views on a variety of religious questions turn out to be subtler and more nuanced than is often thought. In particular, I hope to have shown that a central theme in much of Hume's work on religion is the careful distinguishing of different forms of religious belief and religious practice. It seems highly unlikely that Hume is a theist, at least of any of the more substantive sorts we've considered. But simply concluding that Hume is an atheist and opponent of religion in general risks overlooking the full range of his responses to various forms of religion. Hume is extremely sensitive to epistemic and moral disparities among different forms of religious belief and practice.

It is also worth noting that the arguments against various forms of religious belief and practice that we've considered seem to rely fairly little, if at all, on Hume's general skeptical outlook. Thus, even if Hume thinks that testimony can never provide adequate evidential support for any claim, he thinks that testimony about miracles is beset with particular difficulties. Hume's views on religion are not just straightforward consequences of his general epistemological commitments (though hopefully they are not inconsistent with those commitments!). Some contemporary popular writers seem to assume that Hume's skeptical attitude toward religion is simply a consequence of a more general skeptical outlook. For example, this seems to explain some of Richard Dawkins' attitude toward Hume, whom Dawkins criticizes for failing to 'offer any *alternative* explanation for apparent design, but [leaving] the question open' (1986, p. 6).

Thus, Dawkins claims that it is only after Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species* that it became "possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist" (1986, p. 6). Dawkins's view seems to be that it would be pretty easy for Hume to be a religious skeptic if he is a skeptic about all manner of things, including the natural world. A similar attitude is found in a writer as strongly opposed to Dawkins as William Dembski, one of the main contemporary defenders of intelligent design. Dembski claims that "Hume was a sceptic and caviller" and that his contribution was merely to find "logical flaws in the design argument" (2002, p. 33). Hume did indeed purport to find logical flaws in the design argument, but his nuanced responses to different forms of religious belief and practice belie the attempt to dismiss him as a pedantic sceptic.[5]

## Notes

1 Parenthetical citations to Hume's works are as follows: citations to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (DNR) include the part and paragraph number, followed by page number; citations to Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (NHR) include section and paragraph number, followed by page number; citations to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (EHU) include section, part, and paragraph numbers, followed by page number; citations to Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (T) include book, part, chapter, and paragraph numbers, followed by page numbers from the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch edition (SBN); citations to Hume's *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (E) include page numbers from the 1987 edition.

2 For an interesting discussion of this passage, see Willem Lemmens (2010, pp. 423–460).

3 It is significant that Holden claims that this argument does *not* represent Hume's argument for moral atheism. This is because the argument conflicts with what Holden dubs 'liminal natural theology," which is Hume's view that we lack adequate empirical evidence to support any substantive claims about the intrinsic nature of the deity. Holden takes this argument, then, to be a parody of the kind of substantive or core natural theology that Cleanthes defends and Hume opposes (2010, pp. 168–178).

4 Parenthetical citations to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* include book, chapter, paragraph, and page numbers.

5 To read further on this topic, you might consider, in addition to works cited, Russell and Kraal (2017) and Pyle (2006).

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