Religion and morality in the philosophy of David Hume.

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RELIGION AND MORALITY
IN
THE PHILOSOPHY OF DAVID HUME

by

Terry Myers
B.A. Philosophy, University of Windsor, 1994

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of Philosophy
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the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

RELIGION AND MORALITY
IN
THE PHILOSOPHY OF DAVID HUME

Though the relation between religion and morality is mentioned in almost every major work Hume wrote, he never dedicated a work to examining this relation. Moreover, his treatment of the subject, where it does appear, is unsystematic. Unfortunately, looking to the secondary literature for help in understanding Hume's thought on the relation between religion and morality is of little help, since past writers have largely neglected this area of Hume's thought. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to systematize Hume's thought on the relation between religion and morality.

In my introduction I begin with a brief presentation of the historical context in which Hume's comments on this subject were made. This aids in understanding Hume by illustrating the types of views that he was responding to. I also examine the secondary literature that has been written on Hume and his views concerning religion and morality in order to show what has been written and what sort of work still needs to be done.

The core of this thesis is dedicated to systematizing Hume's thought on religion and morality. I argue that all of Hume's main claims about religion and its relation to
morality support at least one of three major conclusions: (1) that morality is secular, (2) that religion cannot be the foundation for morality and (3) that religion is pernicious to morality. A chapter is dedicated to each of these topics.

Lastly, I address the issue of whether or not Hume believed in a true religion. The answer to this question is essential in evaluating just how injurious Hume’s comments about religion are. I argue that Hume did not believe that there can be a true religion.
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I would like to express my gratefulness to my mother Evelyn Myers and my late father Murray Myers for always allowing me the freedom to pursue my interest in philosophy.

Lastly, I thank Chris Gilham for his encouragement and feedback in the writing of this thesis and for his steady friendship throughout my university career.
ABBREVIATIONS

\[ D = \text{Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion} \]

\[ ECHU = \text{An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding} \]

\[ ECPM = \text{An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals} \]

\[ NHR = \text{The Natural History of Religion} \]

\[ T = \text{A Treatise of Human Nature} \]
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1. MY TASK

At the beginning of his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume writes "As every enquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature" (*NHR* 309). The first question is dealt with primarily in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the latter is dealt with in his *Natural History of Religion*. There is, however, a third fundamental problem regarding religion, which Hume also dealt with, but in a less systematic way. The problem, as Gerhard Streminger explains it, concerns religion's "relationship to and influence on morality."¹ This third fundamental problem will be the focus of my thesis.

Though Hume's writing on the first two questions given above has been widely

commented upon by contemporary philosophers, relatively little attention has been paid to Hume's thought on religion's relationship to and influence on morality. The reason for this neglect is most likely Hume's unsystematic treatment of the subject. Though he never dedicates a single work to this third fundamental question, we can find it, either explicitly or by implication, running through almost everything he wrote: in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, his *History of England*, and in both the *Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

In this thesis I examine two of Hume's claims regarding religion: that *religion is not the foundation for morality* and that *religion can be pernicious to morality*. Though these two related points have been recognized by commentators in the past, I believe they have not been adequately dealt with; the accounts given are either too brief or they are inaccurate. I have scoured Hume's works and attempted to give his ideas a cohesive and comprehensive presentation --something that has not yet been done by past writers. My aim is to contribute to an understanding of Hume's thought on religion and morality by providing a systematic categorization of his points on this topic and a careful analysis of how these parts fit together as a whole. In addition, I show that Hume's thought on religion and morality has a heavy dependence on aspects of his thought that are not explicitly aimed at religious issues, evincing an interconnectedness between Hume's religious writings and those not usually associated with religion. I also show that Hume's thought on the relationship between religion and morality, though scattered throughout his

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²For a more complete account of why this is, see Section 2.
works, is not just casual and is much more cohesive than has been recognized previously.

There are aspects of Hume's thought on religion and morality that I will not be dealing with in this thesis. I will not address Hume's attack on the clergy, which consists of claiming that priests purposely limit human knowledge and promote the gloominess of mankind in order to further the religious cause (and their own interests). Though this may be true, I believe that where it does occur, it is more the result of individual ambition. And even if religion provides a cause which can be abused for personal gain, the same can be said of many other institutions.³

I will also not address Hume's concern with popular conceptions of God, which depict him as being tyrannical and discordant. First, Hume never explicitly says that such a deity could not be a moral authority. He does say that God's omniscience and omnipotence make him an object of fear. But this is exactly what Hume's opponents mark as most important. It is, after all, fear that they think provides the proper motivation to be moral.⁴

Even though I have chosen not to address Hume's concerns with the clergy or popular conceptions of God, I would like to say that they could be incorporated into the scheme I provide. The clergy's moral corruption would certainly fall under Section 3 of Chapter 3, "The Affects of the Religious Mind set on Society." As for God's tyrannical and discordant nature, this could be listed with Hume's arguments against God as moral authority (Chapter 2, Sections 3 and 4). I simply feel that these aspects of his thought are

³For instance, people's individual ambitions may be cloaked in political, nationalistic or environmental causes.

⁴For a more complete account of Hume's opponents' views see Section 3 below.
less deserving of treatment (in this thesis) than the others, not because they are uninteresting, but because they do not bear upon the subject matter with the directness that the other aspects do. In the name of parsimony, therefore, I have left them out.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that I have not taken it upon myself to defend Hume's views. Though I do agree with them (for the most part), defending them would make the subject matter of another thesis. My sole purpose in this thesis is to lend Hume's thought a systematic character in a way that has not been done previously.

I have not, by any means, addressed all the relevant passages in Hume's works that may have a bearing on the relation between religion and morality. Such an undertaking would carry this thesis beyond its proper range. However, I have accounted for the greater part of his thought on this matter. And though not every reference has been supplied, I feel that any which have been left out could be worked into the framework I have devised. And this is my true intention: to arrange Hume's thought on religion and morality in such a way that one can understand the aim and the purpose of each of his arguments in relation to each other and in relation to other aspects of his philosophy.
2. THE SECONDARY LITERATURE

As I have already mentioned, the secondary literature on Hume's thought regarding religion and morality has been sparse, and in my opinion, largely unsatisfactory. Therefore, I would like to give a relatively brief discussion of it. It is not my concern to give a detailed account of the secondary literature in this thesis. My sole purpose in giving it any attention at all will be to orient the reader to what work has been done and to what still needs to be done.

In his paper, "Religion a Threat to Morality," Gerhard Streminger deals with Hume's claim that religion is a threat to morality by proposing three main influences: (1) that the clergy has an interest in setting bounds to human knowledge; (2) that the God of false religion is no moral authority and (3) that false religion corrupts the natural moral sentiments and promotes an "artificial, affected" life (Streminger, 278). Streminger's article certainly does contribute something to our understanding of Hume's views, but it does not adequately convey the scope of Hume's critique. Nor does it elucidate the connections that Hume's critique has to other aspects of his philosophy. For instance, in claiming that God is not a moral authority, Streminger merely refers to Hume's arguments concerning popular conceptions of God --conceptions that depict God's nature as discordant and tyrannical. However, when Hume argues that morality cannot be based on our conception

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\(^5\) See Streminger's article, 282-284.
of God, he is primarily concerned with the attempt to establish God’s moral authority either by a priori means, or by a posteriori means. Not only are his arguments against both attempts to establish God’s moral authority more fundamental than those arguments concerning popular conceptions of God, they draw heavily on other aspects of his philosophy (such as his arguments against knowledge of necessary connection, reason’s lack of efficacy in establishing moral distinctions, and the inability to establish absolute moral distinctions). By failing to take these arguments into account, Streminger has not only overlooked Hume’s main attack on the notion of God as moral authority, he has also failed to notice the extent to which other aspects of Hume’s philosophy support his more obvious anti-religious sentiments.

The degree to which Hume’s thought on religion depends upon other aspects of his philosophy (his epistemology, his theory of the passions and his theory of moral motivation), has been examined by other writers. For instance, Paul Russell argues that "Hume’s skepticism regarding the powers of demonstrative reason," a theme that "runs throughout the Treatise," was recognized by both Hume and his contemporaries as being aimed "primarily against the dogmatic Christian rationalism of John Locke and above all Samuel Clarke." Additionally, Christopher Bernard argues that "Hume’s account of religion in his Natural history, his Essays, and his History of England, is based on

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6The role that these various arguments play in Hume’s thought on religion and morality will be addressed in chapters 1 and 2.

7Paul Russell, "Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume’s Treatise," in The Journal of the History of Ideas, (1988), April-June, p. 247. The role of Hume’s skepticism with regard to demonstrative reasoning will become apparent in Chapter 2 Section. All further quotes by Russell will be indicated within the body of the text.
principles of philosophical psychology which he originally developed in the *Treatise.*" In organizing Hume's various arguments regarding religion and morality, I will also be contributing to an understanding of how all of these arguments hang together —not only amongst themselves, but in relation to other aspects of his philosophy. What emerges, I think, is a network of arguments aimed at supporting each other in a grand skeptical system designed to overthrow the commonly perceived relation between religion and morality that was present in the eighteenth century.

Returning to Streminger, I not only believe that his account of Hume's thought is insufficient, but that it is also mistaken on several points. For instance, Streminger specifies at the beginning of his paper that Hume is really only criticizing false religion (a corrupted version of what religion really is) rather than true religion. If Streminger is right and Hume is only criticizing the more popular and corrupted forms that religion takes amongst the common people, then we must admit that Hume's works are considerably less injurious to the religious stance. It is obvious that Hume feels that common theists sometimes engage in ceremonies or observances that are silly or even morally corrupt. But is this all that Hume is saying? Is he simply stating that degenerate forms of religion are dangerous, while allowing that there is another type of religion that is exempt from these problems? My answer is an emphatic no. I will argue in my conclusion, after Hume's thought on the nature of religion has been carefully studied, that Hume's distinction

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between true and false religion is hollow and that for Hume, religion is, at its very core, dangerous to morality.

Besides Streminger's erroneous belief that Hume thought that there was a substantive true religion, his categorization of Hume's arguments for the conclusion that religion is pernicious to morality is also inaccurate. Streminger's second category, that God is no moral authority primarily supports the conclusion that religion cannot be the foundation for morality, and only in a small, indirect way supports the conclusion that religion is pernicious to morality.

To further illustrate the need for a systematic treatment of Hume's thought on religion and morality we can turn to a critique of Streminger's paper by Joseph Ellin, who says that "Professor Streminger makes an important contribution to our understanding of Hume's views" and that "Streminger has ingeniously brought some order to Hume's views by arranging them under three heads" (Ellin, 295). Ellin acknowledges the importance of clarifying what Hume really thought about the relation between religion and morality. Ellin even adds to Streminger's treatment by summarizing Streminger's presentation of Hume's views into sixteen propositions. Ellin refers to this list as an "odd catalogue of horrors, reflecting, no doubt, Hume's deep dislike of religion as well as his unsystematic treatment of the subject" (Ellin, 296). Referring to Hume's criticisms of religion as an "odd catalogue of horrors" I think, more accurately reflects Ellin's own unsystematic understanding of Hume's views. Yet Ellin's comment points to what is sorely needed—namely, an

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organization of Hume's thought on the relation between religion and morality, an
organization that will make what appears to be "an odd catalogue of horrors" a detailed
and far-reaching account of religion's relation to and influence on morality.

At the end of his paper, Ellin raises some very important points. He says that what
we need is

a clearer account of just what it is about religion which, in Hume's view,
constitutes the "threat to morality." There is a legitimate question as to just what
aspect of religion is Hume's real target. Is it superstitious incredulity? The
misalliance of superstition, meaningless ritual, crafty and dishonest clergy, and
dogmatically held doctrine, which it can be argued, has characterized much of
Judeo-Christian history? Clearly, any final assessment of Hume's views about
religion's relation to morality must be more precise than Streminger's on points
such as these. (Ellin 299, emphasis added)

Ellin is certainly correct. It is not immediately clear exactly what it is about religion that
Hume is criticizing. And it is equally certain that an account of Hume's criticisms must be
more precise and more comprehensive than the one given by Streminger. It is my intention
to answer Ellin's questions, to render Hume's thought on the matter more intelligible.
3. HUME'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Can an atheist be moral? Can a society subsist without the dictates of religion, which posits an infinite, almighty, omniscient God, who is concerned with human affairs and who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous? The answers given by philosophers to these questions were completely and emphatically negative, at least up until the early eighteenth century. For instance, Richard Bentley wrote that the atheist "allows no natural morality, nor any other distinction of good and evil, just and unjust...The most heroical actions or detestable villainies are in the nature of things indifferent to [the atheist's] approbation; if by secrecy they are alike conceal'd from rewards or punishments, from ignominy or applause" (98). By this account, the atheist will find himself at liberty to act in any way he feels, since without moral rules proclaimed by a deity, actions can be neither good nor bad. Moreover, the atheist will feel that so long as his actions can be kept secret from everyone else, he will not have to face any judgement or punishment for them. Thus,

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I owe my analysis in this section to David Fate Norton's article, "Hume, Atheism and the Autonomy of Morals," in Hume's Philosophy of Religion, (Winston-Salem: Wake University Press, 1986), pp. 97-144. The original authors and the works from which their quotes are taken will be acknowledged. However, all page references are to Norton's paper.

according to Bentley, a society of atheists could never subsist, since there would never be any constraint upon people's naturally self-serving motives. Without a deity to observe secret crimes and punish those who would otherwise escape punishment from society, no social order could exist.

No community ever was or can be begun or maintain'd, but upon the basis of religion. What government can be imagin'd without judicial proceedings? and what methods of judicature without a religious oath; which implies an omniscient being, as conscious of its falsehood or truth, and a revenger of perjury? So that the very nature of an oath (and therefore of society also) is subverted by the atheist; who professeth to acknowledge nothing superior to himself, no omnipotent observer of the actions of men. For an atheist to compose a system of politics is... absurd and ridiculous... (98)

According to Bentley, without the notion of a supreme being who will detect all sins, the atheist will not feel himself under any obligation to be moral. Not only does this lack of obligation make the atheist immoral, it undermines the very foundation of society.

But besides the need for a force that will actually motivate people to behave morally, there needs to be some sort of authority which will give moral obligations a law-like status. Perhaps Samuel Pufendorf, a prominent moralist of his day, expresses morality's dependence on religion best when he emphasizes the need for both a moral authority and an effective moral motivator:

It is certain, that morality is the daughter of religion, that they go hand in hand together; and that the perfection of the latter, is the standard of perfection in the former.... In fact, the fundamental principles of natural religion, which must be the basis of all other religion; are also the most firm, or rather only, foundation of this science of morality. Without a deity, duty, obligation, right, are no more, to say the truth, than fine ideas; which may please the mind, but can scarce touch the heart; and which of themselves, cannot impose an indispensable necessity to act or not to act, in such or such a certain manner....But to give these ideas their full force and due measure of efficacy, to make 'em strong enough to maintain their ground against passion and self-interest; they will require a superior being; a being superior to us in power and might, who has subjected us to a strict conformity
therewith in our conduct; who has bound us thereto....who has put us under an obligation, properly so call'd....This fear of a deity, who punishes vice and rewards virtue, has so great an efficacy; that, altho' the fundamental principles of religion be much darken'd, by the intermixture of errour and superstition; yet if they are not entirely corrupted and destroy'd, it will still continue to actuate, and have a considerable influence....But shou'd you make the finest [moral] system in the world, if religion has not its part in it, it will be little more than (as I may say) a speculative morality; and you will be found to build on a sandy foundation.\textsuperscript{12} (109-10)

Pufendorf was far from alone in his sentiments. The idea that morality could stand without religion was thought to be ridiculous, philosophically untenable and \textit{atheistic}.

It was entirely natural to these writers to consider morality the \textit{daughter of religion}. Without God —without a superior power to punish those who do wrong and reward those that do right— the motive to behave morally simply would not be present. For on what basis will one be obligated to act morally, if not for an obligation to God? Pufendorf, like Bentley, expresses the view that without a divine command to set (and authorize) moral rules for society to follow, and without the looming threat of eternal punishment to serve as a deterrent to those who would disobey them, and the promise of eternal bliss to encourage society to follow them, there can be no moral system that will be binding upon anyone. As Pufendorf says above, "Without a deity, duty, obligation, right, are no more, to say the truth, than fine ideas; which may please the mind, but can scarce touch the heart..."

According to Norton, there was one particular philosopher who was willing to concede that it was at least possible for an atheist to behave morally. In 1729 Jean

Barbeyrac wrote:

there may be amongst these atheists, men of sense and philosophers, who, reflecting that it is better for men to subject themselves to certain rules of life, than for every man to follow his humours only, may observe outwardly, so far as they are exempt from such circumstances, as some great interest present, or some violent passion forces them upon, such counsels as are reasonable, calm and aware of the consequences.\textsuperscript{13} (101)

Given that Barbeyrac was a close follower of Pufendorf, who translated and annotated his work, and who even at times carried Pufendorf's attack even further in his own \textit{Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality...from the earliest Times down to the Publication of Pufendorf}, even this small concession is surprising. However, Barbeyrac was only allowing the bare possibility of a moral atheist. The problem was that the majority of people in society, which for him consisted mainly of "ignorant people and idiots," could never manage their lives according to such considerations. In order to motivate them in any effective way, "some more obvious principle, which all the world may be sensible of, and which may make the deepest impressions upon them, must be found out, and that, in a word, can be no other than the fear of a deity" (101).

In admitting the possibility of a moral atheist (as impractical or unlikely as it is) Barbeyrac, in small way, opened the door to the idea of a moral system that is not dependent upon religion, though too much must not be read into this, since for him, such a system would likely never govern anyone's behaviour.

In their convictions, Pufendorf and Barbeyrac were confident. If one is to prove that morality is not founded on religion, and that an atheist can be moral, he has his work

\textsuperscript{13} This quote appears in Barbeyrac's notes to, \textit{Of the Law of Nature and Nations}, by Samuel Pufendorf.
cut out for him. Barbeyrac proposes that the atheist must meet the following challenge:

For in as much as the whole race of men in all ages have constantly held this persuasion [of God's existence], whoever would attempt to assert the contrary, must of necessity not only solidly confute all the arguments produced on the other side, but also allege better and more plausible reasons for his own particular opinion. And farther, since the safety and happiness of mankind have been hitherto thought to depend chiefly on this belief, it is requisite, that he likewise prove atheism to contribute more to the interest and good of all men, than the acknowledgement of a deity. (109, emphasis added)

Anyone familiar with Hume's work knows that it is to this challenge that Hume dedicated a great deal of philosophical effort.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition to Barbeyrac's admission that there might be a moral atheist, Pierre Bayle, though not an atheist himself, was not afraid to point out that a survey of the world plainly showed that religious belief did not necessarily correct a person's immoral inclinations. In fact, theists could be, and often were, immoral, despite their belief in an omniscient God who would inflict the wicked with eternal punishment. According to Bayle, to say that belief in God is the only true security to morals may seem fine in theory, but it is not to be found in reality. Bayle argued that if a being from another world was told that Christians believe that there is a God who punishes the wicked with eternal pains and rewards the righteous with eternal bliss, the visitor would find Christians behaving quite differently than he would have expected. Bayle concludes that if immoral behaviour is to be found in theists, who firmly believe that there is a God, it cannot be from a lack of

\textsuperscript{14}Though it is probably accurate to say that Hume was not really an atheist in the literal sense of the word (for he never denies the existence of a God), the term atheist would have been readily applied to anyone who denied God's care for humans, or to anyone who denied the dependence of morality upon religion. Thus we may see Hume as one of the prospective 'atheists' to whom Barbeyrac's challenge is being issued.
this belief that immorality arises—it must be from a different source. That source is human nature.

Bayle argued that people are not motivated by metaphysical principles such as *There is a God who will punish the wicked and reward the righteous*, but that they are motivated by more secular influences, such as a desire for pleasure and an aversion to pain. Bayle concludes that "man is not determined in his actions by general motives, or views of his understanding, but by the present reigning passion of his heart" (106). 15

Thus we arrive at a point of view which strongly resembles Hume's, at least in a small way. For in the *Dialogues* we have Hume writing: "A man's natural inclination works incessantly upon him; it is for ever present to the mind, and mingles itself with every view and consideration: whereas religious motives, where they act at all, operate only by starts and bounds; and it is scarcely possible for them to become altogether habitual to the mind" (*D* 221).

Though before Hume there were those that defended the possibility of a moral atheist (or that morality might not be founded on religion), at least to some degree (such as Barbeyrac and Bayle), none went to quite the length that Hume did. Hume attacks religion from every angle, always seeking to establish that one could be moral without religion and that morality does not stand upon a religious foundation.

4. **HUME'S TASK**

The challenge to the atheist offered by Pufendorf and the others consists of four points:

1. Confute the arguments in favour of a belief in God.
2. Show the atheistic position is supported by better and more plausible arguments.
3. Show that there can be a practical, effective morality independent of religious belief.
4. Show that atheism contributes more to the good of all people than religion does.

The first two points concern proving God's existence or nonexistence and do not concern us here. The third point concerned Hume greatly. The fourth point was also very important to Hume, but it must be qualified. Though Hume did not hold that atheism (the denial of God's existence) contributed more to the good of the people, he certainly held that the good of the people would be better served if morality was viewed as secular, rather than religious, in origin.

I will address the third part of the anti-atheistic challenge in Chapter 1, where I will give a general account of Hume's secular morality. Hume argues that morality is based in human sentiment and utility rather than in religion. Thus, he is implying that morality does not have a *divine* origin, but is based in *human* nature and *human* interests.

In Chapter 2, I will look at how Hume explicitly argues that religion is not the
foundation for morality by examining moral motivation. There he concludes that morality stems from entirely natural motives, and that religious motives are largely ineffective. Hume also attacks the plausibility of attributing moral attributes to God, either a priori or a posteriori. He argues that since it is not valid to attribute moral attributes to God, we cannot claim God as our moral authority.

It is in Chapter 3 that I will examine Hume's arguments for the conclusion that *religion can be pernicious to morality*. Hume argues that the very notion of a singular and infinite (or *supremely great*) deity, who is responsible for one's fortune in life, or in an afterlife, has dire consequences for morality. Such a conclusion certainly would have shocked the likes of Pufendorf, Bentley and Barbeyrac.
CHAPTER 1

HUME'S SECULAR ACCOUNT OF MORALITY

INTRODUCTION

Since in Chapter 2 I will examine Hume's arguments for the conclusion that religion is not the foundation for morality, it will first be necessary to give an account of what he thinks the foundation for morality is. According to Hume, moral distinctions are not founded on religion in the sense given above\(^{16}\) or in any sense whatsoever --they are a purely human affair. Our moral distinctions are made according to human sentiment and our rules of moral right and wrong arise from the human condition.

It is not my intention to give a comprehensive account of Hume's moral system, but only an account of those aspects that are relevant to the arguments that will be presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Therefore, I will first give a brief account of Hume's

\(^{16}\)General Introduction, "Hume's Historical Context."
argument against the notion that morality can be established by reason. This account will allow for a more complete understanding of the attempt to establish God's moral authority a priori.\textsuperscript{17} I will then examine the two most pertinent claims: (1) that moral distinctions are made according to sentiment and are thus rooted in human nature, and (2) that the moral rules we abide by (justice) arise from, and are dependent upon, the human condition.

By insisting upon the human origin of morality, rather than the divine, Hume weakens two of the most putatively important reasons for needing religion: (1) to give our moral code its authority and (2) to motivate people to act morally. By pointing out that morality does not come down to us from a deity, but rather arises from us directly, Hume counters the notion that we need religious belief in order to have a moral code or that we need religion in order to be moral at all. According to Hume, we can do without religion and still be moral (perhaps more moral) simply by following our own natural human inclinations and the rules that we, as a society, set up for ourselves. We are perfectly capable of distinguishing moral right and wrong on our own, and perfectly capable of conducting our behaviour according to these distinctions.

\textsuperscript{17}See Chapter 2, Section 3.
1. MORALITY AND REASON

In Hume's moral system, reason plays a subordinate role to that of the passions—it is our passions that distinguish between vice and virtue, good and evil, not reason. According to Hume, reason only concerns matters of fact or the relations of ideas. Morality, he says, cannot be based upon judgements concerning these things. Rather, morality arises from a *moral sense*.¹⁸

Hume's arguments for reason's subordinate role in morality are two-fold: (1) reason can never directly influence the will and (2) reason can never be the basis for distinguishing vice from virtue.

In the *Treatise*, Hume sets out to prove that reason can never be a motive to any action and that consequently, it can never oppose any action of the will. He says that the understanding may act in two different ways: the first is in judging from demonstration or probability. According to Hume demonstration and volition are entirely separate.

I believe it scarce will be asserted, that the first species of reasoning alone is ever the cause of an action. As it's proper province is the world of ideas, and as the will always places us in that of realities, demonstration and volition seem, upon that account, to be totally remov'd from each other. (*T* 413)

Though demonstration and abstract reasoning are useful in discovering the regular motion

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¹⁸This 'moral sense' will be discussed in the following section.
of bodies or in the calculation of formulas, the conclusions we draw from these reasonings do not directly influence how we act.¹⁹

The second way in which the understanding may act is in determining causal relations between ideas or objects. Again, such determinations alone cannot be the motive for our actions. For instance, Hume says that we may use reason to determine whether a certain object may cause us pain or pleasure, but it is not that determination itself which motivates us to act. Rather, it is the prospect of pain or pleasure which actuates the will. Thus, reason plays only a mediate role in our actions. This point is made more explicit in Book 3 where Hume says, "Reason and judgment may, indeed, be the mediate cause of an action, by prompting, or by directing a passion..." (T 462). From this he concludes that reason only discovers various connections, but does not motivate our actions.²⁰

The upshot is that "reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition" (T 414). Consequently, Hume says, reason can never prevent any volition. This is a necessary consequence. For Hume feels that it would be impossible that reason could prevent a volition if it cannot give rise to one. He says, "Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse..." (T 415). According to his earlier arguments it is clear that a contrary impulse of the sort needed could not be reason.

In the end, reason is relegated to mere servitude within the moral realm. "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other

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¹⁹The reasons for why such judgements do not directly influence how we act are given below.

²⁰One may question the validity of Hume's claim that reason cannot be the cause of our actions. For a more detailed explanation of this claim, see Appendix A.
office than to serve and obey them" (T 415). In order to illustrate that reason cannot influence the passions, however, Hume does not only subjugate reason to passion, but he also emphasizes their incompatibility. Hume says that our passions have an original existence. What he means is that our passions are not representations of something else. On the other hand, reason deals with ideas which are only copies of the objects they represent. Thus, passions and ideas are incommensurable. "'Tis impossible, therefore, that... passion can be oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth and reason..." (T 415). If passions cannot be true or false, it is impossible that they could oppose or agree with ideas, which are susceptible to this distinction. When Hume says, "We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and reason," (T 415) he is not only implying that talk of such combat is inaccurate because the passions clearly dominate reason, he is also implying that combat between the two is not possible since they are incommensurable.

In Book 3 Hume asks, "Whether 'tis by means of our ideas or impression we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praiseworthy?" (T 456). Since ideas correspond to reason, and impressions to passions, Hume is essentially asking, Is it by reason or sentiment that we can distinguish vice from virtue? Since morality deals with the realm of actions, it is clear, by way of Hume's earlier arguments, that morals cannot be derived from reason. To lend his argument more strength Hume considers whether morals can even be the subject of reason at all.

Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth and falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true and false, and can never be the object of
reason. (T 458)

Since the passions and volitions exist originally, and are not representations of other things, as was said earlier, they are not copies of other things like ideas. Hence, they are not susceptible to being true and false and can never be the object of reason. "Actions may be laudable or blameable, but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable" (T 458).

Hume suggests that in trying to establish that morals are derived from the discovery of relations of ideas and objects, that one will run into inextricable absurdities. He asserts that such relations would have to be universally binding and obligatory. Hence, they would not only be binding on us, but would extend to nonrational entities. By this account, if an oak tree grows up and overwhelms its parent tree, it would have to be deemed immoral, since the relation here is the same as that of a child murdering his parent. To say that the tree lacked a will or choice does not change the relation between it and the parent in comparison with the child and its parent, but only points to a difference in causes. The relations, however, remain the same. "And as the discovery [of the relations] is not in both cases attended with a notion of immorality, it follows, that that notion does not arise from such a discovery" (T 467).²¹

Having shown that the distinction of vice and virtue cannot be based on judgments of fact or on relations of ideas, Hume feels that "it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion, that we are able mark the difference betwixt them" (T 470). Hume feels that so long as you look for vice in objects you will never find it. You must

²¹This argument is also used to support the conclusion that moral attributes are not absolute, and cannot be applied to God a priori. See Chapter 2, Section 3.
look "into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you...Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling not of reason. It lies in yourself not in the object" (T 469). This leads Hume to conclude that "Morality...is more properly felt than judg'd of..." (T 470). He says that the wish to assign reason the job of distinguishing vice from virtue arises from the mistake of confounding sentiments for ideas. But as was shown earlier, the two are far from being similar.

Reason, then, which only deals with truths and falsities concerning judgements of matter of fact, and the relations of ideas and objects, can only play a mediate role in the moral life. That is, it can only excite a passion, but it cannot move us to act on its own. Passions are the immediate cause of our volitions. And since reason can never move us to act, and considering that morality deals with the causes of our actions, morality can also never be based upon the dictates of reason.

2. **MORALITY DERIVED FROM A 'MORAL SENSE'**

Having concluded that morality is determined by impressions or passions, rather than ideas, Hume's next question is "Of what nature are these impressions, and after what manner do they operate upon us" (T 470)? In this context, Hume is basically asking, *by what means do our impressions or sentiments distinguish good from evil?*

With regard to our moral evaluations concerning individual characters, Hume says
that we may either find certain characters immediately agreeable --that is, without qualification-- or we may find them agreeable because they exhibit qualities which are beneficial to society. In the former case, the moral approval simply stems from an agreeable feeling with which we are struck upon the contemplation of the character, without consideration of any benefits it might procure. For my purposes here, I will call such approbation *unqualified*, though Hume never uses this term. In the latter case, the moral approval stems from a regard to the usefulness of the character. I will call this type of approbation *qualified*.

Hume holds that those impressions which arise from the contemplation of a virtuous character give us pleasure and those that arise from the contemplation of a vicious character give us pain or displeasure. For Hume it is not always necessary, in order to explain why a person is virtuous or vicious, to go beyond our sentiments of approbation or disapprobation; in many cases the sentiment itself sufficiently explains why the person is virtuous or vicious.

To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very feeling constitutes our praise or admiration. We go no farther; nor do we enquire into the cause of the satisfaction. (*T* 471)

In the cases in which moral approval or disapproval is given without qualification, the evaluation stems from an "original constitution of the mind" (*ECPM* 214).

But in the case of qualified individual moral evaluations and those evaluations which concern justice, the approval or disapproval we feel is not immediate, but is mediated by a concern for the impact that a character will have on the good of society. Thus, these types of moral distinctions are not determined solely according to sentiment,
but according to utility also. For, we may observe that most moral distinctions are determined by reference to the good of humanity; an action, rule or character is seen to be good as far as it promotes the good of humanity, and bad as far as it promotes the opposite.

Hume says it has been suggested that since the natural social virtues of benevolence, honesty, generosity or clemency tend to further the interests of humanity, that it is must be solely from this tendency that these qualities of character give rise to moral approbation, and their opposite give rise to moral disapprobation. Hume admits that the tendency to promote the good of humanity is a great part of the reason why we approve or disapprove of certain character traits, since we do find that "most of those qualities, which we naturally approve of, have actually that tendency, and render a man a proper member of society: While the qualities, which we naturally disapprove of, have a contrary tendency, and render any intercourse with the person dangerous or disagreeable" (T 578). But that the agreeableness of the social virtues arises solely from these considerations, and that they are inculcated by precept and education "will never surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer" (ECPM 214). Hume says it is our very nature which gives the words honourable and shameful, lovely and odious their moral value. He says that many of the social virtues "have a natural beauty and amiableness, which, at first, antecedent to all precept or education, recommends them to the esteem of uninstructed mankind, and engages their affections" (ECPM 214). Thus, this moral sense operates by the simple arousal of a sentiment "common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same
opinion or decision concerning it" (*ECPM* 272). For this sentiment, there is no further principle to be appealed to, no antecedent explanation of why the sentiment arises. As human beings, we are, by our very nature, disposed to take pleasure in the contemplation of certain personal characteristics. Consider that if the answer to the question *why do we approve of any personal characteristic is because it is useful*, then we must also ask the question *why do we approve of what is useful?* The answer would then be, *because it contributes to the happiness of mankind*. If pushed further, and asked, *but why approve of what contributes to the happiness of humanity*, one cannot give an answer. We simply find what is beneficial to our fellow person, or society at large, (or to ourselves) to be agreeable, without any further qualification. As humans, it is part of our nature to have a "feeling for the happiness of mankind" (*ECPM* 83) or an "affection of humanity" (*ECPM* 75). Though we often have recourse to the ends which certain qualities have a tendency to promote, we cannot explain why we find this end favourable unless we appeal to a certain concern or desire for the good of humanity—a simple, natural sentiment which we find agreeable. By virtue of being human, all that is conducive to humanity is agreeable, and all that is pernicious, disagreeable. Thus, we find that the same affection which lies at the bottom of our unqualified approval of certain character traits, also lies at the bottom of our approval of those character traits and social rules or actions whose approval is mediated by concerns of utility.

The utility of certain qualities, therefore, is only seen as a good because we antecedently see the end as good, and that without recourse to any other good that may be gained. In other words, if there was no original preference given in the human mind, to the
good of humanity, those qualities of character that have this tendency would never be met
with a feeling of approval, nor those qualities which have the opposite tendency a feeling
of disapproval.

Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to
us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a
sentiment should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful
above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for
the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery; since these are the
different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. (ECPM 286)

Thus, our human disposition to find certain things agreeable and others disagreeable is
seen to be the ultimate foundation for moral distinctions. The happiness and enjoyment of
another person, or society as a whole, is something we find agreeable without
qualification. One may appeal to the utility of certain qualities or activities, but ultimately,
one is reduced to declaring the reasons for moral approval to be an agreeable feeling, and
for moral disapproval, a disagreeable feeling. To demand a further explanation for why we
approve of what gives us pleasure or disapprove of what gives us pain is futile.

Ask a man, why he uses exercise; he will answer, because he desires to keep his
health. If you then enquire, why he desires health, he will readily reply, because
sickness is painful. If you push your enquiries further, and desire a reason, why he
hates pain, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is
never referred to any other object...It is impossible there can be a progress in
infinitum; and that one thing can always be a reason, why another is desired.
Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate
accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection. (ECPM 293)

Pleasure and pain are ultimate ends and require no further justification. And as all utility
points to the furthering of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, it is apparent that even that
consideration must be reduced to that natural moral sense that Hume so much insists on.
For utility, on its own, cannot be desirable unless we admit that the end aimed at is
antecedently desirable.

3. JUSTICE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume undertakes to prove that justice is based solely upon utility.\(^{22}\) By this, Hume means that the rules of society are adopted and followed because they tend towards the good of society. According to the theists of Hume's day, the rules of justice rest upon religious doctrine and are followed under threat of eternal punishment; according to Hume, the laws of justice are adopted and followed because it is believed that they will tend to the betterment of society. Thus, the rules of justice arise from their usefulness and are dependent upon the human situation. Justice, therefore, for Hume, does not consist in an absolute set of rules, binding upon every rational being in every conceivable circumstance. It cannot prescribe a given course of action independent of human conditions. Rather, justice consists in a set of rules that are formed under certain conditions, either for the purpose of sustaining societal conditions or for improving them in some way. Moreover, these rules are only followed so long as the proper social conditions obtain, and may be changed, and are in fact changed,

\(^{22}\)This assertion seems to be inconsistent with my earlier analysis, in which I claimed that for Hume, a "feeling for the happiness of mankind" is the ultimate foundation for our approval of the social virtues as well as our approval of justice. For a resolution of this apparent inconsistency, see Appendix B.
when the conditions render the existing rules ineffective or useless. Hence, rather than being a set of absolute rules existing independently of human concerns, or a set of rules established by God, justice consists in a set of rules established by humanity, a set of rules adopted for its tendency to promote human happiness and reduce human misery. And as social conditions change, and as the ends at which we aim change, so must the rules of justice.

That justice arises out of a need for orderliness, fairness, and safety within society seems an obvious enough assertion. "Human nature cannot by any means, subsist, without the association of individuals; and that association never could have place, were no regard paid to the laws of equity and justice. Disorder, confusion, the war of all against all, are the necessary consequences of such a licentious conduct" (ECPM 206).

It is this association of individuals that gives rise to the need for justice. For without such rules --rules that establish mutual understanding, constraint, cooperation and agreement-- society could not subsist at all.

The convenience, or rather necessity, which leads to justice, is so universal, and every where points so much to the same rules, that the habit takes place in all societies...Even in common life, we have, every moment, recourse to the principle of public utility, and ask, *What must become of the world, if such practices prevail? How could society subsist under such disorders?* (ECPM 203)

For what stronger foundation can be desired or conceived for any duty, than to observe, that human society, or even human nature could not subsist, without the establishment of it; and will still arrive at greater degrees of happiness and perfection, the more inviolable the regard is, which is paid to that duty? (ECPM 201)

It is clear that justice arises from a need and that that need can only be human in character. It arises because, as humans, we each have certain natural tendencies, desires, and
interests which must in some way be regulated or freed, checked or provided for, extinguished or encouraged. Justice is necessary to establish rules by which each individual's interests can be pursued, by which each individual's needs can be coordinated with the those of others. By this account, the need for justice is a human need, dependent upon human nature and the human condition. "We may conclude, therefore, that, in order to establish laws for the regulation of property, we must be acquainted with the nature and situation of man..." (ECPM 194, emphasis added).

To establish further that the rules of justice are entirely dependent upon human nature and the human condition we need only consider the fundamental changes that would be necessary in our rules of justice if the human condition, or human nature, greatly differed from what we presently see. For instance, what need of justice would there be in a state where everything that a person could need for his happiness was to be found in profuse abundance? Consider the need for justice if it were the case that upon the desire of any given thing, that one could easily obtain it, and that without depriving another, or in any way depleting the stock from which others might wish to draw.

For what purpose make a partition of goods, where every one has already more than enough? Why give rise to property, where there cannot possibly be any injury? Why call this object mine, when, upon the seizing of it by another, I need but stretch out my hand to possess myself of what is equally valuable? Justice, in that case, being totally USELESS, would be an idle ceremonial, and would never possibly have place in the catalogue of virtues. (ECPM 184)

Such is the link between the human condition and the rules of justice, that there may be no need for them at all where the conditions are suitable.

The dependence of justice upon the human condition can also be seen quite clearly if we imagine a state in which every person stands in need of even the most common
amenities, where an extreme lack of goods results in almost every human need going unfulfilled. Hume, claims that in situations like this, the rules of justice are suspended; every person must provide for himself.

Is it any crime, after a shipwreck, to seize whatever means or instrument of safety one can lay hold of, without regard to former limitations of property? Or if a city besieged were perishing with hunger; can we imagine, that men will see any means of preservation before them, and lose their lives, from a scrupulous regard to what, in other situations, would be the rules of equity and justice? (ECPM 186)

From the contemplation of these various hypothetical states, we can see clearly, that where the human condition is drastically altered, the need for justice may be suspended.

The dependence of justice on human nature can be illustrated in a like manner if we imagine a state in which the human qualities of kindness, generosity, friendship and selflessness are to be found utterly complete and unhindered in every person.

Why should I bind another, by a deed or promise, to do me any good office, when I know that he is already prompted, by the strongest inclination, to seek my happiness, and would of himself, perform the desired service...Why raise landmarks between my neighbour's field and mine, when my heart has made no division between our interests; but shares all his joys and sorrow with the same force and vivacity as if originally my own? Every man, upon this supposition, being a second self to another, would trust all his interests to the discretion of every man; without jealousy, without partition, without distinction. (ECPM 185)

It may safely be asserted, if one considers the foregoing accounts, that the rules of justice must change as the human condition changes. And that the rules of justice may even become obsolete if the human condition changes drastically enough. Moreover, if one considers the foregoing accounts, it seems clear that such rules cannot be absolute—that is, binding on all rational creatures. For, it is not our rationality alone that dictates the rules of justice. Our human idiosyncrasies are in large part responsible for the human condition, in addition to environmental factors which would also be particular to our race.
Moreover, it is the human condition that gives rise to the rules we follow —rules that are only useful because we are of a certain nature, living in a world with certain conditions. "Thus, the rules of equity or justice depend entirely on the particular state and condition, in which men are placed, and owe their origin and existence to that UTILITY, which results to the public from their strict and regular observance" (ECPM 188).

CONCLUSION

That morality cannot be based upon reason and that moral distinctions are not absolute; that moral distinctions depend upon human nature and that the rules of society arise from their usefulness and are determined by the human condition; all these factors combine as an effective barrage against the notion that morality must be derived from a divine source rather than a human source. Moreover, these points endanger the notion that religion is needed to motivate people to act properly. Barbeyrac claims that "should you make the finest [moral] system in the world, if religion has not its part in it, it will be little more than a speculative morality..." In examining Hume's morality we see an entirely opposite opinion. Morality is founded on human nature, which hardly makes for a purely "speculative" morality.

According to Hume, the common person does not need recourse to religious principles in order to distinguish right from wrong. Nor does he need religious principles
to be impelled towards what is right. For that he need only consider how his actions will affect his own fortune or that of his fellow people. By Humean standards, Bentley's refrain that the atheist "allows no natural morality, nor any other distinction of good and evil, just and unjust..." is completely at odds with experience. For Hume, moral distinctions and motives are largely natural, unlike religious doctrine which espouses moral tenets which are artificial and unnatural.²³ Hume would also describe Bentley's claim that "For an atheist to compose a system of politics is...absurd and ridiculous" as absurd and ridiculous. For it is clear, that political structures are the product of the human condition and basic human desires and values.

²³For more details on Hume's account of the artificiality of religious morality see Chapter 3.
INTRODUCTION

Lying behind the theists’ position (of Hume’s day) that morality is founded on religion, are two separate fundamental positions: (1) that moral distinctions are absolute and eternal or (2) that moral distinctions are promulgated by God, who enforces them as a lawmaker enforces laws. In the first case, moral distinctions are analogous to mathematical laws -- they exist independent of God's will; \(^{24}\) his will is subservient to them. God (as well as humans) must submit to these absolute moral distinctions just as both must submit to the claim that two plus two equals four. In the second case, moral distinctions are dependent upon God's will. According to this view, moral distinctions are binding upon us because God has made them that way. In other words, morality is what God says it is. What both of these views have in common, however, is the necessity of a moral enforcer --namely, God. Regardless of whether moral distinctions exist independent of God's will, or are

\(^{24}\)For instance, Malebranche, Cudworth and Clarke.
dependent upon it, there is a need for these distinctions to be upheld by an authority capable of such a huge task. Since God is omniscient (thus allowing him to detect all moral violations), and omnipotent (thus giving him the power to punish violaters or reward those who obey) only he can be the requisite moral enforcer. And since, according to the tradition to which Hume is responding, human beings are often inclined to flout their moral duties, unless otherwise constrained, a God who stands over humanity, keeping watch and distributing eternal rewards and punishments is a necessary security to morals.

In his Treatise Hume argues against the notion of eternal, absolute and immutable laws of morality. For him, as I have already explained, morality can only be derived from human nature and the human condition. In rejecting the absolute nature of morality, Hume also dispenses with the notion that God can be the author of our moral rules. For he explains that even if it is true that moral laws are absolute, it would take additional argumentation to prove that God (or any other rational beings) actually follow these rules. Hume thinks that such a conclusion cannot be established since we lack experience of other rational beings. Without this conclusion, Hume thinks that the moral character of God cannot be known a priori. Hume also thinks that God's moral character cannot be established a posteriori. He argues that nature does not provide the proper evidence for an inference to a being who possesses moral attributes similar to our own (or any moral attributes at all). With these arguments, which will be covered in Sections 2 and 3, Hume undermines the two theories above. For both theories presuppose that God has moral qualities, and that his are the same as ours.
But in addition to questioning God’s moral character, Hume also argues against the notion that there is a need for a moral enforcer, or that such a notion is really an effective moral motivator. I would like to discuss these arguments first.

1. **FEAR AS MORAL MOTIVATOR**

In examining the premise that fear is the only effective motivator to moral conduct, I would like to make it clear that when I use the word ‘fear’ I mean ‘fear of God’ or ‘fear of the punishment that God will inflict, either in this life or the next.’ For this is exactly the type of motivation that the theists of Hume’s day felt is necessary in order to secure moral conduct.

This central premise, that fear is needed to make people act morally, may be divided into three separate components: (1) that fear is what, in fact, motivates people to act morally, (2) that fear is the only effective motive to moral action and (3) that fear is a proper moral motivator. Hume rejects all three of these claims. In doing so, Hume is obligated to show that, as a matter of fact, fear of eternal punishment is not the only passion that can motivate people to act morally, that fear is ineffective in motivating people to act morally and that fear cannot be the proper motive to virtuous action.

That fear is not the only passion that can motivate a person to act morally may appear too obvious to need argumentation. Hume’s account of moral motivation (which I
addressed in the previous chapter) lays its emphasis upon human benevolence and sympathy. Hume was not so naive as to think that all humans are perfectly generous or sympathetic. In fact, it is our lack of perfect benevolence that Hume says gives rise to the need for justice. However, there was no doubt for him, that morality has its root in the human passions, and that a concern for the good of humanity is the primary motivating force in moral matters. Benevolence, sympathy, generosity, gratitude or love, among countless other passions, can and do motivate people to perform morally laudable acts, without recourse to a deity who doles out eternal punishment or reward.

That fear of eternal punishment is not an effective constraint upon human conduct, Hume believed, is apparent enough if we survey human behaviour. Human beings are motivated by many other passions, some laudable, such as sympathy and generosity, (as mentioned above) and some not so laudable, such as greed, vengeance, jealousy and hatred. It is perfectly conceivable, and is indeed commonly observed, that any one of these passions may easily override a person's fear of eternal punishment.

For Hume, it is clear that religious fear is simply not at the root of most human behaviour. The daily passions which commonly press upon us have a much greater influence upon what we do. Common human inclination "engages on its side all the wit and ingenuity of the mind; and when set in opposition to religious principles, seeks every method and art of eluding them: In which it is almost always successful" (L 221). The fact that people are more apt to follow their own inclinations carries with it disadvantages, of course. For people will often follow their greedy or malicious desires, rather than consider what is morally right. But this is the way humans are, and the fear of eternal punishment
will do little to change this, since human beings are so much more concerned with their immediate circumstances and satisfying their natural wants.

For Hume, people do not behave morally for religious reasons. Nor can we attribute villainy to a lack of religious devotion. How else can we explain the treachery of those who are the most devout theists? And what about the benevolence of those who make no profession of religion? Hume observes in the *Natural History of Religion*:

...The greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion; Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere. (*NHR* 359)

If we may observe in those who sincerely make a profession of their religious belief, the most immoral behaviour, we may conclude that religious belief does not necessarily promote moral behaviour. The immoral man will continue to be immoral and will be little influenced by distant, vague and uncertain punishments or rewards. At the same time however, anyone of a more noble disposition will act morally, not out of concern for avoiding eternal punishment, or of gaining eternal reward, but out of the goodness of his own nature and his sympathy for others, which continually influence his will.

It is certain, from experience, that the smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct, than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems. A man's natural inclination works incessantly upon him; it is for ever present to the mind, and mingles itself with every view and consideration: whereas religious motives, where they act at all, operate only by starts and bounds; and it is scarcely possible for them to become altogether habitual to the mind. (*D* 221)

Hume is not suggesting that all people are honest and benevolent, but that when these qualities can be found in a person, they will always have a much greater influence upon his conduct than will the views suggested by religious systems. *Why?* Because one's own
predisposition, coupled with the immediacy of one's own circumstances, has a greater effect upon conduct than the distant and uncertain motives suggested by religion. According to Hume's view of moral motivation, when Pufendorf suggests that in order to influence people to behave morally we need "some more obvious principle" which he thinks is "no other than a fear of a deity," he is greatly mistaken as to the efficacy of such a force. For the fear of a deity is not as "obvious" as he believes. That is, the fear is not as intimately present to the mind in the same way as one's own natural inclinations and circumstances are.

Expressing the quintessential religious position on the matter, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume has Cleanthes claiming that since "finite and temporary rewards and punishment have so great an effect, [upon human conduct] as we daily find; how much greater must be expected from such as are infinite and eternal" (*D* 220)? From this consideration, Cleanthes concludes that "The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it" (*D* 219). However, Philo responds by claiming that

The inference is not just, because finite and temporary rewards and punishments have so great an influence, that therefore such as are infinite and eternal must have so much greater. Consider, I beseech you, the attachment which we have to present things and the little concern which we discover for objects, so remote and uncertain. (*D* 220)

Hume notes that even priests are quick to point out that we are more greatly influenced by immediate, secular concerns than we are by religious principles or the prospect of a future state. And it is from this tendency, they declaim, that a great deal of the evil in the world results. This very principle composes the chief part of their tirades on the spiritual laziness
of the people. Yet when confronted with a speculative antagonist, who points out that the very criticism the priests forward is an argument against the effectiveness of religion to regulate the conduct of men, these same priests declare religious motives to be so powerful and requisite to society, that we could never do without them (D 220-21).

According to the theist, oaths in courts of judicature are morally binding because one is under the scrutiny of the divine eye which will detect a lie, and exact the appropriate punishment, even when the court cannot. For Hume "'Tis the solemnity and importance of the occasion, the regard to reputation, and the reflecting on the general interests of society, which are the chief restraints upon mankind" (D 224).

Thus, for Hume, the motivation for acting morally, in the most general sense, is derived from the concerns with which we are faced in daily life, paired with the nature of our own disposition --that is, from secular concerns, which are relatively immediate. And as for the criminal whose mind is always bent upon stealing and cheating, the prospect of a punishment so far away and uncertain will hardly influence his conduct, so long as the promise of short-term gain remains a possibility.

For Hume, fear is not only an ineffective motivator to moral action, it is a morally unacceptable motivator. Hume's general account of the relationship between motivation and virtue states that if we are to regard a person's actions as morally laudable, the motivation behind the action must be equally as laudable.

'Tis evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. This we cannot do directly; and therefore fix our attention on actions, as on external signs. But these actions are still considered as signs; and the ultimate object of our praise and approbation is
the motive, that produc'd them. (T 477)

Simply put, the virtuousness of the action is dependent upon the virtuousness of the motive. But is performing proper moral actions simply out of a concern for one's own well-being (that is, out of a fear of eternal punishment, or out of hope of gaining eternal reward) a virtuous motive? Consider that Hume says in his Dialogues that "the steady attention alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness" (D 222, emphasis added). According to Hume, such a motive is selfish and carries with it ill consequences. He says, "tis certain, that self-love, when it acts at its liberty, instead of engaging us to honest actions, is the source of all injustice and violence..." (T 480). Thus it is clear that according to Humean standards, if one is performing actions simply out of fear, or concern for one's own interest, one is not necessarily being virtuous.

It is clear enough that if you were to ask a man why he jumped into a river to save a drowning child and he responded because I was afraid that if I didn't I may be blamed in the child's death, the man would be little worthy of the title virtuous. However, the same action performed out of a concern for the well-being of the child would certainly warrant the utmost moral approbation. In each case the action performed was the morally right action. In only one case does the man deserve to be deemed virtuous.

For Hume, then, the supposed need for God, or religion, as a moral enforcer or moral motivator, is ill-founded. For such a notion is not the only motivation for behaving morally (or an effective motivator). Nor does it provide the proper motivation for behaving morally. If one is going to be moral, such behaviour should arise from some
benevolent affections, rather than a "narrow, contracted selfishness." Moreover, the notion of God as a moral enforcer, according to Hume, is simply not effective in getting people to behave morally.

2. ESTABLISHING GOD'S MORAL ATTRIBUTES A PRIORI

Having given Hume's account of the inefficacy of fear as a moral motivator, I would like to turn to the question of whether the moral attributes with which we operate can be applied to God a priori (that is, whether we can assume that God's moral attributes are the same as ours). According to the tradition to which Hume is responding, God's moral attributes are the same as ours, though this belief is held for two different reasons. According to those that would say moral rules are absolute, God did not create them. However, he does enforce them. Therefore, it must be assumed that his moral values are the same as ours. It must also be assumed by those who would say that God promulgated the moral rules, that God operates according to the same morality that we do. For it is from God that we receive these rules.

Hume's attack on the attempt to establish God's morality a priori focuses on the notion that moral rules are absolute, like laws of mathematics. He argues that moral rules are not absolute, but are human in origin. These arguments alone, even if successful, however, do not refute the assumption that God's morality is our morality. In addition to
his arguments regarding the absolute nature of morality, Hume also argues that even if it is possible to prove that morality is absolute, it is not possible to prove that this morality is universally binding on all rational beings. Thus, it can never be established that God operates according to the same moral standards that we do. I will begin with Hume's attack on the absolute nature of morality.

As I have already said, for Hume, morality is a purely human practice. It stems from our very nature, from our responses to certain situations and from our concerns for the good of humanity. Thus, morality is based in human sentiment and dependent upon human concerns. There were moralists in Hume's time, however, that believed morality could be established by reason alone; that moral distinctions could be demonstrated according to methods much like those used in geometry or algebra. Their position is that moral distinctions, such as good and evil or right and wrong, are absolute, immutable and binding on every rational being.

According to the absolutist, then, the moral distinctions we discover are as equally applicable to ourselves as they are to God. Therefore, there is no problem with believing that our moral distinctions could be consistent (or in fact identical) with God's. For, if these distinctions are absolute, they will apply to all rational beings.

Given that Hume believed morality was a purely human affair, rooted in human passions, and governed by the human predicament, it is no surprise that he did not agree with the absolutist standpoint. Hume firmly believed that our moral distinctions are applicable only to human beings, and that to apply them to God is totally without justification.
Taking the absolutist to task, Hume suggests that if it is possible for reason to uncover the nature of moral distinctions, morality must either consist in some relations of objects, or must be a matter of fact.\(^{25}\) But, as I have already said, the absolutists of Hume's day believed not only that morality can be arrived at through reason, but that morality is capable of demonstration and could be placed on an equal footing with geometry or algebra. Hume says that according to this approach, morality cannot consist in a matter of fact, since matters of fact are not capable of being demonstrated. Therefore, according to the absolutist position, moral distinctions must consist in some type of relations of ideas or objects.

First, then, the relation in which one is to find good and evil, Hume says, must be between our thoughts and external objects. For, if the relations that make up morality be between our thoughts amongst themselves, we would be capable of immoralities within ourselves and if between external objects considered only between themselves, they too, on that account, would be susceptible to moral praise and blame. Both of these conclusions are absurd.\(^{26}\) It is the absolutist's task to elucidate in what manner the existence of such a relation—a relation between our thoughts and external actions—constitutes the distinction between good and evil.

But in addition to demonstrating in which relations morality is to lie, the absolutist

\(^{25}\)Hume argues in the *Treatise* that the understanding exerts itself in two ways: by discovering the relations of ideas, or in inferring matters of fact. These considerations are examined in Chapter 1, Section 1.

\(^{26}\)See the example of the oak tree which grows up and overwhelms its parent, Chapter 1, Section 1.
must also demonstrate that the effect these relations will have upon the will of any rational creature will always be the same. For "tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it" (T 465). In other words, it must be demonstrated that the said relations will prove to be obligatory on every rational mind. In Hume's own words:

In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, obligatory on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite. (T 465)

This is the absolutists task; Hume argues that it cannot be accomplished. The first condition—showing that morality consists in a relation between our thoughts and external actions—cannot be fulfilled, since, as Hume has argued elsewhere, the apprehension of a relation can never actuate the will.\(^\text{27}\) How can morality consist in the relation between our internal actions and external objects if these relations are unable to actuate the will? By this account moral distinctions consist in relations which can have no effect upon our actions, thus reducing morality to a futile speculative study which never affects our conduct.

Hume's second condition also cannot be fulfilled, since as Hume has already shown, any cause and effect relations we posit, are based solely on our experience of their constant conjunction.\(^\text{28}\) There is no causal relation between objects, or even thoughts and

\(^{27}\)Chapter 1, Section 1.

\(^{28}\)Treatise, I. III. VI. Here Hume argues that our inference from causes to effects are derived from experience; that we are led, by certain influences of the imagination to expect a certain effect whenever we see a certain cause. For a more detailed account of Hume's argument against necessary connection, see Appendix C.
objects, of whose connection we can be sure of by considering those objects in themselves. Therefore, even if a connection between moral relations and our wills was discovered, it could not be extended beyond experience, to any other s. Hume writes in a letter to Francis Hutcheson:

Morality, according to your opinion as well as mine, is determined merely by sentiment, it regards only human nature and human life... If morality were determined by reason, that is the same to all rational beings: But nothing experience can assure us, that the sentiments are the same. What experience have we with regard to superior beings? How can we ascribe them any sentiments at all?  

Given that people are the only moral agents open to our observation, they are the only beings we may expect to conform to the moral distinctions we discover. If morality, as Hume believes, is based in sentiment --human sentiment-- then the resultant obligations will be binding on humans only. To propose that the same cause and effect relation between moral rules and the human will will obtain between these relations and the wills of creatures of a different kind (or God), is totally unjustified. As we lack the privilege of experiencing other beings, so we lack the privilege of attributing to them a relation which is only based on experience of humans in the first place.

To delineate moral right and wrong according to human standards, and then to assert that these distinctions are the same for God as they are for us, and that God is bound to adhere to the same moral principles that we do is to assert what cannot possibly be supported by reason. Since reason can only set out connexion regarding what experience informs us of, and since experience only informs us of our own moral situation,  

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any assertions we make regarding the moral attitudes or obligations of beings that are beyond our experience are without foundation.

If furnished with evidence found in the world, however, of God's morality, we may be warranted in claiming him as our moral authority. Theists claim that the design of the world constitutes such evidence. From a design which is clearly benevolent, they say, we may infer a benevolent cause; from a universe fitted to fulfill our needs, we may infer a moral creator. It is to the a posteriori argument for God's morality that I will now turn.

3. ESTABLISHING GOD'S MORAL ATTRIBUTES A POSTERIORI

Beginning in Section 10 of the *Dialogues*, Philo and Demea reflect upon the misery of humanity, asserting that mortals are subject to innumerable pains, unfulfilled desires, melancholy and disillusionment. Demea says to Philo:

The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want, stimulate the strong and courageous: Fear, anxiety, terror, agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent: Weakness, impotence, distress, attend each stage of that life: And 'tis at last finished in agony and horror. *(D 194)*

Philo adds that if we examine nature we will find it designed so that each creature is kept in perpetual fear, anxiety and want so that each creature is forever being preyed upon by others. "And thus on each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is
surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and distraction" (D 195).

Demea points out to Philo that humans seem to be the only creatures exempt from this constant torment, since by combination in society, we can master our natural enemies. But Philo objects.

On the contrary, it is here chiefly that Man, it is true, can, by combination, surmount all his real enemies, and become master of the whole animal creation: But does he not immediately raise up to himself imaginary enemies, the demons of his fancy, who haunt him with superstitious terrors, and blast every enjoyment of life? ...Nor does the wolf molest more the timid flock, than superstition does the anxious breast of wretched mortals. (D 195)

"Besides," says Philo,

consider, Demea; this very society, by which we surmount those wild beasts, our natural enemies, what new enemies does it not raise to us? What woe and misery does it not occasion? Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, contumely, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud; by these we mutually torment each other; and they would soon dissolve that society which they had formed, were it not for the dread of still greater ills, which must attend their separation. (D 195)

Based on this account of human life, Philo asks Cleanthes how he can persist in his anthropomorphism --that is, how he can persist in the belief the human virtues of benevolence, mercy and rectitude have an analogy in the divine being-- when the misery of human life is so obvious and so much attested to by anyone who has ever had occasion to treat of the subject.

[The deity's] power we allow infinite: whatever he wills is executed: but neither man nor any other animal are happy. Therefore he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite: he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end: but the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity; therefore it is not established for that purpose...In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men? (D 198)

Demea suggests that the whole matter may be easily resolved. This life, he says, is but a
point in time in comparison with eternity. The evil phenomena with which human beings are so much afflicted will be rectified in the next life. It is then that we will see the wisdom and benevolence of God's ways, and the torments of this life will be justified. But Cleanthes objects to these suppositions as arbitrary. He argues that this solution is without just foundation. He asks, "Whence can any cause be known but from its known effects? Whence can any hypothesis be proved but from the apparent phenomena" (D 199-200)?

Cleanthes is arguing that it is only from observed effects that we can reason to the possibility of a future state. But since there is no evidence of such a thing exhibited in nature, we are not justified in asserting it as a means to resolve the present difficulty. He adds, "To establish one hypothesis upon another, is building entirely in the air..." (D 200). Instead, Cleanthes asserts that the only way one can assert that the human moral standards have an equivalent in the deity is to deny the misery of mankind altogether. He says to Philo and Demea,

Health is more common that sickness: Pleasure than pain: Happiness than misery. And for one vexation, which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments. (D 200)

Though Philo offers counter arguments against Cleanthes' factual claim that pleasure is more prevalent than pain, he will allow Cleanthes the point, but still retains his original position, that God's moral attributes cannot be asserted based upon the effects we see in human life.

But allowing you, what never will be believed; at least, what you never possibly

\footnote{Here Cleanthes is alluding to principles explained earlier in the Dialogues, but which Hume first laid out in the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding ("Of a Particular Providence and a Future State").}
can prove, that animal or at least, human happiness, in this life, exceeds its misery; you have yet done nothing: For this is not, by any means, what we expect from infinite power, infinite wisdom, and infinite goodness. (D 201)

Philo is arguing, that even if the theist is granted that human misery is outweighed by happiness it does nothing to alleviate the apparent inconsistency between the existence of evil and God's infinite wisdom, power and benevolence. "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil" (D 198)? The atheist need not prove that misery outweighs happiness (though according to Hume, this premise seems obvious enough if we survey human life, or the accounts given by poets and philosophers). The atheist needs only to point out that there is misery in the world --something that the theist cannot deny altogether. From this observation, we must conclude that the moral virtues, our ideas of benevolence, mercy, or justice, either have no analogy in the divine character, or that God is not infinitely powerful, merciful, or benevolent --an assertion that is contrary to fundamental theological principles concerning God's nature.

But Cleanthes suggests that these infinite attributes, so much insisted upon by theists, savour "more of panegyric than of philosophy" (D 203). God's infinitude, Cleanthes is suggesting, is more the product of overblown praise than of theological necessity. As Hume says elsewhere, theists attribute infinity to the deity in a quest to gain his favour through flattery, thinking it dangerous to refuse any perfection to his character, though they can hardly grasp such a vast concept.31 He suggests that we opt for terms

31 Hume remarks in the *Natural History of Religion* that in attributing infinity to the deity, the theist runs into mystery and destroys the intelligent nature of the deity (*NHR* 330).
such as admirable, excellent, superlatively great, wise and holy. "These sufficiently fill the imaginations of men; and anything beyond, besides that it leads into absurdities, has no influence on the affections or sentiments" (D 203). Seeing that the concept of infinity is beyond the ken of any theist, he thinks that religious devotion would be better served by using terms more proportionate to the powers of the human mind. Additionally, he believes that using such terms will alleviate many of the apparent absurdities or inconsistencies regarding God's nature that have occurred as a result of trying describe God as being infinite in his attributes. The problem of evil, Cleanthes thinks, arises from an inconsistency of this kind.

Thus, Cleanthes says, supposing the author of the world to be finite, though far exceeding human kind, we may explain the existence of evil without running into inconsistencies. For if we suppose God to be good, but only finitely so, "A less evil may then be chosen, in order to avoid a greater; Inconveniences be submitted to, in order to reach a desirable end: And in a word, benevolence, regulated by wisdom, and limited by necessity, may produce just such a world as the present" (D 203).

As radical an idea as this would surely seem to the common theist --compromising God's perfection-- it accomplishes Cleanthes' end, to alleviate the apparent inconsistency between God's goodness and the existence of evil in the world. Hume thought that even if granted, viewing God as finitely good hardly set the theist upon the grounding he needs to infer God's moral attributes from observable phenomena. For establishing a consistency between evil and God's goodness, is by no means sufficient for inferring God's goodness from a world that has evil in it.
Hume argues that if a being, wholly unacquainted with the universe, was convinced that it was the production of a very good and wise being, immeasurably more powerful than himself, (though finite) this being would meet with a universe very much unlike the one he would have expected. This being would never imagine "merely from the attributes of the cause...that the effect could be so full of vice and misery and disorder, as it appears in this life" (D 204). However, Hume adds that had this being been antecedently convinced of the existence of a deity like the one described to him, by way of strong arguments, he would not necessarily be forced to retract his belief in such a being once he had seen all the evil in the universe. Being so limited in his faculties in comparison with the creator of the universe, he would freely admit that the difficulties he sees with human life may be accounted for and justified by some greater plan of which he is wholly ignorant and could never comprehend. This gives the appearance that the problem of evil will no longer prevent an inference from the world to God's goodness. But there is a fatal flaw to all this reasoning. The consistency we see between God's finite goodness and the existence of evil in the world can only save the notion of a good deity, provided we already started with such a notion. However, this is not the case; we are trying to infer his goodness from what we see. We are not simply trying to reconcile a morally corrupt world with a finitely good deity, we are trying to establish the deity's nature based on the evidence. Hume argues that we could reconcile the notion of a good God with the observable phenomena, if we had already been convinced of God's existence by way of separate arguments, but we can never infer the idea of a good God, at least not one who operates according to the same values that we do, from the observable phenomena.
Is the world, considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, beforehand, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? It must be strange prejudice to assert the contrary. And from thence I conclude that, however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference. Conjectures, especially where infinity is excluded from the Divine attributes, may perhaps be sufficient to prove a consistence; but can never be foundations for any inference. (D 205, emphasis added)

If we must reason from the effects we see displayed throughout the world, to the goodness of its cause, rather than attempt to reconcile the effects with an already conceived cause, we will forever be at a loss to establish the goodness of that cause. For, in positing a benevolent deity or a deity that has moral attributes that resemble our own, theists are attributing more to the cause than is existent in the observable effects. And if all we have to draw on in making attributions to the deity are the effects we see issuing from him, on what grounds can we go beyond the effects, to establish additional traits, traits which are in no way evinced in the effects? To affirm the existence of attributes which are not reflected in the effects is to "arbitrarily suppose the existence of qualities and energies, without reason or authority" (ECHU 93). Thus, so long as there is evil in the world, and there is no doubt that there is, we are unable to establish that the deity operates according to moral standards which are the same as ours.

In fact, Hume argues that given the observable phenomena, the more just inference would be to assert that the universe is not governed by a caring deity at all; that there are no malevolent forces inflicting our pains on us; that there are no benevolent forces procuring our enjoyments and good fortune. The organization of the universe, upon contemplation of its working, seems to be devoid of any moral preference whatsoever, but
is more the product of brute physical forces exerting themselves without intention or consciousness. In the *Natural History of Religion*, we find this belief affirmed when Hume says,

> Could men anatomize nature, according to the most probable, a least the most intelligible philosophy, they would find, that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced about which they are so much concerned. (*NHR* 316)

In Part 11 of the *Dialogues*, after having reflected on the four principle causes of evil in the universe, and on the general misery of animal life in our world, Hume says,

> Look around this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children! (*D* 211)

Thus, in examining the world around us, we are left without proper justification for inferring a benevolent deity, or a malevolent deity. We are most justified with asserting the existence of deity that has no care for human happiness or human misery (that is, if we care to assert the existence of a deity at all).

Hume says that there are four hypotheses that may be advanced concerning the nature of the causes of the universe: that they are (1) perfectly benevolent, (2) perfectly malevolent, (3) both benevolent and malevolent, or (4) neither benevolent nor malevolent. He concludes that, "mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seems to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable" (*D* 212). Thus, we are left with an
uncaring universe, a universe which does not favour nor oppose any human endeavour, a
universe whose operations cannot be altered by prayers or persuaded through flattery, a
universe which leaves us to rely upon our own strategies for dealing with our problems,
forcing us to accept blame for our shortcomings, but also allowing us to take full credit for
what we are able to accomplish.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing arguments all have origins which are strewn throughout Hume's work.
They all converge upon a common conclusion, that religion cannot be the foundation for
morality. The diversity of works referred to evinces Hume's unrelenting concern with
religion, and how deeply religious concerns are ingrained in his work. Hume's skepticism
with regard to cause and effect reasoning in the Treatise, for instance, is not just a bare,
isolated epistemological concern. It is a concern with a strong bearing on religious belief.
His moral theory as given in the Treatise and in the second Enquiry was most obviously
written with a religious conception of morality in mind. And that we find many of the
principles forwarded in the Treatise and the second Enquiry present in works such as the
Dialogues and the Natural History, evinces an interconnectedness in Hume's thought.
Such an elaborate convergence of thought upon a single topic is surely a sign of Hume's
intent to do more than casually criticize religion's relation to morality, even if his
unsystematic execution seems to suggest the opposite.
CHAPTER 3

THE PERNICIOUS AFFECTS OF RELIGION ON MORALITY

INTRODUCTION

Hume was not satisfied with simply challenging the notion that morality is secular and that it could not be grounded in religion. Hume went further, arguing that religion should not be seen as the foundation for morality and that religion in fact perverts our natural moral conceptions. Humanity's tendency to couch moral concerns in religious terms, Hume thought, had pernicious consequences for morality. Trying to live a moral life -- a life which is not only properly regulated according to certain duties and obligations, but conducive to happiness and enjoyment -- while operating according to fundamental religious principles (such as belief in a God and an afterlife) is bound to result in the perversion of our moral principles. According to Hume, there are two main causes of this
perversion. First, moral merit does not always equal religious merit.\textsuperscript{32} Second, though
morality is founded, in large measure, on utility, religion espouses beliefs and practices
which are totally useless. To see how these two causes result in a perversion or corruption
of morality, we must first examine Hume's account of how religion arises. For him,
religion is the product of certain psychological tendencies. After an examination of the
origin of religion, I will illustrate in what manner, according to Hume's view, religion
corrupts morality. For Hume, the pernicious consequences of religion are manifested in
two ways: (1) by adversely affecting the relationship one has with oneself and (2) by
adversely affecting the relationship one has with others (or that groups have with each
other).

1. **HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY AS THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION**

Hume's account of the origin of religion in his *Natural History of Religion* states that
religion is born primarily from humanity's need to cope with the uncontrollable situation it
finds itself in, a situation in which "we hang in perpetual suspense between life and death,
health and sickness, plenty and want" (*NHR* 316). Life and death, sickness and health,
plenty and want are seen to be "distributed amongst the human species by secret and
unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable" (*NHR*
\textsuperscript{32}For a more detailed account of this claim see Appendix D.}
316, emphasis added). Since human happiness depends in large part upon the forces of nature or chance, which are capricious and unexplainable, "these unknown causes, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence" (NHR 316).

Given that "there is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted and of which they are intimately conscious" (NHR 317) the first primitive human beings conceived these "secret unknown causes" as beings with human attributes.

By degrees, the active imagination of men, uneasy in this abstract conception of objects, about which it is incessantly employed, begins to render them more particular, and to clothe them in shapes more suitable to its natural comprehension. It represents them to be sensible, intelligent beings, like mankind; actuated by love and hatred, and flexible by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifices. (NHR 335)

It is important to note, that for Hume, this form of religion did not arise from a contemplation of the regularity of nature's workings, from a divinely inspired exultation, nor from rational reflexion, but from a contemplation of "the various and contrary events of human life" (NHR 314) and from the fear and uncertainty of what these contrary and uncontrollable events might bring. More generally, it is the "ordinary affections of human life" such as "the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries" (NHR 316) that led humans to formulate some conception of the divine. In order to gain some control over
the nature and fortune, both of which are uncontrollable, unpredictable and irregular, the
first primitive humans attributed human characteristics to these unseen powers so that they
may then be entreated or flattered into yielding affects desirable for humanity's ends. The
first theists saw that "To-day [the deity] protects: To-morrow he abandons us." Their
attribution of human qualities to the powers that afflicted them lead them to believe that,
"Prayers and sacrifices, rites and ceremonies, well or ill performed, are the sources of [the
deity's] favour or enmity, and produce all the good or ill fortune, which are to be found
amongst mankind" (NHR 315). Subject to Hume's "universal tendency" to project human
characteristics to all manner of things, the first theists thought that the things they desired
of the Gods could best be gained in the way they had found to work best among
themselves --by flattery and entreaty.

This account of religion's historical origins is applied analogously by Hume to
civilized people. For Hume it was fear of the unknown that led the first humans to adopt a
religious standpoint, which is then facilitated by the "universal tendency" he describes; for
Hume this cause is equally as valid in explaining why the civilized people of later times,
and certainly even the people of his day, adopt a religious standpoint. This psychological
explanation, in turn, provides Hume with a groundwork on which to base his account of
the affects religion has on morality. Hume believed that the mind set present in the
religious standpoint often has pernicious affects on how we conceive of and behave
towards others and on how we conceive of and behave towards ourselves.

The principle problem with the religious mind set, according to Hume, stems from
the very relationship the theists perceive between God and themselves. On one end there is
a supremely good being, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. It is on this invisible power that the theists depend for protection and favouritism in this life, and eternal happiness in the next. For this protection and favouritism there are no limits to the lengths they will go to in order to flatter him. Seeking to praise God in ever more flattering terms, the theists will "find it dangerous to refuse their assent" to any new accolade attributed to God.\textsuperscript{33}

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? This they dare not affirm; but thinking it safest to comply with the higher encomiums, they endeavour, by an affected ravishment and devotion, to ingratiate themselves with him. \textit{(NHR 333)}

On the other end of this relation is the theist who, being entirely dependent upon this great being, must take special pains to appear at all times utterly devoted him and utterly in awe of him. For it is upon the theist's ability to maintain an air of devotion that his well-being depends. The theist's slavish flattery is intended to please the deity from whom the theist will then be able to beg favours. And as there is no end to their flattery, there can be no end to what they feel they may request.

This relationship between God and theist, then, is composed of a single God who is supremely great, and an inferior dependent (the theist). The relationship described obviously goes beyond the \textit{ontological} dependence posited by metaphysicians. It is more accurate to see the relation as one between a king and his subject—the subject being both sycophant and beggar. The praise given, however, is infinitely greater, in proportion to the

\textsuperscript{33}In fact, Hume argues that this tendency is what leads humanity from polytheism, where Gods are seen as finite, to monotheism, where the notion of an infinite God displaces all other deities \textit{(NHR 330-31)}.  

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infinitely greater scraps that may be won. Hume holds that the consequences of this
relation for morality are dire. The theist's need to signal his undying devotion, admiration
and faithfulness to God will carry him to strange and harmful lengths. In Hume's thought
regarding the harmful consequences of religion, we find this relation manifesting itself in
two ways: it adversely affects one's conception of or treatment of oneself or it adversely
affects the conception of or treatment of others. In the first case I am referring to what
Hume describes as self-mortifying acts and "monkish virtues" that he feels religion often
prescribes to its votaries. I will discuss these affects in Section 2 of this chapter. In the
second case I am referring to the intolerant nature of religious sects with regard to the
beliefs or practices other sects or to those of unbelievers. This intolerance will be
discussed in Section 3 of this chapter. In both cases we may see this behaviour as a direct
result of the religious mind set present in conceiving God to be singular and infinite and in
conceiving oneself to be entirely dependent upon such a being.

2. THE RELIGIOUS MIND SET AND ITS AFFECTS ON THE SELF

Hume observes in his *Natural History of Religion* that

*Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief, though
altogether just, is apt, when joined with superstitious terrors, to sink the human
mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish
virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only*
qualities which are acceptable to him.\textsuperscript{34} (\textit{NHR} 339)

In contrast to the polytheistic religions, which espouse spirit, courage, magnanimity, and love of liberty as the virtues which aggrandize a people, monotheism, according to Hume, encourages whippings, fastings, cowardice, humility, abject submission and slavish obedience as the true means of obtaining divine favour.

Hume's account of why monotheists have adopted a completely reversed morality lies in the nature of their deity. Whereas the pagan Gods were conceived to be "only a little superior to mankind, and to have been, many of them, advanced from that inferior rank" (\textit{NHR} 339), the monotheistic deity is infinitely superior to humans. In the former case the votaries did not see themselves as so vastly inferior to their Gods. Hume says that the pagans were "more at ease, in [their] addresses to [the Gods], and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalship and emulation of them" (\textit{NHR} 339). Such behaviour in a monotheist would be heretical. Hume believed that the vast difference in each religion's conception of the divinity accounts, in large part, for the vast difference placed upon the moral virtues correspondent with each. Thus, the encouragement of the monkish virtues, which Hume viewed as morally indictable, can be traced directly to the relation between the theist and the deity --a relation between a perfect being, and a being infinitely inferior to him. In paganism, where this relation did not obtain, the correspondent virtues were diametrically opposed to those espoused by monotheism. In paganism, the loyalty owed to any given God never approached the loyalty owed to the

\textsuperscript{34}Nietzsche's famous claim that religion rendered men fit for slavery, was not an original notion. Hume traces this notion as far back as Machiavelli's (1469-1527) \textit{Discourses} (Book II, XX, 6-7).
God of the monotheist. Nor did any pagan God so far exceed any mortal. Thus the
cornerstone of the pagan deities, and the very fact that there was more than one, makes all
the difference in the resultant moral values.

The monkish virtues which, Hume claims monotheism espouses, are morally
objectionable not only because they completely oppose what we would normally deem
praiseworthy, but because they encourage a demeaning conception of the self and degrade
the status of human beings. If we turn to Hume's account of personal merit, we find him
arguing that it is founded on two particular qualities: we either find a character
immediately agreeable, (that is, we find it agreeable even though there may be no use for
it) or we find a character agreeable because it has a tendency towards an end we find
agreeable (that is, it has utility). A brief examination of Hume's account of personal merit
will make the artificiality of religious merit more explicit.

Among the qualities that we may possess that we find agreeable to ourselves,
Hume lists, as a few samples, cheerfulness, greatness of mind, courage, and benevolence.
Hume says that these qualities

without any utility or any tendency to farther good, either of the community or of
the possessor, diffuse a satisfaction on the beholders, and procure friendship and
regard. Their immediate sensation, to the person possessed of them, is agreeable:
Others enter into the same humour, and catch the sentiment, by a contagion or
natural sympathy. (ECPM 250-51)

Surveying the monkish virtues, we find they tend to the opposite extreme; cheerfulness is
replaced with solemnity and solitude while greatness of mind and courage are passed over
in favour of meekness and submission.

Among those qualities we find agreeable in others Hume lists good manners,
politeness, wit, ingenuity, a spirit of dialogue, eloquence, genius, modesty, decency and cleanliness. Of politeness and good manners Hume says, "These attentions and regards are immediately agreeable to others, abstracted from any consideration of utility or beneficial tendencies. They conciliate affection, promote esteem, and extremely enhance the merit of the person, who regulates his behaviour by them" (ECPM 261). Among the monkish virtues, we see none of the lively or sociable virtues, such as wit, eloquence or spirit of dialogue.

Hume lists as qualities we may find useful to ourselves, discretion, industry, honesty, fidelity, strength of mind, frugality, economy, good-sense, prudence, discernment and forethought, among many others. And though these may not be directly opposed by the monkish virtues, they are not emphatically espoused as being of the utmost importance to one's fortune in life. In order to be fortunate in life, says the theist, worship must be foremost.35 Often the monkish virtues, in one degree or another, are in integral part of worship.

Hume claims that it is religion which perverts "our natural understanding" (ECPM 268) and leads us to value what, by our natural sentiments, would seem the most useless and disagreeable virtues.

And as every quality, which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others, is, in common life, allowed to be part of personal merit; so no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. (ECPM 270, emphasis added)

Hume finds it amazing that his view, which states that personal merit consists in

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35See Appendix C.
possessing qualities which are useful and agreeable to ourselves or others, should have so long eluded past enquirers. No doubt, for Hume, religion's perversion of our natural understanding and human inclinations is surely to blame.

Hume believed that the monkish virtues were not only disagreeable, according to taste, but that they had no use. The outcome is a character that is little liked by others, and little useful to the person in question. "A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar, but will scarcely be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself" (ECPM 270).

No matter how his views on personal virtue may fair with philosophers, Hume says, they are implicitly assumed in common life.

Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments. (ECPM 270)

Not only does religion encourage a character that Hume considers morally reprehensible, but it can also encourage behaviour which is harmful to the self. Consider that in many religious observances or practices, votaries are encouraged to deny themselves certain physical necessities or even inflict physical pain upon themselves as a sign that they are devoted to God. "...If [the superstitious man] fast a day, or give himself a sound whipping; this has a direct reference, in his opinion, to the service of God. No other motive could engage him to such austerities" (NHR 359). It is a mystery to Hume.
why theists would rather engage in such bizarre and unpleasant acts rather than try to attain divine favour by virtue and good morals.

For clearly, such austerities are much more disagreeable than behaving morally. For, not to mention the excessive penances of the Brahman and Talapoins, it is certain that the Ramadan of the Turks, during which the poor wretches, for many days, often in the hottest months of the year, and in some of the hottest climates of the world, remain without eating or drinking from the rising to the setting sun; this Ramadan, I say, must be more severe than the practice of any moral duty, even to the most vicious and depraved of mankind. The four lents of the Muscovites, and the austerities of some Roman Catholics, appear more disagreeable than meekness and benevolence. In short, all virtue, when men are reconciled to it by ever so little practice, is agreeable: All superstition is for ever odious and burdensome. (NHR 358, emphasis added in last sentence)

As I have already mentioned (in Appendix D), Hume accounts for this behaviour by explaining that the theist needs to find some way of making it explicit that his actions are being done for God. And as actions that are entirely natural may go unnoticed by God, the theist is compelled to extreme acts such as those listed above, not although they are bizarre, painful, distasteful or arduous, but because they are. Here again we see the relation between the theist and deity giving rise to immoral acts --against one's self: The dependence the theist has upon the deity for his well-being gives rise to a desperation which is unparalleled in secular life. This desperation is acted out through strange and unnatural observances or practices that one would not otherwise be motivated to engage in.

When men depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these artificial lives...no one can answer for what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of mankind; and the natural principles of their mind play not with the same regularity, as if left to themselves, free from the illusions of religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm. (ECPM 343)

Not only can such an artificiality be simply and innocently absurd, but it can also be
dangerous to a person's well-being or the well-being of society as a whole.

3. THE RELIGIOUS MIND SET AND ITS AFFECTS ON SOCIAL RELATIONS

Hume observes that religion has given rise to the most barbarous beliefs and behaviour. In response to Cleanthes' profession that religion is a necessary "security to morals," in Part XII of the Dialogues, Philo asks,

How happens it then, if vulgar superstition be so salutary to society, that all history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men. If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries, which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous than those in which it is never regarded or heard of. (D 220)

It seems that history shows us the sectarian and intolerant character of religious belief and practice; that when the many manifestations of religious belief find themselves in each other's company, or that when theists of any assortment see a want of religious devotion in any one person or group, animosity, suspicion, hatred, persecution and subjugation are often the result. Where religion dominates, so do these ill affects. For Hume, "the love of God does not imply the love of human kind" (Streminger, 290).

It is obvious enough, that in those cases where religious beliefs are at odds, it is always the sect to which one belongs which holds the true tenets; the others are impious or heretical. Therefore, they are a threat to society and more importantly, an insult to God.
Hume observes that the notion of a unified God is a primary factor in explaining religion's intolerant nature, since, for the theist, one God implies only one set of acceptable religious beliefs or practices.

...This unity of object seems naturally to require the unity of faith and ceremonies, and furnishes designing men with a pretence for representing their adversaries as profane, and the objects of divine as well as human vengeance. For as each sect is positive that its own faith and worship are entirely acceptable to the deity, and as no one can conceive that the same being should be pleased with different and opposite rites and principles, the several sects fall naturally into animosity, and mutually discharge on each other that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions. (NHR 337)

Often these religious disagreements will result in violence on a scale from verbal persecution and individual clashes to outright war. According to Hume, subscription to the notion of a unified deity is, in large measure, responsible.

The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. The implacable narrow spirit of the JEWS is well known. MAHOMETANISM set out with still more bloody principles; and even to this day, deals out damnation, though not fire and faggot, to all other sects. And if, among CHRISTIANS, the ENGLISH and DUTCH have embraced the principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots. (NHR 337-38)

And often immoral actions not only arise out of intoleration, but are actually seen to be justified by appeal to one's religious beliefs. Persecution, subjugation or even the killing of others, in the name of a religious cause, is often seen, through the eyes of a theist, as a morally laudable act or even as an act they are morally obligated to commit. "Hence the

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36Hume points out in his Natural History of Religion that this intolerance is not to be found among the polytheists. "[I]dolatry is attended with this evident advantage, that, by limiting the powers and functions of its deities, it naturally admits the Gods of other sects and nations to a share of divinity, and renders all the various deities, as well as rites, ceremonies, or traditions, compatible with each other" (336).
greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion...Nay, it has been observed, that enormities of the blackest dye have been rather apt to produce superstitions terrors, and encrease the religious passion" (NHR 359-60).

The upshot is this: acts that appear, on secular grounds, to be the most heinous of crimes may be worthy of great praise according to the theist. "Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere" (NHR 359).

The cause of this divergence in moral and religious merit arises from the loftiness of the notions one finds present in religious belief. Anything to do with religion is seen to be of infinitely greater importance than any secular matter. This importance is based upon several different factors. For instance, the allegiance owed to the deity, can have no equal amongst mortals. For there is no mortal which even approaches the greatness of the deity. The importance of the cause which religion is supposed to promote cannot be paralleled among any social, economic or political factions of this world, whose scope is so finite, whose duration is so transient and capricious. The rewards and the punishments that the theists seek or avoid cannot be matched by the generosity or the severity of any philanthropist or dictator. In short, there is no enthusiasm, no rancour, no fear, no hatred, no bliss like that which religion infuses into the heart of humanity. And this simple fact is owed to religion's sublime nature which is derived from the vastness and solemnity of its

37 The religious cause being the spreading of religion's moral and metaphysical tenets.
tenets. And for all religion's grandeur and severity, people are willing to go great lengths. And so it is that theists may often reach that degree of religious enthusiasm that Hume speaks of so disapprovingly, a state in which "everything mortal and perishable vanishes as unworthy of attention," a state in which "human reason and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides." In this state, little regard is paid to the concerns of this world, but all is bent upon the cause to which the theist is so earnestly devoted. These considerations lead Hume to say in his *Dialogues* that "The bad effects of such habits, even in common life, are easily imagined: But where the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure which can be made use of to promote it" *(D 222).*

It is clear that all of the above factors can be traced directly to the relation between God and the theist that I previously described. From God's greatness and the theist's utter dependence upon him comes desperation and an end of worldly concerns. If it can be said that the *sacredness of the cause* may lead theists to feel justified in committing immoral acts, the same can be said for the interest in a *future state*. As I indicated above, the prospect of a future state entails rewards and punishments which are of such extreme magnitude that they cannot be paralleled on earth. This, of course is owed to the power of God, the only being that can mete out such a purely blissful reward, or such a purely horrifying punishment and make either of them endure for eternity. The prospect of such rewards or punishments, Hume thought, may be detrimental to morality. For in trying to

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secure a place in heaven, or in trying to avoid a place in hell, the theist may resort to extreme acts. And as theists do not commonly see moral behaviour as a way to win God's favour\(^\text{39}\) we can be assured that these acts will often be pernicious to morality rather than favourable. "The steady attention alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence" \((D \text{ 222})\).

Hume held that the religious belief in an afterlife, and the artificial distinctions it made in moral and practical matters could often divert one's attention from one's natural concerns and affections. For an example of religion's artificial distinctions and merits, we may turn to the \textit{Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals}.

A SYRIAN would have starved rather than taste pigeon; an EGYPTIAN would not have approached bacon: But if these species of food be examined by the senses of sight, smell, or taste, or scrutinized by the sciences of chymistry, medicine, or physics; no difference is ever found between them and any other species, nor can that precise circumstance be pitched on, which may afford a just foundation for the religious passion. A fowl on Thursday is lawful food; on Friday abominable: Eggs in this house, and in this diocese, are permitted during Lent; a hundred paces farther, to eat them is a damnable sin. This earth or building, yesterday was profane; to-day, by the muttering of certain words, it has become sacred. \((ECPM \text{ 198})\)

Such rules evince how utterly disconnected religion is with \textit{real} concerns ---that is, concerns which have usefulness and in some way contribute to human happiness. Hume believes that these observances are not only without any just foundation, but that such artificial criteria for merit or demerit divert our attention from those concerns which are

\(^{39}\text{As described in Appendix D.}\)
more important. Religion "represents a perversion of natural values" (Bernard 235). It encourages a morality which is wholly unnatural and even diametrically opposed to our natural human instincts. Thus we have Hume saying in the *Dialogues*,

But even though superstition or enthusiasm should not put itself in direct opposition to morality; the very diverting of the attention, the raising up a new and frivolous species of merit, the preposterous distribution, which it makes of praise and blame; must have the most pernicious consequences, and weaken extremely men's attachment to the natural motives of justice and humanity. (*D* 222)

The essential point is that even though the breach of many religious rules does not, by any obvious means, constitute any *real* immorality, (for instance, eating fowl on Friday) it may, according to the religious stance, deserve the severest moral disapprobation. Conversely, though an act, according to the familiar and accepted dictates of morality, may be deemed morally reprehensible, according to the dictates of religion, the same act may merit enthusiastic praise and respect (for instance, burning a heretic). As I have already stressed, these observations illustrate both the divergence between moral merit and religious merit\(^{40}\) and their opposition. Moreover, this divergence, according to Hume, may be traced to the nature of the deity and the consequences this has for the theist's conception of himself and his relation to others.

\(^{40}\text{Appendix D.}\)
CONCLUSION

Unlike Richard Bentley, who held that "no community ever was or can be begun or maintain'd, but upon the basis of religion," Hume emphasizes the opposite; that religion's influence on society is detrimental; that "no period of time can be happier or more prosperous than those in which [religion] is never regarded or heard of." Recalling Barbeyrac's challenge --that "since the safety and happiness of mankind have been hitherto thought to depend chiefly on [theism], it is requisite, that [the atheist] likewise prove atheism to contribute more to the interest and the good of all men, than the acknowledgement of a deity"-- we see Hume has challenged the notion that the "safety and happiness" of humanity has depended upon theism. According to Hume, religion has contributed misery and strife to humanity. In giving an account of how religion serves to do more harm than good and in giving his positive account of morality's secular foundation, Hume has also endeavoured to prove that atheism "contributes more to the interest and the good of all men."
1. **DID HUME BELIEVE IN A "TRUE RELIGION"?**

As you will recall, at the beginning of this thesis I noted Joseph Ellin's request for a more detailed account of exactly what it is about religion that Hume is after. This thesis has been dedicated to making these points clear, so I would now like to treat them explicitly here. However, before doing this I want to address the issue of whether or not Hume really believed in a true religion.

Whether Hume believed that there is a true religion is extremely important in deciding just how injurious his comments on religion and morality are. For if Hume is only attacking false religion --that is, some degenerate, corrupted version of what religion really is, or should be-- rather than true religion-- a religion which is a "necessary security to morals"-- then Hume's arguments could be seen as ill-aimed and of less consequence. Since, if it is only false religion that he is criticizing, then the true version would be exempt from these criticisms. The ultimate conclusion to all of Hume's arguments would then be
that there is a need to reform religion rather than eradicate it. But the latter is certainly Hume's desire—to eradicate religion in whatever form it exists.

Consider also that if Hume believed in a true religion, his reputation of atheist, or enemy of religion, would be entirely lost. In fact, as an enemy of false religion, Hume would have to be seen as a champion of the (true) religious cause! For in fighting superstition and ecclesiastic ambition, Hume would be fighting for a purer version of religious belief and practice. Perhaps even a version not wholly unlike Luther's. To anyone familiar with Hume's works and his tone towards religion, such a conclusion is highly unlikely.

Hume no doubt hated religion and all its ramifications. It almost seems certain that when Hume attacks religion, there is no real distinction to be made between true and false religion. This observation, however, necessitates an answer to the question, why did Hume ever give such a distinction in the first place? For the distinction does appear in several places.

The most obvious explanation of why Hume would make a distinction between true and false religion is that he simply wanted to avoid the censure that would come with denying the benefits of religion for society. Affirming the pernicious affects of religion on morality would have been somewhat dangerous in Hume's day. It would not only expose Hume to persecution, but could threaten his personal reputation or even result in lawsuits. Rather than openly professing that he thought religion was dangerous to society, he cleverly disclaimed that he was only attacking a corrupted form of religion. If believed, such a claim could save him the troubles described above and allow him to say whatever
he wanted regarding religion. This explanation is very likely given that Hume went to
great lengths to edit his *Treatise* so as not to offend Bishop Butler. Hume was a discrete
and subtle writer and one need not look far for offensive claims that are artfully concealed
by subtle implications (on the other hand, you don't have to look too far for offensive
claims that are not concealed!). Hume knew all too well how to get his point across
without being too obvious. This is not to say that his true sentiments entirely escaped his
readers (or that he was never explicit in his hatred for religion). However, his subtleness
must have softened the blow considerably.

But because Hume had good reason to obscure his true feelings is not entirely
convincing evidence for the claim that his distinction between true and false religion is
merely contrived for this purpose. That Hume created a hollow distinction between true
and false religion must ultimately be proved by a careful examination of his writings. I
would like to start with Ellin's account of why Hume really did not hold that there is a true
religion and then augment it with some additional observations.

In criticizing Gerhard Streminger's claim that Hume is only attacking "false
religion," or some degenerate form of religion, Joseph Ellin says that "there is no evidence
that for Hume there is any form of religion which can be identified as 'true religion!'" (Ellin,
296). This claim is a bit strong, since if we merely look to the *Dialogues* or to the *Natural
History* we will find Hume mentioning true religion. However, I do agree with Ellin in his
general sentiment, that for Hume there really was no true religion.

As textual evidence for the claim that Hume believed in a true religion, Streminger
gives what he calls Hume's "most explicit" description:
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. (D 220)

But as Ellin rightfully points out, this description is not given by Philo (the character whose views seem closest to Hume's) but by Cleanthes. Cleanthes is defending the claim that "religion however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all," since it is a "necessary security to morals" (D 219). Philo attacks this defense of religion by listing the evils that attend it. In this attack, it is clear that Philo is attacking religion as it has been found in the world. Ellin points out that if Philo responds to Cleanthes' defense by attacking common religion, Philo must be assuming that this is what Cleanthes is talking about. "Unless Philo has misunderstood Cleanthes' point (an implausible hypothesis), it is not the claim of Cleanthes, much less of Hume, that it is true religion which has the office described. On the contrary, it is false religion" (Ellin, 297).

Ellin's ultimate explanation of Hume's distinction between true and false religion states that for Hume, true religion really means nothing other than philosophy itself, and morality: philosophy being whatever reason can tell us about the question of the origin of the universe, and morality being the set of principles ultimately founded on "inclination" and "the natural motives of justice and benevolence." If that is the case, Philo's --read Hume's-- attack on false religion is in fact an attack on religion, since there is no other kind...It appears that anything which we might commonly understand as religion is on Philo's view false religion, and wholly bad, though Philo --read Hume?-- disguises this conclusion by occasionally calling the good things --philosophy and morality-- by the name "true religion." (Ellin, 297)

Thus, Ellin holds that when Hume is referring to true religion, he is not referring to anything that is religious in any traditional sense.

I believe that Ellin is correct for the most part. However, I would like to propose
that when Hume mentions true religion he does have *something* in mind. Albeit, that

*something* is very little indeed. Rather than saying that the term true religion is completely
devoid of any religious content I would propose that there is *some* religious content, but
so little, that it hardly warrants the contrary position, that Hume believed in a religion that
is exempt from his criticisms.

At the end of the *Dialogues* Hume writes,

If the whole of natural Theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself
into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *That
the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy
to human intelligence:* If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or
more particular explication: If it affords no inference that affects human life or can
be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is,
can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence: and cannot be transferred,
with any appearance of probability, to the qualities of the mind: If this really be the
case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than
give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs? (*D* 227)

Though in this passage Hume does not claim subscription to this extremely limited theism
(if we can call it theism at all), since he says "as some people seem to maintain," there is
very good evidence that Hume did indeed maintain this view: that all we can do is assent
to the proposition that *the cause or cases of order in the universe probably bear some
remote analogy to human intelligence.* In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Hume writes,

While we argue from the course of nature, and infer a particular intelligent cause,
which first bestowed, and still preserves order in the universe, we embrace a
principle which is both uncertain and useless. It is uncertain; because the subject
lies entirely beyond the reach of human experience. It is useless; because our
knowledge of this cause being derived entirely from the course of nature, we can
never, according to the rules of just reasoning, return back from the cause with any
new inference, or making additions to the common and experienced course of
nature, *establish any new principles of conduct or behaviour.* (*ECHU* 98,
emphasis added)
Here we see Hume allowing the bare possibility of an intelligent cause, or a cause that somehow resembles the human mind. But according to Hume, the frailty of human reason, and our limited experience allow for no more than this. In all manner of causal reasoning, according to Hume, we are only justified in attributing to the cause precisely what is necessary to explain the effect. With reference to nature, or the universe, we may ascribe to the cause nothing more than that it might bear some remote analogy to human intelligence. Thus we are left with a very bare conception of the deity. I would venture to affirm that we are hardly left with the notion of a deity at all. And Hume certainly thought that to establish the existence of the commonly held notion of a deity—a being with desires, intentions, moral characteristics, and the like—or to establish that there is a particular providence or a future state, is far beyond the limits of human understanding.

"The whole is a riddle, an enigma an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgement appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason..." (NHR 363). Given that Hume does not admit any degree of certainty with regard to the existence of a deity, or that such a deity would be concerned with human beings, or that there is an afterlife in which the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished, it is hardly likely that he believed in a true religion. For if one denies all of these things, what is there left to be considered religious (in the Western sense of religious)? Certainly the bare allowance that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence hardly qualifies as a true religion. Thus I would affirm that when Hume refers to true religion, there is actually something to which he is referring, but that his conception really has any
practical application, that it changes the nature of his arguments against common religion is entirely unfounded. And given that this version of true religion is so entirely empty of any meaningful content, my conclusion that the term true religion does have a referent is still entirely consistent with Ellin's conclusion.

2. ANSWERING ELLIN

Finally I would like to answer Ellin's questions:

_There is a legitimate question as to just what aspect of religion is Hume's real target._ Is it superstitious incredulity? The organization of worship? Priests? Doctrine? Monotheism? Or perhaps the unhappy misalliance of superstition, meaningless ritual, crafty and dishonest clergy, and dogmatically held doctrine, which it can be argued, has characterized much of Judeo-Christian history?

Having given Hume's views on religion and morality close scrutiny throughout this thesis, I can give a rather simple answer to this question: _all of them_. Hume no doubt felt that most religious beliefs and practices ranged from utterly useless or simply ridiculous to wicked and dangerous; that much, if not all, church doctrine was infested with contradictions, absurdities and vagaries, and that, above all, none of it contributed to human happiness, but rather to human misery. And since he thought that human misery is the soil in which the seeds of religion grow best, he also saw that his fight against religion would not be successful any time soon.

Perhaps the most integral component of Hume's claim that religion is pernicious to
morality concerns the belief in one God. As I noted in the previous chapter, Hume felt that the religious tolerance within polytheism was a result of its decentralized conception of the divine. If one believes in the existence of many finite Gods, there is no reason to be critical of any other religion that professes the existence of other Gods. Since there is no monopoly on divinity, everyone is entitled to a share.

With monotheism the case is quite different. The notion of a unified deity, with particular attributes, and particular prescriptions for humanity, shuts the door not only to the notion that there may be other Gods or that there may be different conceptions of what is held to be the only God, but the notion of one deity also shuts the door to varying beliefs about what is expected of God's followers. In other words, even if two sects both believe in one God, it does not necessarily follow that they will be tolerant of each other. For each sect's conception of the deity (or the deity's wishes) may be different, and this difference is often enough to spark controversy.

The organization or nature of worship, no doubt, also forms a large part of what Hume finds so distasteful and dangerous about religion. The intoleration that religion gives rise to, the sacredness of the cause, and the prospect of a future state all contribute in specific ways to the misery of humanity. And as I have pointed out, on Hume's view, much of this misery can be traced to the notion of one infinite deity.
3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since, as Antony Flew writes, "David Hume was...the first major thinker of the modern period to be through and through secular, this-worldly, and man-centred," Hume's thought on religion and on the relationship between religion and morality is important for understanding the role religion plays in our moral life today. Being among the first major thinkers of the early modern world to espouse a secular view of morality, Hume can be seen as one of the primary sources of the day-to-day secularism of modern life. It is important, therefore, that we have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of Hume's views on religion and morality, of how his many arguments relate to each other, of what conclusions he is seeking to establish and by what strategies he is trying to undermine the perceived influence that religion has on morality. Such an understanding is especially important in this particular case, since Hume never gave an accurate or comprehensive account of his own views.

Moreover, understanding Hume's views is not something that will only prove valuable to someone who is simply interested in studying Hume, or to someone who simply wants to gain a philosophical understanding of the relation between religion and morality as it appears in the eighteenth century. Though religion may not be as prevalent in

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everyday life now, as perhaps it was in the eighteenth century, we may safely assert that
the influence of religion has not weakened in the twentieth century, at least in one area,
ethics. In any set of considerations regarding hot issues such as abortion, euthanasia,
capital punishment, artificial insemination, or genetic engineering, one will surely be
confronted with religious issues which have a direct bearing on any final judgement
concerning the morality or immorality of these actions. 42

From a Humean standpoint, the influence of religion with regard to the above
issues is particularly troubling. Decisions regarding any of these issues needs to be reached
by considering if they can be squared with our human sentiments, or whether such actions
will better serve the good of the individual involved or of the public at large. To try and
determine whether these actions are right and wrong according to religious doctrine or
prescriptions, according to Hume, is, at the very least, useless, and at the worst,
dangerous. Since religious concerns are often without utility or are the product of
superstition, they cannot and should not serve as considerations in any decision regarding
moral matters. Given the prevalence of religious belief in moral matters today, Hume's
philosophy is still relevant.

42 For instance, it is often objected that suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment or
abortion are wrong since it is only God who can put an end to human life. It is objected with
regard to new reproductive techniques, and genetic engineering, that we are "playing God"
by artificially starting or altering life and that this is wrong.
APPENDIX A

REASON AND VOLITION

One may question the value in Hume's assertion that reason may prompt a passion, but not a volition. For *if it is reason that gives rise to a passion, and it is that passion which prompts our actions, isn't reason, at bottom, the cause for our actions?* In order to answer this question, a more explicit account of his theory is needed.

Why it is that reason cannot rightfully be seen as the cause of our actions can best be illustrated borrowing an example that Hume uses in the *Treatise*. When a person approaches a fruit tree with the desire to eat the fruit, but then recognizes the fruit as being poisonous, he refrains from eating the fruit. In this case, reason informs the person that the fruit is poisonous, and *prima facie*, it appears that this *judgement* is what leads the person to abstain from eating the fruit. Now we have already asserted that according to Hume's theory a judgement cannot influence the will, *except by exciting a passion*. According to the Humean thesis then, it is not the judgement that prompts the person to abstain from eating the fruit, but a contrary passion --a passion of *fear* (or what is the same, a *desire* to avoid what is harmful). It is true that this passion of fear (or desire to
avoid what is harmful) arises from a judgement and, as we have already seen, this is consistent with Hume's account, since it was said that reason could not give rise to an action, but only a passion. It is, in turn, the passion that influences the will. This is the reason for Hume's claim that reason can only affect our will indirectly or mediately --that is, through a passion.

The objection that ultimately, reason influences the will, since reason gives rise to the passion, which in turn gives rise to actions still needs to be answered. To answer this objection, I will refer the reader to an earlier passage where Hume says, "...the [passion] arises not from reason, but is only directed by it. 'Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object..." (T 414, emphasis added). It would seem that when Hume says the impulse does not arise from reason but is only directed by it (or prompted by it), that he is making a hollow distinction. But this is far from the case. Consider that in the case of the poisonous fruit, it was reason that informed the person of the fruit's particular quality. And that this information gave rise to a feeling of fear. But consider also that the judgement the fruit is poisonous could have no effect upon one's conduct (as Hume insists) if it wasn't for the fact that, as a human being, the person already had an antecedent disposition to desire avoiding what is poisonous (or, in general, to what is harmful). And if one inquires, where did this passion come from, the answer is certainly not, from reason. In fact, no cause can be given, except to say that the aversion is entirely natural and is part of our human constitution.

According to this analysis, it is true in one sense to say that reason gives rise to a passion, which in turn, gives rise to an action. For reason, in the particular instance, gives
rise to the apprehension. But *in another sense* reason is only *directing* or *prompting* a
preexisting passion --a passion which in no way could be founded on any sort of
reasoning. And it is to this preexisting passion that Hume is referring when he says "...the
[passion] *arises* not from reason, but is only *directed* by it." It is as if there is a preexisting
stock of latent passions, constituting part of human nature, which reason excites at given
times, in certain circumstances. So to the objection that *reason is ultimately the cause of
our actions*, I will reply that this cannot be true. For without passions, there would be
nothing to actuate the will. Moreover, reason is not the original cause of our passions, but
only excites them in particular cases.
APPENDIX B

THE FOUNDATION OF MORALITY

I have argued that there is a natural moral sense which lies at the bottom of our approval of the social virtues. However, I would also say that, according to Hume's analysis, the same foundation can be given to our approval of the rules of justice. But this seems to be a strange claim, since in his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals we have Hume undertaking the task of proving that "public utility is the sole origin of justice, and that reflections on the beneficial consequences of this virtue are the sole foundation of its merit...." (*ECPM* 183). Hume's claim that the sole origin or foundation of justice is utility can prove very confusing when trying to sort out his moral philosophy. For though he argues that utility is the sole origin or foundation of justice, he also says,

Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a sentiment should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery; since these are the different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. (*ECPM* 286)

Thus Hume is asserting that there is something more fundamental than utility --namely, a
"feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery." But how do we reconcile this claim with his previous claim, that utility is the sole foundation or origin of justice? I would like to point out that there is a difference between saying that this moral sense is the origin of such distinctions or rules and saying that it is their foundation. This difference is particularly important with regard to justice. Hume is using the terms origin and foundation as if they mean the same thing. I believe that with regard to Hume's moral system, they do not mean the same thing.

As I have argued, there is a basic human sentiment that forms the foundation for our approval of the social virtues and for our approval of justice. However, this is not to say that it is this sentiment which gives rise to all our moral distinctions or conventions. In the case of the approval we give to character traits that we find useful, it is the utility of the particular trait that gives rise to our feelings of approval. The same must be said of justice. Hume's account of the origin of justice does not include any supremely benevolent concerns on the part of those first members of society. In fact, according to Hume, the rules of justice are established primarily out of self-interest. Moreover, they are established precisely because people are not wholly benevolent, altruistic or virtuous. If everyone were naturally predisposed to behave morally, and always with the interests of others in mind, there would be no need for justice at all. Hence, justice arises from its usefulness, from the benefits which everyone stands to gain from its institution. However, as Hume points out,

Usefulness is agreeable, and engages our approbation. This is a matter of fact, confirmed by daily observation. But, useful? For what? For some body's interest, surely. Whose interest then? Not our own only: For our approbation frequently extends farther. It must, therefore, be the interest of those, who are served by the
character or action approved of and these we may conclude, however remote, are not totally indifferent to us. (ECPM 218)

Despite the fact that our own interest is more intimately felt than that of others, and that we are often more strongly influenced by what will affect us, rather than others, we are nonetheless, concerned with the well-being of others. "Any recent event or piece of news, by which the fate of states, provinces, or many individuals is affected, is extremely interesting even to those whose welfare is not immediately engaged... The interest of society appears, on this occasion, to be, in some degree, the interest of each individual" (ECPM 223). Thus, there is this concern for the happiness of humanity, or affection of humanity, that we have, which is entirely natural. And without this underlying sentiment, or disposition, even the rules of justice, as useful as they are, would be without any proper grounding. Recall what I had pointed out earlier: "Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means."

Thus, we may say that this feeling for the happiness of humankind is the foundation for all moral distinctions, and even for justice, without claiming that justice arises from this feeling, or that this feeling is the origin of justice. Similarly, we may assert that though this feeling underlies moral distinctions, we need not assert that this feeling is present to the mind whenever someone behaves morally. For people usually follow society's rules, or unstated moral rules, without this larger concern in mind. The approval, however, of having such laws or rules, can always be traced to this feeling for the happiness of humankind, though each individual's actions may not be explicitly based upon it. Thus, for all practical purposes, we may safely assert that the laws of justice and
morality arise from their usefulness, and are followed for the same reason. However, it is not inconsistent to say that the approval of such laws, and even the criteria on which they are determined, are *ultimately* founded upon a general sympathy and concern for humanity.
APPENDIX C

RELIGION AND HUME'S ANALYSIS OF CAUSALITY

In the chapter entitled, "Of the inference from the impression to the idea" in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that it is not reason that leads us to infer effects from causes, but rather that it is experience that leads us to expect one object whenever we see another. This experience seems so natural and invariable to us that we mistakenly deem these connections necessary though no such attribution is actually warranted.

Hume begins his sceptical argument against inductive reasoning concerning cause and effect by pointing out that when we infer an effect from a cause, we do not link the two by penetrating into their essences, thus uncovering some necessary link which would necessitate the one to appear after the other. In fact, Hume asserts that, "There is no object, which implies the existence of an other if we consider these objects in themselves, and never look beyond the ideas which we form of them" (*T* 86-87). He says that if we could uncover something that would evince a necessary link, it would be incontrovertible knowledge that the effect must follow from the cause. In other words, it would be inconceivable that from any given event, which we take to be a cause, that anything but
the expected (and previously observed) effect would result. However, as Hume points out, we can quite easily imagine that from any given cause, the expected effect will not occur at all, or will be much different. According to his "establish'd maxim in metaphysics," which generally states that whatever we can clearly imagine is possible, the fact that we can imagine a previously experienced effect not following from its cause is proof of its possibility. Hume says, "When we pass from a present impression to the idea of any object, we might possibly have separated the idea from the impression, and have substituted any other idea in its room" (T 87). Given that there is no contradiction in asserting that any certain effect will result from any given cause, it is clear that we have no knowledge of the connection between observed causes and their effects. Such a connexion is, therefore, not logically necessary.

Since a necessary connexion is nowhere to be found, Hume is lead to conclude, "'Tis...by experience only, that we can infer the existence of one object from that of another" (T 87). Hume's account of experience, and how this leads us to call one thing a cause and another an effect goes something like this: in all past instances, when a given species of objects presents itself, we have seen that another species has attended it, either temporally or spatially (or both). This relation, experienced numerous times, leads us to call one object the cause and the other the effect. Hume notes that this story leads us to the discovery of a new relation between causes and effects, that was not previously noted in the discussion on the association of ideas in Section 4, namely, the relation of "constant conjunction." In his discussion of the association of ideas, Hume says,

Were ideas entirely loose and unconnected, chance alone wou'd join them; and 'tis impossible the same simple ideas should fall regularly into complex ones (as they
commonly do) without some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another. (T 10)

He tells us that the qualities of resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect, are the "gentle forces" which prevail and lead us to associate one idea with another. However, the relation of cause and effect is somewhat more complex than the former two. First, the relation of resemblance is fundamental to any association of ideas. For as Hume says, "no objects will admit of comparison, but what have some degree of resemblance" (T 14).

Second, Hume tells us that the notion of cause and effect is brought about by the contiguity of the cause and the effect. This contiguity can either be spatial or temporal, (the latter of which Hume refers to as "succession"). However, contiguity and succession are not enough to lead us to posit the relation of cause and effect between two objects. Just because we see two objects close together in space or time, does not lead us to assume that one is the cause and the other the effect. Thus, a third relation must be appealed to in order to lead us to the idea of cause and effect. Hume calls this constant conjunction. It is clear now that the cause and effect relations we draw between objects in the world cannot be known without experience. This brings Hume to his central question, "Whether experience produces the ideas by means of the understanding or of the imagination; whether we are determin'd by reason to make the transition, or by a certain association and relation of perceptions" (T 88-89).

Hume says that if we arrive at the idea of cause and effect by way of reason, it would proceed upon the following principle: "that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same" (T 89). This principle, Hume says, must be
founded either on knowledge or probability.

That the maxim instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same cannot be founded on any demonstrative arguments is clear according to the foregoing considerations. In order to found this maxim on knowledge, it would be necessary that we penetrate into the essences of the objects, and determine that one is implied by the other. This would give us justification for asserting that one must necessarily follow from the other. However, no such necessity is possible. Moreover, we can always clearly conceive of an effect following from a cause in a way which we have never seen before. Therefore, cause an effect relations cannot be logically necessary. "To form a clear idea of any thing, is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it" (T 89).

It is equally clear, according to Hume, that the maxim instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same is not founded on probability. Hume says that the idea of cause and effect is derived from experience which tells us that in all past instances, one object has always appeared after the appearance of another. Thus, whenever we see one object, which we commonly take to be a cause, we expect that the effect should follow.

According to this account of things, which is, I think, in every point unquestionable, probability is founded on the presumption of a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those, of which we have had none; and therefore 'tis impossible this presumption can arise from probability. The same principle cannot be both the cause and effect of another... (T 90)
In other words, probability, in this instance, is seen to be founded on the presumption that *instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same.* In this reasoning there is an obvious circularity.

Hume concludes that it cannot be reason that leads us to draw a causal connection between causes and effects, but that it is merely an association of ideas in the imagination. "When the mind...passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination" (*T* 92). This association of ideas is governed by the three general principles mentioned in Section 4; namely, contiguity, resemblance and cause and effect. More specifically, the principle of cause and effect is governed by the principle of constant conjunction. These principles unite our ideas and give our experience of nature its uniformity.

Hume's scepticism with regard to cause and effect is symptomatic of his more general academic scepticism. The doctrine of scepticism in academic matters (as opposed to in practical matters, as seen in Pyrrhonism) seeks to emphasize that there are limits to what we can truly know; that the understandings we are equipped with cannot reveal or make sense of everything that it is confronted with. This concern with our understandings' limits does not realize itself in the form of disdain, but in the form of caution and humility. Hume captures this humility perfectly when he says,

> While we cannot give a satisfactory reason why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall or fire burn, can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination which we may form with regard to the origin of worlds and the situation of nature from eternity to eternity? (*ECHU* 160)
Given that the things we find most common and simple in life present us with difficulties, Hume proposes that when we endeavour upon deeper philosophical researches, we should not proceed with haughtiness or obstinacy. "In general, there is a degree of doubt and caution and modesty which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought forever to accompany a just reasoner" (*ECHU* 161-162).
APPENDIX D

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL MERIT

In his *Natural History of Religion* Hume observes that many of religion's votaries will seek the divine favour "not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but either by frivolous observances, intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions" (*NHR* 357). 43

Hume proclaims that "...there is no man so stupid, as that, judging by his natural reason, he would not esteem virtue and honesty the most valuable qualities, which any person could possess." He then asks, "Why not ascribe the same sentiment to his deity? Why not make all religion, or the chief part of it, to consist in these attainments" (*NHR* 358). For Hume, this is, no doubt, a central question regarding religion's connection to morality. For Hume, it was plain enough that though religion is emphatic in professing the importance of its role in promoting moral excellence, it hardly ever accomplishes its end. The reason for this is simple: morality forms only a small part of religious belief and

43For a description of what Hume thinks are some strange and absurd practices see Chapter 3, Section 3.
practice. Referring to the Jewish prayer book and the five books of Moses, Hume writes, "The least part of the Saddar, as well as of the Pentateuch, consists in precepts of morality; and we may also be assured, that that part was always the least observed and regarded" (NHR 357).

Besides religion's general neglect of morality, however, there is also a gulf between moral merit and religious merit. Hume thinks that theists do not actually believe that being moral will gain divine favour. This is why they do not make being moral "the chief part" of religion. He argues that according to theists, though they would scarce admit it, the actions they perform for the sake of morality (that is, for the sake of their own well-being or that of others, or humanity in general) are not actions that will win divine favour. Hume is claiming that it is implicit in the theist's reasoning that moral actions will not evince devotion to God (which is what will win divine favour). For, these types of actions are what one is naturally inclined to do, and would in fact do, if there were no God in the world. Hume says:

The duties, which a man performs, as a friend or parent, seem merely owing to his benefactor or children, nor can he be wanting to these duties, without breaking through all the ties of nature and morality. A strong inclination may prompt him to the performance: A sentiment of order and moral obligation joins its force to these natural ties: And the whole man, if truly virtuous, is drawn to his duty, without any effort or endeavour...[T]he moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretension to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is deemed no more that what we owe to society and to ourselves. In all this, a superstitious man finds nothing, which he has properly performed, for the sake of his deity, or which can peculiarly recommend him to the divine favour and protection. (NHR 358-59)

If Hume is correct, the motivation for behaving morally is rooted in a concern for the well-being of ourselves and those around us. Moreover, these concerns are entirely natural. Consequently, in order to show one's devotion to God, one must resort to actions which
arise from an entirely different motive. As a result, the theist engages in actions which are unnatural and serve no purpose in daily life. And it is, indeed, the very uselessness of the actions, that sets them apart from the others.

[The superstitious man] considers not, that the most genuine method of serving the divinity is by promoting the happiness of his creatures. He still looks out for some more immediate service of the supreme Being, in order to allay those terrors, with which he is haunted. And any practice, recommended to him, which either serves to no purpose in life, or offers the strongest violence to his natural inclinations; that practice he will the more readily embrace, on account of those very circumstance which should make him absolutely reject it (NHR 359).

In order to distinguish himself, in order to again divine recognition, the theist performs acts that are clearly not rooted in any natural sentiments, and are not required, nor even preferred for any reasons other than that of appeasing or flattering the deity. Any natural motive or any earthy utility --the very marks of any action we would normally call laudable or useful-- are on that account ineligible as acts intended to signal religious devotion.

According to this thinking, (as unconscious as it may be) practices which are useless, or which even involve some degree of physical or emotional suffering, will, for that very reason, be more obviously recognized and appreciated by the deity.

[Such an action] seems the more purely religious, because it proceeds from no mixture of any other motive or consideration. And if, for its sake, he sacrifices much of his ease and quiet, his claim of merit appears still to rise upon him, in proportion to the zeal and devotion which he discovers. In restoring a loan, or paying a debt, his divinity is nowise beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many would have performed, were there no God in the universe. But if he fast a day, or give himself a sound whipping; this has a direct reference, in his opinion, to the service of God. No other motive could engage him to such austerities. By these distinguished marks of devotion, he has now acquired the divine favour, and may expect, in recompense, protection and safety in this world, and eternal happiness in the next (NHR 359).

By appealing to such religious practices, Hume shows why he believes that behaving
morally is not what is required of a theist in order to be deemed pious. Consequently, *moral merit does not equal religious merit*. It seems that enduring self-abasement, asceticism, or frivolous observances plays a more dominant role in the religious life than being virtuous. The theist's need to distinguish his daily actions from those which he wants God to recognize as being performed for him only, also explains why "frivolous observances," "intemperate zeal," "rapturous extasies," or the "the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions" form such a large part of religion.

For Hume, observing that theists must resort to actions other than those performed for the sake of morality not only supports the claim that religious merit is *different* from moral merit, but that religious merit can also run *counter* to moral merit. This explains why "the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion" and why "it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises..." *(NHR 359).*

In the end, if it is true that the theist is required to perform useless ceremonies or practices or engage in frivolous observances in order to evince his religious devotion, rather than merely being virtuous, it does seem that religious merit and moral merit have little, if nothing, to do with each other. And if this is the case, it can hardly be professed that religion is the foundation for morality.

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*The argument is that in order to evince their devotion to God, theists will sometimes ignore the precepts of morality. They do not see such actions as inconsistent with their religious belief, since, as Hume has already argued, being moral and being religious are quite different.*
The separation of religious and moral merit does not imply that being religious will necessarily lead to immoral behaviour, though Hume thought it often did. But it certainly shows that being religious is no guarantee that one will be moral. Moreover, it suggests that being religious is not necessary in order to be moral.
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VITA AUCTORIS

Terry Myers was born in 1970 in Windsor, Ontario. He graduated from Sandwich Secondary School in 1990. From there he went to the University of Windsor where he obtained his Honours B.A. in Philosophy in 1994. Terry was awarded the University of Windsor Full-Tuition Scholarship for the years 1994-1995 and 1995-1996. Terry is currently a candidate for the Master’s degree in philosophy at the University of Windsor and plans to graduate in Fall 1996.