

From scepticism to aesthetic theism: Hume on religious affect and piety

Hume lived in a culture where the love of God still was considered not only as a support for morality but even its very perfection. The conception of a genuine affective relation to God, which should lead to moral perfection and piety, is radically challenged in Hume's philosophy. According to Hume there exists no original passion or affection that has God as its natural object. Moreover, when in the grip of religious beliefs, especially the faith in a providential God with moral attributes, the passions are distorted from their 'natural' course and create a form of latent pathology in religious people with detrimental consequences for their moral sincerity. This critique of the Christian faith of his days stands out not only in Hume's investigation of the origins of religion (his *Natural History of Religion*) and some of his essays (for example 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm'), but influences also in a substantial way his sceptical arguments against the rational legitimacy of religious belief, notoriously in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Remarkably, in the famous section 12 of his posthumous masterpiece, Hume puts forward the idea that there exists a genuine or 'true' form of religion that has no detrimental influence on morality and is even in consonance with it. If this is the case, what sort of religion can this be? Has Hume's highly speculative reference to the idea of 'true religion' any significance beyond a mere rhetorical, perhaps even ironic tribute to the religious culture of his days? In this contribution, I will defend the idea that Hume's 'true religion' reveals the possibility of a certain philosophical awe and wonder, which can be supportive for morality and virtue. This philosophical or aesthetic theism is put forward by Hume in the *Dialogues* through the voice of Philo. Moreover, so I will defend, in so far as this aesthetic theism can be considered to be related to specific calm affects or passions and helps to appease philosophical melancholy *and* enthusiasm, Hume seems to leave room for a form of piety which is in consonance with his moderate scepticism. However, the comparison of Hume's aesthetic theism with the Christian concept of moral and religious love reveals that Hume's piety is of a wholly unorthodox kind and, in the end, not incompatible with a moral atheism.

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