

## Hume's Philosophy of Religion—Enlightened Progress, or Cul-de-sac?

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Hume's philosophy of religion is found principally in his critical writing on natural theology in the early fragment on evil, the first *Enquiry*, and the *Dialogues*, and on revealed religion in *Enquiry* X. He touches on relevant issues elsewhere in his philosophy (including the two suppressed 'dissertations' of 1757), even if not as obsessively as some of his commentators. His skill lies in simplifying complex issues, which can be good, but not if the result is glib and facile. His philosophical critique is complemented by his unsympathetic portrayal of the psychology of popular religion in 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' and *The Natural History of Religion*, and of the role of religious figures and institutions in history in his *History of England*. He criss-crosses between reflections on the *reasons* and the *causes* of belief.

Hume's take on religion, particularly institutional religion, is almost consistently negative, but if we look at how readers have interpreted his negativity down the ages, there is no consensus. A dogged minority has found enough Humean-looking sentiments in the characters of Cleanthes and Demea in the *Dialogues* to challenge the simple view that Philo represents the author, but there are other sorts of evidence that it is through Philo that Hume is steering the argument. But what Philo is thought to stand for has changed over the years as philosophical fashions have changed; and with the increasing diversity of philosophical stances current in the academic world today Hume has been appropriated, on religion as on other subjects, by a bewildering array of incompatible philosophical interests. In this tercentenary year, we have heard a babel of voices on what the Enlightenment was about, on the scarcely examined assumption that whatever it was, Hume was its greatest Scottish, or British, or European embodiment. In the religious context, this commonly now takes the form of seeing Hume as spokesman for a staunch atheism, anticipating the rejection of religion by many at the present day. But this sets him at variance with his philosophy. For Hume's philosophy is that of a sceptic, preoccupied with the limitations of reason, whereas atheism, like theism, is a dogmatic stance that oversteps those limits. His philosophy should push him to agnosticism, but it is distorting to see this as the important issue. Hume's real aim was to gain understanding of how the human mind works; and the 'atheist-Enlightenment' reading ignores that what is identified as the Enlightenment in both Scotland and England was dominated by practising members of the national churches, including prominent clergy.

If we put Hume back into his 18th-century context, his writing on natural theology provoked a few controversialists but for the most part fell on deaf ears, even though most of the pamphlet literature against him was lightweight. The Common Sense critique of Hume was for a time decisive. His assault on the foundations of revelation too seemed to contain more paradoxes than it was trying to rebut. The *Enquiry* did not sell particularly well until it was packaged with other works, and likewise the posthumous *Dialogues*, so that these works were submerged within a larger corpus and did not attract the focused study they receive today. Traditional modes of thought and reasoning were sufficiently firmly entrenched that Hume was not generally seen as doing much damage: his underlying philosophy was too paradoxical and his mode of arguing too clever for his own good. He misjudged the way most of his contemporaries saw the design evidence, which was not as a formal argument, more a cultural mindset born of a century's advances in the sciences: the argument that present-day students believe that Hume has knocked down was something of his own invention. Where he did take an existing argument (Samuel Clarke's for a first cause), it came out as a caricature and was largely ignored. His critique of miracle reports attracted more substantial criticism from critics who were not slow to find sophistries in his logic. But the rise of Kantianism, the advent of German biblical criticism, Darwinism, and European positivism seem to have opened up routes to more lasting critiques than Hume achieved.