

WAS HUME AN ATHEIST? A RECONSIDERATION

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TAI HA LEE: Was Hume an Atheist? A Reconsideration
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In *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, Paul Russell claims that scholars describing Hume simply as a skeptic or agnostic fail to recognize his irreligious objectives. Russell summarizes Hume's philosophy in three points. First, Hume endorses thin theism which is theoretically empty and of little practical use. Second, Hume's outlook is characterized by a permanent and strong antipathy towards religion. Third, the science of man, constructed by Hume in his *Treatise*, intends to establish a godless worldview. Hence, Hume's views on religion could be described as atheistic or irreligious. However, this author feels that Russell fails to capture the essence of Hume's philosophy of religion in that it may allow a place for religion. First, Hume's deism is neither empty nor of little use; therefore, Hume's endorsement of thin theism cannot be interpreted as de facto atheism. Second, Hume's antipathy for religion is directed towards specific religions, namely, Catholicism and Protestantism, and not religion in general. Therefore, describing Hume's attitude as "irreligious" is clearly misleading. Third, Hume's science of man is based on the precept of a methodological naturalist with no interest in metaphysical beings. Therefore, it cannot be said that Hume sought to establish a godless worldview.

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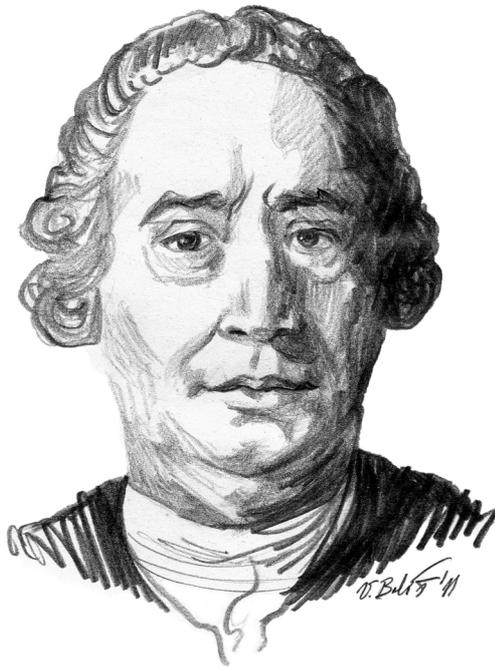
Introduction. Since N. Kemp Smith's monumental article "The Naturalism of Hume" was published in 1905, most contemporary scholars no longer regard Hume as a destructive skeptic who merely wished to let the principles of empiricism play out its logical, but skeptical, conclusion.¹ Nonetheless, Hume has been interpreted as an exceptionally destructive skeptic with regard to religion. As a result, and until recently, several scholars of Hume² have represented Hume as an atheist regardless of the fact that Hume had defended himself against such an accusation.³ Scholars of Hume, however, such as Mossner, Butler, Twyman, and Livingstone, have claimed that to describe Hume as an

¹ Green views Hume's philosophy as "a doctrine founded on the testimony of the senses, which ends up by showing that the senses testify to nothing." Green (1964, p. 154).

² See Flew (1992, introduction), Gay (1976, p. 409), Williams (2006, pp. 267-73) and Millican (2002, pp. 34-40).

³ Hume (1986, pp.115-124). Hereafter *LFG*. In this letter, Hume replies to the charges directed against him.

atheist runs counter to the spirit of the skeptical philosophy he adopted.⁴ With regard to this controversy, Paul Russell has claimed, in a recent book,⁵ that to describe Hume simply as a skeptic or agnostic in relation to his fundamental views on religion fails to properly recognize and appreciate the extent of Hume's irreligious intentions. It appears to the present author, however, that Russell does not seem to have properly grasped the positive aspects of Hume's philosophy of religion.



David Hume

According to Mossner, although Hume's skeptical philosophy, within which his treatment of religion ought to be situated, can be regarded as partly destructive, it can also be viewed as constructive.⁶ As Mossner states, Hume's skeptical philosophy has not only a destructive side, directed to subverting the foundational role assigned to reason in human life by Cartesian rationalism, but also a constructive dimension, which seeks to establish a science of human nature on the basis of an experimental method, directed towards showing that it is not reason but the interplay of sense, imagination, interests, and habit that form the basis of human knowledge and morality. It can thus be said that Hume's skepticism is to be located in the middle ground between dogmatic rationalism on the one hand and the Pyrrhonian on the other. Despite this, some scholars of Hume regard Hume's views on religion as

entirely destructive. On reading Hume's skeptical philosophy as described in the *Treatise*

⁴ See Mossner (1954, p. 133), Butler (1960, P. 98), Tweyman (1986, pp. 138-9) and Livingston (1984, p. 177).

⁵ Russell (2008, pp. 279-89). Hereafter *RHT*.

⁶ Mossner (1984, 21). Norton also argues the same view: "Hume was a self-proclaimed sceptic who consciously developed a philosophical position that is at one and the same time fundamentally skeptical and fundamentally constructive." Norton (1993, p. 1).

and the *Enquiry*, it however seems to me that this destructive interpretation should be questioned. Considering the true spirit of Hume's philosophy, which inclines towards moderate beliefs, actions, and institutions through an investigation of those principles of human nature which motivate behavior, it would be strange indeed if Hume turned out to be no more than an atheist who could find no place in human life for a religious outlook: an outlook which would appear to be as much a part of human nature as is the quest for knowledge and a concern for distinguishing between the morality of good and evil. For this reason, one could reasonably claim that a place for religion does exist in Hume's skeptical philosophy. In this respect, although Hume undermined the intellectual foundations of religious beliefs, such as the existence and nature of God, at the same time he left open the possibility of a deistically based religion such as can be found in natural religion or Confucianism. Moreover, although Hume launched a serious attack on the harmfulness and corruption of organized religion, he nevertheless endorsed the Church of England as this was regarded as an acceptable compromise between the extremes represented by superstition and enthusiasm (or fanaticism).

The present article therefore sets out to refute Russell's atheistic interpretation of Hume's view regarding religion by demonstrating that there is a place for religion in Hume's skeptical philosophy. In accordance with this aim, I will first consider the grounds on which Russell regards Hume's philosophy to be atheistic and irreligious.

Russell's atheistic interpretation. In order to resolve the question of whether Hume was atheistic in outlook, Russell begins by considering the arguments for the existence of God in the *Dialogues*, one of Hume's main inquiries on the subject of religion. This involves three arguments relating to proof as to the existence of God. Two of these concern the *a priori* argument (i.e. the cosmological argument) and the *a posteriori* argument (i.e. the argument from design), and the third concerns the argument relating to the existence of evil.

With regard to the *a priori* argument, Hume's criticism, which is to be found in part 9 of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,⁷ is, according to Russell, straightforward. Thus, whatever is demonstrable is such that its contrary implies a contradiction. Whatever is conceived as existing, however, can also be conceived as nonexistent. Since there is no Being whose non-existence implies a contradiction, it follows that there is no Being whose existence is demonstrable (*Dialogues*, p. 189). It is therefore concluded that theism is unable to be supported from the *a priori* argument.

In contrast, Hume's position on the argument from evil can be found in the age old question of Epicurus: the existence of evil in this world implies either that God is unable to prevent evil, in which case he is not omnipotent, or that he is unwilling, in which case he is malevolent. Either way, it follows that it is impossible to vindicate all God's attributes (*Dialogues*, p. 198). Hume, however, allows for the possibility that evil in the world is necessary or essential for the realization of a perfectly good whole (*Dialogues*, p. 201).

⁷ Hereafter *Dialogues*.

This means that the existence of evil is compatible with infinite power and the perfect goodness of God. Yet, as Russell points out, Hume's compatibility of evil with the attributes of God cannot be used to infer the existence of God as a perfect Being.

In opposition to the two aforementioned arguments, Hume proposes that the *a posteriori* argument (i.e. the argument from design) offers the most plausible and convincing explanation. By endorsing this viewpoint, however, the intention of Hume was to expose the weaknesses and limitations contained in such an argument. In this respect, on coming across objects that possess order, harmony and beauty, where their parts are adjusted to each other in order to fulfill some end or purpose, we infer the existence of a mind that is both intelligent and intentional. In addition, when discovering objects with these features in the world, we naturally infer that the universe must also have been created by a cause stemming from a mind similar to that of man. However, the analogy between the structure of universe and what leads to the creation of human artefacts is weak, and we are left with a vague hypothesis that the existence of a being must be infinitely different from that of the human minds. Hence it cannot but be concluded that the argument from design fails to prove the existence of God in any comprehensible way.

But it does not logically follow that, because Hume was not a theist who believed in the God of orthodox religion, he must therefore have been an atheist. In addition, it seems that Hume remained open – as can be seen in part XII of the *Dialogues*⁸ and the last section of the *Natural History of Religion*⁹ – to the possibility that some truth could be found in thin theism i.e. deism. From this, it seems reasonable to claim that to label Hume atheistic in outlook is misleading. However, Russell puts forward the further objection that Hume's thin theism is theoretically empty and has no practical implications. "It is uncertain because the subject lies entirely beyond the reach of human experience, and it is useless because we are unable to establish any new principles of conduct and behavior" (*RHT*, p. 284).¹⁰ In short, because Hume appears to hold such a vague commitment towards the existence of a supreme intelligence as the origin, creator, and governor of this universe (*Dialogues*, p. 227), this therefore disqualifies religion as having any significance with regard to real life. For Russell, the key to understanding Hume's argument on religion seems to reside in the fact that Hume was set on depriving religious doctrines of any sound philosophical footing, to the extent that it could have little or no practical value or influence. It can thereby be concluded that Hume is, by definition, an atheist who does not support or embrace any form of theism.

Similarly, in various publications including, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*¹¹, the *NHR*, the *History of England*¹², Hume seems to display a strong hostility towards, and criticism of, orthodox religion, which suggests he thought the world would

⁸ *Dialogues*, p. 227.

⁹ Hume(1956, p. 75). Hereafter *NHR*.

¹⁰ With regard to this point, Williams entirely agrees with Russell: See Williams (2006, pp. 272-73).

¹¹ Hereafter *Enquiry*.

¹² Hereafter *History*.

be a better place without such a belief system. More precisely, Hume's views regarding the doctrine of the soul, a future state, and morality run directly against the teachings of orthodox religion. It is therefore a mistake for Hume to be regarded as a skeptic or agnostic whose general attitude to all religious hypotheses is one of suspending judgment on the grounds that claims of this kind are beyond the scope of human understanding and simply because the terms "skeptic" or "agnostic" incorrectly suggest that Hume's position is one of intellectual neutrality with no viewpoint either for or against religion.

A similar line of enquiry to Russell's irreligious interpretation of Hume's philosophy on religion can be found in Russell's understanding of the *Treatise of Human Nature*.¹³ According to Russell, Hume proposes in the *Treatise* that secular morality has no relation to the God of orthodox religion. This renders religion superfluous and unnecessary for the purpose of human life. Thus, Russell states that "the alternative scheme Hume presents in the *Treatise* may well be described as a 'godless worldview'" (*RHT*, p. 288). This suggests that Hume intended to establish a godless worldview on the basis of the principles and operations of human nature. If this is true, to describe Hume's position on religion simply as skeptical or agnostic is not to properly grasp his irreligious intentions (*RHT*, pp. 284-5). However, even if this were not the case, Hume's view would have been regarded as irreligious by his contemporaries in that his naturalism expressed in the *Treatise* is similar to the metaphysical system, described by Bayle as "Stratonic Atheism" which presents nature as self-existing, self-ordering, and self-moving. Russell accordingly concluded that certain recent scholars of Hume, who regard the early critics of Hume's *Treatise* as intolerant bigots and religious fanatics who did not understand Hume's philosophy, "have failed to recognize and appreciate properly the considerable extent of Hume's irreligious aims and objectives" (*RHT*, p. 289).

In sum, the evidence that Russell presents for the destructive interpretation of Hume's philosophy of religion can be summarized in the following three points. First, the thin theism endorsed by Hume in both the *Dialogues* and *NHR* is not only theoretically empty but also of no practical value; the second concerns the fact that Hume displays a strong and permanent antipathy towards religion, and the third relates to the fact that the science of man as expressed in the *Treatise* by Hume is intended to establish a godless worldview.

Hume's thin theism and Confucianism. In a letter to Gilbert of Minto written in 1751 when the draft of the *Dialogues* was completed, Hume wrote:

I have often thought, that the best way of composing a Dialogues, would be for two Persons that are of different Opinions about any Question of Importance, to write alternately the different Parts of the Discourse, & reply to each other. By this Means, that vulgar Error would be avoided, of putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of the

¹³ Hereafter *Treatise*.

Adversary: And at the same time, a Variety of Character & Genius being upheld, would make the whole look more natural & unaffected.¹⁴

At first glance, the *Dialogues* seem to represent the victory of the Pyrrhonian skeptic (Philo) over the naturalist (Cleanthes). However, the winner in the *Dialogues* is neither Philo nor Cleanthes. As Hume states in the above passage, each protagonist tends to defend a different opinion on natural religion.¹⁵ Hume therefore intends, through the dialogues presented by the three protagonists (Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo), to lead us to a conclusion which is free from the lethargy associated with Pyrrhonian skepticism and the prejudices caused by philosophical dogmatism, by employing an approach which is both natural and unaffected.

The dramatic reversal that Philo resorts to at the end of part XII in the *Dialogues* shows that Hume's approach to religion is not simply that of a skeptic as can be seen in the following passage:

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 ultimate probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: ... 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; and believe that the argument, on which it is established, exceed the objections which lie against it? Some astonishment indeed will naturally arise from the greatness of the object: some melancholy from its obscurity: Some contempt of human reason, that it can give no solution more satisfactory with regard to so extraordinary and magnificent a question. But ... A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity (*Dialogues*, p. 227).

Philo's point is that if all that human reason can legitimately claim about God is only that there is some remote analogy between human and divine intelligence, a contemplative and religious man could not but feel some melancholy from its obscurity, and contempt for the inability of human reason to offer a satisfactory solution concerning such a question. This statement indicates how Philo regards reason as having limitations in that it has no constitutive role in religion and which also suggests the need for a fresh approach

¹⁴ Hume (1932, p. 154).

¹⁵ The question as to "Who speaks for Hume?" has invited the different interpretations among scholars without reaching any clear determination. With regard to this question, I agree with Yandell's view that Hume uses the mouth of all participants in order to discuss deeply and comprehensively the subject of natural theology. See Yandell(1976, p. 110).

to the issue of religion. However, since Hume did not believe in a Christian God, as he confessed on his deathbed,¹⁶ we cannot assume that he seriously thought, as Philo did, that there was a necessity for a new approach to religion. However, Hume's confession constitutes no more than a personal belief; therefore, whether his skepticism, which is not related to his intentions or beliefs, will lead the way to a new approach to religion remains an unanswered question.

For Hume, there are two important issues associated with religion: its foundation in reason and its origin in human nature (*NHR*, p. 21). Hume's inquiries concerning the first question shows that although there is no rational way of demonstrating the nature and existence of God, the prospect nevertheless exists as to the possibility of natural belief with regard to an intelligent Author. Early in Part 12 of the *Dialogues* Philo states that "a purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, as at all times to reject it" (*Dialogues*, p. 214). According to Logan, Philo's statement is an irregular argument, which appeals to the sentiments, to the imagination and emotion rather than to reason, and it gives rise to a belief in supreme intelligence. That is, "we are by nature irresistibly and inextricably drawn towards the belief in a Supreme Being to which we pay profound adoration whenever we contemplate the complexities of nature".¹⁷ Therefore, it could be argued that a belief in an intelligent designer is indeed a natural belief.

On the other hand, Hume's inquiry concerning the second question indicates that all popular religions observed throughout the history of humankind have been based not on the natural belief in an intelligent Author, but on a theism artificially induced for the purposes of a priestly class,¹⁸ dogmatized on the basis of a false philosophy, and justified by revelation. Thus, Hume stated the following in the last section of the *NHR*:

The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind, than to be thus selected from all other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator. But consult this image, as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our represen-

¹⁶ "He said he never had entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke" (Boswell 1947, p. 76).

¹⁷ Logan (1998, pp. 145-146). R. J. Butler also argues that the belief in an intelligent designer is a natural belief. That is, a belief in design, like belief in either causation or the existence of external objects, is unavoidable and to have the belief in an intelligent designer is natural. See R. J. Butler (1960, pp. 98-99).

¹⁸ "Most men are ambitious; but the ambition of other men may commonly be satisfied, by excelling in their profession, and thereby promoting the interests of society. The ambition of the clergy can often be satisfied only by promoting ignorance and superstition and implicit faith and pious frauds" (Hume 1985, p. 200). Hereafter *Essays*.

tations of him! How much is he degraded even below the character, which we should naturally, in common life, ascribe to a man of sense and virtue! (NHR, p. 75)

This passage shows that Hume had rejected thick theism and orthodox religion, but was more amenable to thin theism, i.e. deism and natural religion. In this regard, Hume was particularly affected by the English deists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries who rejected the idea of divine revelation or miracles as a violation of natural law and who claimed to live up to the principles and obligations of secular morality.¹⁹ Thus, Hume's notion of God is clearly distinct from traditional theism of orthodox Christianity, which is based on providence and faith in the efficacy of prayer or sacrifices. This outlook can be found in a letter written in 1743 to his friend William Mure of Caldwell. Here, Hume points out that Plato distinguishes three categories of atheism.

There are three kinds of Atheists. The first who deny a Deity, the second who deny his Providence, the third who assert, that he is influenced by Prayers or Sacrifices.²⁰

As stated in the *NHR*, Hume suggested that human beings have a natural propensity to believe in an invisible, intelligent power. It is therefore certain that Hume is not an atheist in the first sense. And Hume embraces, as do English deists, God's providence which refers not to miracles as a violation of natural law but the laws of nature including the principles of human nature. Thus, Hume is far from being an atheist in the second sense. Finally, Hume does not believe in the efficacy of prayer or sacrifice which will be revealed by providence, such as in a miracle, since "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact, which it endeavors to establish" (*Enquiry*, p. 77). Hume, therefore, cannot be regarded as an atheist in the third sense.

In an essay entitled "Of Suicide", Hume explicitly sets out these ideas on deism with regard to God as follows:

The providence of the deity appears not immediately in any operation, but governs everything by those general and immutable laws, which have been established from the beginning of time. All events, in one sense, may be pronounced that action of the almighty: They all proceed from those powers, with which he has endowed his creatures. A house, which falls by its own weight, is not brought to ruin by his providence more than one destroyed by the hands of men; nor are the human faculties less his workmanship than the laws of motion and gravitation. When the passions play, when the judgment dictates, when the limbs obey; this is all the operation of God; and upon these animate prin-

¹⁹ In Book III of the *History*, Hume clearly endorses a deistic belief. "The only religion obligatory on mankind is the belief of one supreme Being, the author of nature and the necessity of good morals, in order to obtain his favour and protection" (*History*, pp.186-7).

²⁰ Hume (1954, p. 11).

principles, as well as upon the inanimate, has he established the government of the universe...Nature still continues her progress and operation; and if general laws be ever broke by particular volitions of the deity, 'is after a manner which entirely escapes human observation (*Essays*, p. 581).

Here the deistic notion of God is precisely defined. If God's providence appears only with respect to the laws of nature or human nature, whatever nature says is also what God dictates. In this respect, secular morality is nothing but the expression of God's providence or revelation.

A man may disturb society, no doubt; and thereby incur the displeasure of the almighty: But the government of the world is placed far beyond his reach and violence. And how does it appear, that the almighty is displeased with those actions that disturb society? By the principles which he has implanted in human nature, and which inspire us with a sentiment of remorse, if we ourselves have been guilty of such actions, and with that of blame and disapprobation, if we ever observe them in others (*Essays*, p. 586).

It appears to Hume that God of deism speaks to us through the principles implanted in human nature. All types of theism, which views God as a capricious Being who is influenced by sacrifices or prayers, are always in danger of weakening or destroying the sound principles of common life, such as secular morality, in so far as they permit God's providence or intervention in response to man's religious devotion. However, in such deism, whereby God governs his creatures through moral as well as natural laws, God is no longer a capricious being who is delighted by entreaty, solicitation, sacrifice, and flattery. From this perspective, a superstitious person would find that little could properly be performed to appease a deity or which might specifically procure divine favor and protection. As a consequence, there can be no place for any religious fanaticism

When a deistic notion of God is followed, it is possible for a person to sublimate moral action from the social to the religious spheres. Such sublimation allows us to think that secular morality is implanted in ourselves by God, and gives rise to the conviction that our moral lives might not be in vain. That Hume recognizes the positive aspects of deism, in that such an outlook helps to promote morality, is clear in the essay entitled "The Platonist":

Can we then be so blind as not to discover intelligence and a design in the exquisite and most stupendous contrivance of the universe? Can we be so stupid as not to feel the warmest raptures of worship and adoration, upon the contemplation of that intelligent being, so infinitely good and wise?

The most perfect happiness, surely, must arise from the contemplation of the most perfect object. But what is more perfect than beauty and virtue? And where is beauty to be found equal to that of the universe? Or virtue, which can be compared to the benevolence and justice of the Deity... it is our comfort, that, if we employ worthily the faculties

here assigned us, they will be enlarged in another state of existence, so as to render us more suitable worshippers of our maker: And that the task, which can never be finished in time, will be the business of an eternity (*Essays*, p. 158).

In addition, deism may contribute to preventing the intrusion of superstition by enforcing morality:

To which we may add, that, after the commission of crimes, there arise remorse and secret horrors, which give no rest to the mind, but make it have recourse to religious rites and ceremonies, as expiations of its offences. Whatever weakens or disorders the internal frame promotes the interests of superstition: And nothing is more destructive to them than a manly, steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these spectres of false divinity never make their appearance (*NHR*, p. 73).

In short, deism not only reinforces secular morality, but also renders us immune to superstition. This is a sensibility that can also be found in Confucianism, which was profoundly influenced by Oriental life.²¹ According to Helmuth von Glasenapp, Confucius believed:

Heaven was the one and highest world principle. He took Heaven to be a personal being, but saw in it not so much a god who arbitrarily, by means of miracles and revelations, interferes with the course of history and with individual life; rather he considered it to be the regulator of the eternal, cosmic moral law which rules all things in heaven and on earth and keeps them in order.²²

As Glasenapp states, Confucianism embraces the deistic notion of God in which there is no space for the existence of a particular kind of providence in relation to a God-like miracle or revelation. Furthermore, human nature, including the natural quality of morals, is understood as representing the principle of Heaven. According to Mencius, a man who retains and nurtures his own nature actually serves Heaven i.e. God:

For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven, By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature he is serving Heaven.²³

²¹ In the essay 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', Hume presents religion as free from dangerous bigots Quakers and Confucianism. See Hume (*Essays*, p. 78).

²² Glasenapp (1970, p. 57).

²³ Mencius (1970, p. 182).

Thus, to observe the natural motives of morality, which is supposed to be implanted in human nature by Heaven is not merely moral but religious. In fact, the worship of Heaven (i.e. Deity) in Confucianism has not only reinforced traditional secular morality, but has also effectively prevented the intrusion of superstition which weakens the principles of common life. From the preceding observations, we can therefore safely assume that thin theism (i.e. deism) is neither empty nor useless. Ultimately, this suggests that Hume actually left open the possibility of a role for religion.

The Church of England as a happy medium. The second justification regarding Russell's claim to Hume being an outright atheist derives from the latter's hostile attitude toward religion. There are, as Russell points out, a number of hostile and critical statements on religion scattered throughout almost all Hume's works. However, we must be careful to note that Hume's hostility was not directed to religion in general, but rather to proselytizing (Presbyterian Church) and superstition (Catholic Church). According to Hume, the former is not only contrary to sound reason and philosophy but also leads to many aberrations typical of human society, whereas the latter renders men tame and submissive, and ultimately becomes a most egregious instrument of tyranny, oppression, and violence (*Essays*, pp. 73-9). Hume especially expressed antipathy towards such forms of religion because they seemed to threaten the order and peace of human society through religious dispute. For example, the struggles between the Roman and Presbyterian Churches typical of the history of modern England were not confined to religious disputes; these, in fact, developed into a political disagreement between the monarch and the common good, involving factions, persecutions, and civil commotions. Thus, in order to avoid such religious confrontations, Hume suggested the primacy of deism as a mean of attaining a measure of toleration and indifference towards religious controversies.

In the essays "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm", Hume wrote:

We learn from English history, that, during the civil wars, the *independents* and *deists*, though the most opposite in their religious principles; yet were united in their political ones, and were alike passionate for a commonwealth. And since the origin of *whig* and *tory*, the leaders of the *whigs* have either been *deist* or profess *latitudinarians* in their principles; that is, friends to toleration, and indifferent to any particular sect of *Christians*: While the sectaries, who have all a strong tincture of enthusiasm, have always, without exception, concurred with that party, in defense of civil liberty. The resemblance in their superstitions long united the high-church *tories*, and the *Roman catholics*, in support of prerogative and kingly power (*Essays*, pp. 78-9).

However, the indifference of the deist or the latitudinarian to the religious sectaries was unable to endure, because of the natural inclination "to rest (our) attention on sensible, visible objects", that is, "to unite the invisible power with some visible objects"

(*NHR*, p. 38). As Hume further stated, we are therefore unable to remain content with a purely abstract and invisible deity:

an abstract, invisible, object, like that which *natural* religion alone presents to us, cannot long actuate the mind, or be of any moment in life. To render the passion of continuance, we must find some method of affecting the senses and imagination, and must embrace some historical, as well as philosophical account of the divinity (*NHR*, p. 167).

Instead of a deistically based natural religion such as Confucianism, Hume put forward one of the organized religions as a suitable candidate by way of a compromise. Furthermore, three further passages can be found in the *History* and the *Essays* in which Hume specifically endorsed the Church of England as a “happy medium”. The first is located in the unpublished preface to the second volume of the *History* dealing with the later Stuarts:

Of all the Sects, into which Christians have been divided, the Church of England seems to have chosen the most happy Medium; yet will it undoubtedly be allowed, that during the Age, of which these Volumes treat, there was a Tincture of Superstition in the Partisans of the Hierarchy; as well as a strong Mixture of Enthusiasm in their Antagonists.²⁴

The second is to be found in volume IV dealing with the reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603):

OF ALL THE EUROPEAN CHURCHES, which shook off the yoke of papal authority, no one proceeded with so much reason and moderation as the church of England; an advantage, which had been derived partly from the interposition of the civil magistrate in this innovation, ... And the new religion, by mitigating genius of the ancient superstition, and rendering it more compatible with the peace and interest of society, had preserved itself in that happy medium, which wise men have always sought, and which the people have so seldom been able to maintain (*History*, IV, pp. 119-120).

The last is to be found in the essay entitled, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm”.

How smoothly did the ROMISH church advance in her acquisition of power? But into what dismal convulsions did she throw all EUROPE, in order to maintain it? On the other hand, our sectaries (the Church of England), who were formerly such dangerous bigots, are now become very free reasoners; and the *quakers* seem to approach nearly the only regular body of *deists* in the universe, the *literati*, or the disciples of CONFUCIUS in CHINA (*Essays*, p. 78).

²⁴ Mossner (1954, p. 307).

Hume's endorsement of the Church of England seems to be based on two main attributes. One concerns the fact that, thanks to his historical observation concerning the religious policies of the Tudors, Hume regarded the Church of England as a politically useful institution in a modern England that was already mired in religious disputes. The second relates to the fact that the Church of England seemed to have effectively suppressed the influence of the priestly class, which was in danger of promoting a perverted idea of God, through the domination of civil jurisdiction over ecclesiastical jurisdiction.²⁵ What stands out from these considerations is that the term "irreligion" for describing Hume's general attitude towards religion is not as accurate and informative as Russell would like us to believe.

Moreover, Russell's view that "Hume's fundamental attitude toward religion is one of systematic hostility and criticism" (*RHT*, p. 284) is not consistent with the spirit of Hume's philosophy with regard to common life as can be seen in the following statement: "philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (*Enquiry*, p.112). The common life, which is the object of philosophical reflection in Hume's science of human nature, is recorded in history. The result of this is that philosophy as an inquiry into common life is only possible on the horizon of history. For Hume, philosophical thought without a careful consideration of the historical context can become extreme and so can never provide a true solution to problems experienced by individuals in their lives. Hume emphasizes this point in the essay "Of the Study of History" as follows:

When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiment of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue. History keeps in a just medium betwixt these extremes, and places the objects in their true point of view (*Essays*, p. 568).

According to Hume, "the first ideas of religion arose from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind" (*NHR*, p. 27). Moreover, "to render the passion of continuance, we must find some method of affecting the senses and imagination" (*Essays*, p. 167). Additionally, "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (*Treatise*, p. 415). Hence, "the frailties of our Nature mingle themselves with everything, in which we are employ'd; and no human institution will ever reach perfection."²⁶ Coupled with these statements, one cannot infer that Hume expected to sweep away orthodox religion, which is grounded on

²⁵ According to J B. Stewart, Hume clearly excluded the Church of England from false religion: "In 1770 he dropped the Church of England from his list of false religions. Presumably, he had come to think of the clergy of the Church of England as fostering neither superstition nor enthusiasm, but as filling the respectable office of clergyman" (Stewart 1963, p. 283).

²⁶ Mossner (1954, p. 306).

the frailties of human nature, by philosophical enlightenment. In effect, Hume is not at all optimistic about the prospect of ridding humanity entirely of religion and superstition. According to Millican, “at the beginning of *Enquiry X*, he [Hume] expresses the hope that his argument against the credibility of miracles will help to protect ‘the wise and learned’ from ‘superstitious delusion’, but he simultaneously suggests that others will be beyond its help.”²⁷ All together, one could assume that Hume sought to find a compromise between the philosophical ideal and the concrete reality of the historical context. For this reason, even if Hume personally had a strong antipathy towards organized religion, to employ the term “atheism” or “irreligion” to refer to Hume’s philosophical view on the subject is therefore clearly misleading. If we interpret Hume’s philosophical view of religion as atheistic and irreligious as Russell does, this means that Hume went to extremes in analyzing the problems of religion. In this regard, Russell’s interpretation of Hume’s views fails to capture the full significance of history in relation to Hume’s philosophy of common life.

Hume’s philosophy as a methodological naturalism. Lastly, Russell’s view that there is no place for religion in Hume’s philosophy comes from the suggestion that Hume’s *Treatise*, in effect, represents a book on atheism. Russell’s reason for claiming this is that Hume’s system of morals (i.e. secular morality) is essentially naturalistic, which renders religion superfluous and unnecessary. In other words, “Hume provides a clear, positive alternative to Christian morality”. Hence, Russell asserts “the alternative scheme Hume presents in the *Treatise* may well be described as a godless worldview.”²⁸ Can it be inferred, however, that Hume did not allow a place for religion on the grounds that his project for constructing a system of morals in a godless world had no need of this? If this assumption is to be logically justified, it must first proceed by ascertaining whether Hume’s science of man in relation to morality is intended to establish an atheistic system. In other words, the legitimacy of Russell’s claim depends on whether Hume is a methodological or a metaphysical naturalist.²⁹

With respect to this issue, Russell seems to regard Hume as a metaphysical naturalist. However, contrary to Russell’s interpretation, Hume does not appear to be a metaphysical naturalist in the *Treatise* wherein the main philosophical concern seems not to reside in whether metaphysical beings exist, but how beliefs come about in the first instance, a viewpoint which is illustrated in the following:

²⁷ Millican (2002, p. 39).

²⁸ “Bishop Warburton, who dogged Hume for the right, reasons but with inadequate weapons, detected Hume’s intentions with a perception sharpened by dislike: the design of the ‘Natural History’, he wrote darkly, is ‘to establish naturalism, a species of atheism, instead of religion.’ No reader of Hume’s essay will be inclined to discount Warburton’s suspicion” (Gay 1976, p. 409).

²⁹ Pennock defines the methodological naturalist as one who “does not make a commitment directly to a picture of what exists in the world, but rather to a set of methods as a reliable way to find out about the world—typically the methods of the natural sciences, and perhaps extensions that are continuous with them—and indirectly to what those methods discover” (Pennock 2001, p.84).

He [the skeptic] must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. We may well ask, What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body? but 'tis in vain to ask, Whether there be body or not? (*Treatise*, p. 187)

From this passage, it is obvious that Hume is not a metaphysical naturalist who denies that there is anything beyond blind laws working on inert matter, but a methodological one who states that for the purpose of doing science nothing but law will be entertained, yet who recognized that there might be more to fact or meaning. Hume's preference for methodological naturalism is also illustrated in his attitude towards skepticism. In this regard, Hume replies to the charge of being an extreme skeptic (Pyrrhonian) in *LFG*:

The Doctrine of the *Pyrrhonians* or *Sceptiks* have been regarded in all Ages as Principles of mere Curiosity, or a kind of *Jeux d'esprit*, without any influence on a Man's steady Principles or Conduct in Life. In Reality, a Philosopher who affects to doubt of the Maxims of *common Reason*, and even of his *Senses*, declares sufficiently that he is not in earnest, and that he intends not to advance an Opinion which he would recommend as Standards of Judgment and Action. All he means by these Scruples is to abate the Pride of *mere human Reasoners*, by showing them, that even with regard to Principles which seem the clearest, and which they are necessitated from the strongest Instincts of Nature to embrace, they are not able to attain a full consistence and absolute Certainty (*LFG*, p. 116).

Here Hume's reply centers on three points. Firstly, Hume distance himself from the charge of being a Pyrrhonian or extreme skeptic, referred to as no more than mere curiosity, which has no significant impact on human life. Secondly, he delineates those features of such skepticism that serves to separate it from life, viz. the claim of doubting the maxims of both common reason and one's own senses. Thirdly, he emphasizes the underlying thrust or purpose of the skeptic's project which he accepts. Indeed, the role of skepticism in Hume's work is directed precisely to the task of abating the pride of human reason by showing that it is not able to achieve an absolute certainty even with respect to its clearest principles and which we are led to embrace by the strongest necessity that are derived from the natural instincts. In other words, the underlying purpose of the skeptic is to encourage us to attend to the principles of human nature which has, even if it has not been recognized because of the pride of human reason, actually exerted a significant impact on human life.

The alternative scheme Hume presents in the *Treatise* corresponds precisely with the underlying purpose of his skeptical outlook. However, Russell's suggestion that Hume's *Treatise* is no more than an atheistic project goes beyond the scope of Hume's actual skepticism. Even if Hume's system of morals renders religion superfluous and unneces-

sary, it does not directly lead to a “godless worldview” or atheism. As a true skeptic, Hume would concur with Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* who states “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”³⁰ Thus, Hume refers to skepticism as “philosophy in this careless manner” in the *Treatise* as follows:

The conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so overwhelm'd with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it. A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them (*Treatise*, p. 273).

According to Baier, the pursuit of philosophy in such a careless manner is “to be carefree and liberated from all compulsions, including the compulsion to pursue the theoretical details of their own philosophy.”³¹ Certainly, taking a particular worldview beyond the limit of reason is nothing but the compulsion from which Hume wishes to be liberated. Seen from this perspective, it is apparent that to view Hume as a metaphysical naturalist who is confident of his own worldview is to maintain that Hume placed too much confidence in human reason. However, this clearly runs against the intention of Hume’s skeptical philosophy concerning reducing the pride of human reason.

Conclusion. By leaving open the possibility of a deistically based religion, Hume eventually came to be seen as an heretic in the eyes of orthodox Christians during the time of Hume, whereas to the unbelievers he was regarded as a fideist. However, I am persuaded of Hume’s sincerity when he states:

They throw on me even the Reproach of Papist; an Imputation, which I never imagin'd I should have merited. From accusing me of believing nothing, they now charge me with believing everything. I hope you will be perswaded, that the Truth lyes in the middle betwixt these Accusations.³²

As Hume says, the truth, it appears, is to be found somewhere in the middle of these accusations. Hume was thereby neither a heretic nor a fideist, but a skeptic with regard to religion.

In a letter to Francis Hutcheson written in 1739, Hume put forward an important question which hints at the latter’s attitude towards religion:

³⁰ Wittgenstein (1951, p. 189).

³¹ Baier (1991, p. 2).

³² Hume (1954, p. 231).

For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this life or for the next? For himself or for his Maker?³³

Undoubtedly, Hume's philosophy of encouraging a love of every day life, rather than the uncertain and imaginary joys of happiness to be found in heaven, would seem bizarre to Hume's contemporaries who had not experienced a deistically based religion such as Confucianism. Hume, as a religious philosopher, however, was able to accept a deistically based religion similar to that of Asians who had lived with the tradition of Confucianism for hundreds of years. Moreover, instead of persisting to support a deistic religion that the masses were unable to accept due to a universal propensity to refer to sense and imagination,³⁴ Hume, as a philosopher of common life, preferred to endorse the Church of England as a way of realizing a compromise between a deistic religion and orthodox religion, or the ideal and the real. It is for this obvious reason that the views of those early critics who had labeled Hume's philosophy as a form of "atheism" or as "irreligion" need to be dismissed as either intolerant or overzealous in their religious beliefs and were thus unable to understand the true significance of Hume's philosophical outlook.³⁵

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³³ Hume (1932, p. 33).

³⁴ "The Frailties of our Nature mingle themselves with everything, in which we are emply'd; and no human Institution will ever reach perfection. The idea of an Infinite Mind, the Author of the Universe seems at first Sight to require a Worship absolutely pure, simple, unadorned; without Rites, Institutions, Ceremonies; even without Temples, Priests, on verbal Prayer & Supplication" (Mossner 1954, p. 306).

³⁵ "Many of our own contemporaries have denied that the label 'atheism' fits the *Treatise* and have suggested that Hume's early critics used this label because they were intolerant bigots and religious fanatics. The fact is, however, that by and large, our own contemporaries have failed to recognize and appreciate properly the considerable extent of Hume's irreligious aims and objectives in this work" (*RHT*, p. 289).

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