

Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to

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# Hume

## on Religion

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ROUTLEDGE



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## Introduction

Hume's life, his philosophy of religion, and his influence

### Life

David Hume was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 26 April 1711, and died there sixty-five years later, on 25 August 1776. In an autobiographical essay, 'My Own Life', written shortly before his death, Hume tells us that, on both sides, he came of a 'good' family (MOL: 3). The family was related to the earl of Home, although not itself of the aristocracy. The Humes were country gentry, fairly comfortably off, but 'not rich' (MOL: 3). Upon their father's death, in 1713, Hume's older brother, John, inherited the family estate, while Hume himself and his sister, Katherine, each received a modest annuity. Knowing from an early age that his inheritance would not be enough to support him, Hume saw that he would need to earn a living, and money was to worry him on and off until he was almost forty.

The family estate, Ninewells, which was not large, was in Berwickshire, near Berwick-on-Tweed, close to the English border. Hume spent much of his childhood there, receiving a good education by tutors



hired to teach his brother and himself. As a boy, Hume was well read: ‘I . . . was seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments’ (MOL: 3). By his own description, he was a sober and industrious boy, with a ‘studious disposition’ (MOL: 3). Hume was raised in the Presbyterian Church, the established Church of Scotland, which, at the time, represented a severe and censorious form of Calvinism. His biographer, E.C. Mossner, tells us that the young Hume was quite religious and that he accepted without question such doctrines as original sin, predestination, and the total depravity of human nature.

Despite this early devotion, Hume lost his faith quite young, either as a student at the University of Edinburgh, 1722 to 1725–6, or shortly thereafter. A few months before his death, Hume told James Boswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson (1709–84), that ‘he never had entertained any belief in religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke’ (Boswell 1947: 76). That was in his early teens, while enrolled at the University of Edinburgh. It may be a bit of an exaggeration that reading those philosophers – John Locke (1632–1704) and Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) – was the sole or principal cause of Hume’s loss of faith, yet reading them at a time when his religious conviction was wavering undoubtedly both sped and shaped the collapse of his faith. But, possible overstatement notwithstanding, the remark to Boswell also shows us that Hume’s abandonment of religious belief had a pronounced intellectual dimension. Mossner puts the two points together as follows:

it is abundantly clear that the youthful Hume relinquished his religious beliefs gradually over the course of years rather than immediately upon reading Locke and Clarke. And it is also clear that those religious beliefs were relinquished under philosophical pressure – that Hume reasoned himself out of religion.

(Mossner 1954: 64)

There is also an ironic aspect to Hume’s point that it was upon reading Locke and Clarke that he lost his faith, inasmuch as both of those philosophers believed a convincing case could be made out for the existence of a deity. At any rate, in spite of his loss of faith, Hume

remained very interested in religion, and, in the words of the Hume scholar, J.C.A. Gaskin, ‘wrote more about religion than about any other single philosophical subject’ (Gaskin 1988: 1).

Hume’s mature attitude to religion was not benign. From his adolescence onwards he had a strong antipathy to the grim and rigid Presbyterianism that had prevailed in Scotland during his youth and in which he had received his own religious upbringing, as well as to Catholicism, which he saw as a superstition (EHU: 51). In addition, he had a lifelong distaste for, and distrust of, what he saw as a mixture of zeal and hypocrisy widespread among the devout, or at least among those professing to be devout. His particular term of disparagement for this phenomenon, borrowed from Locke, was ‘enthusiasm’. In Boswell’s last conversation with Hume, the biographer quotes him to say that, ‘when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious’ (Boswell 1947: 76).

In his late teens, with university life already behind him, Hume had an insight that would change his life. It was the concept of a new, comprehensive, and fundamental system of philosophy. The cornerstone of this new system would be Hume’s introduction of ‘the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects,’ as the sub-title of his first book, his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), tells it. In essence, Hume believed he had discovered a radically new way of understanding human nature. As he would develop his theory, first in the *Treatise*, and then subsequently in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), a human being is less a creature of reason than of feeling and habit. It was a theory having the potential to cause an intellectual revolution. For, if true, it would overturn the basis of self-understanding that had prevailed from ancient times, namely, human nature understood as first and foremost rational.

This turn to experimentalism in the human and social sciences – our present-day equivalent of Hume’s ‘moral subjects’ – was modelled on Isaac Newton’s (1642–1727) great success the previous century in providing a fundamental and comprehensive experimentalist account of physical nature. It was the opening up to Hume’s imagination of what he called a whole ‘new scene of thought’. In a letter, he later described his vision as follows:



after much study and reflection on this [new medium by which truth might be established], at last, when I was about 18 years of age, there seemed to be opened up to me a whole new scene of thought, which transported me beyond measure, and made me, with an ardour natural to young men, throw up every other pleasure or business to apply entirely to it.

(Mossner 1954: 65)

Presently, we will see something of the Newtonian influence on Hume's thinking in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

Hume entertained very high hopes for his *Treatise of Human Nature*, expecting it would both be well received and revolutionize philosophical thinking. The expectation that it would, indeed that it could, be both of those things is, perhaps, testimony to some naïveté on Hume's part, for intellectually revolutionary works are rarely welcomed by those whose thinking they deem, or show, to be obsolete. His expectations so high, the book's reception was a bitter disappointment. In a passage that is often quoted, Hume described the book's initial impact this way: 'Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell *dead-born from the press*; without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots' (MOL: 4).

Indeed, in one respect, response to the book was even worse than that. Not only did it not change the philosophical outlook of its readers at the time, but, six years after publication, it was the basis for significant harm to its author's interests.

That came about as follows. In 1745, Hume was a candidate for a professorship of philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. But he was accused by the principal of the university, William Wishart, also professor of divinity there, of heresy, scepticism, and atheism, charges based on Wishart's reading of the *Treatise*. To his very great disappointment, Hume did not get the job. Six years later, in 1751, Hume would try again for a professorship, this time of logic at Glasgow University, but he was denied then too. Thus it was that Scotland's greatest philosopher never succeeded in winning appointment to a university professorship in his own country, or, for that matter, anywhere else.

Hume had a second career as a diplomat and government official, in addition to his life of scholarship. This began in 1746, not long after his rejection at the University of Edinburgh, when he was offered, and quickly accepted, the post of secretary to General St Clair who, at the time, was planning a military expedition to the eastern provinces of Canada. Hume spent the next three years as a diplomat in General St Clair's service, first in his military campaign in France, the plan to fight against French forces in Canada having been called off, and then in a diplomatic mission in Italy. One effect of Hume's second career was to solve his hitherto chronic financial problem. Returning to England in 1748, he pronounced himself financially secure: 'my appointments, with my frugality, had made me reach a fortune, which I called independent, though most of my friends were inclined to smile when I said so: in short I was now master of near a thousand pound' (Mossner 1954: 220). Hume's second career thus aided his first in an important respect, for he was now free, at the age of thirty-seven, to devote himself to a life of reading and study, without worrying over-much about how to maintain a sufficient income.

In the early 1750s, Hume circulated portions of his recently-drafted *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* among his friends, and was widely advised in strong terms to suppress the book. Fearing the effect upon his life and reputation of an anticipated hostile reaction to the book, Hume took the advice. He returned to the manuscript ten years later in 1761, and revised it again in 1776, shortly before his death. Although withheld from publication for prudential reasons, Hume was eager that his *Dialogues* appear in print, and to that end he specified in his will that, within two years of his death, the book must be published. It was eventually guided into print by Hume's nephew and namesake, as both Hume's long-time publisher, William Strahan, and his long-time friend, Adam Smith (1723–90), the famous economic theorist, were, for their own reasons of prudence, reluctant to arrange for publication.

In the early 1760s, approximately fifteen years after his diplomatic service on the staff of General St Clair, Hume returned to that second career. For three years, until 1766, he served as secretary to the British Embassy in Paris, a period in which he enjoyed many contacts with French intellectuals, notable among them Voltaire

(1694–1778) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). Hume returned to London in 1766 to be Under Secretary of State, a post he held for two years. Recalling his rejection, twenty years before, for a professorship at the University of Edinburgh, and recalling especially the reasons for that rejection, we may see a measure of poetic justice in his appointment now to be Under Secretary of State, for among Hume's responsibilities was appointment and promotion of church authorities in Scotland. In 1768 Hume retired to Scotland, famous, prosperous, his ambition to be a man of letters and, in that respect, of 'reputation', realized.

What kind of person was David Hume? By all contemporary accounts, his mind was quick, nimble, sharp and subtle, traits that at first, apparently, struck many as surprising. This was because, in body, by early middle age, he had become heavy and fat, with a face and eyes that, in repose, were dull and lifeless. For, then as now, we tend to associate sharpness of mind with sharpness of features, and clumsiness of body with that of mind. Hume was gregarious, funny, witty, by every account a splendid conversationalist, and he was popular among his friends and acquaintances. He enjoyed good conversation, the company of both sexes (although he never married), food, and wine. Hume described himself as, 'a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions' (MOL: 9). Adam Smith, in a letter written shortly after Hume's death, described him this way,

his temper, indeed, seemed to be more happily balanced . . . than that perhaps of any other man I have ever known . . . I have always considered him . . . as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.

(Smith 1947: 247–8)

Hume's demeanour and behaviour in the months before his death are a good illustration of Adam Smith's description. In the first half of 1776, suffering greatly from colitis, and possibly cancer, Hume knew that he would not live long. Despite that, Boswell detected in him no terror of death, no trace of the fear of the unknown that, twenty

years earlier, in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), Hume had identified as a chief source of religious belief. In Boswell's words, 'it surprised me to find him talking of different matters with a tranquility of mind and a clearness of head which few men possess at any time' (Boswell 1947: 78). In short, it seems that, in both good times and bad, Hume embodied many of the pagan virtues he so admired; temperance, prudence, courage, rectitude untied to any kind of supernaturalism, sympathy, and cheerfulness in the face of the inevitable. Consistent with this, at the end of his life no less than before, Hume appears to have had none of the grim joylessness of the strict Presbyterianism in which he was raised.

## Hume on religion

### *Philosopher, historian, psychologist, anthropologist of religion*

It is principally for its seminal contributions to the philosophy of religion that Hume's thinking on religious topics occupies an important place in the world of ideas today. His most extensive philosophical examination of fundamental religious ideas occurs in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, thus making that book his major contribution to the philosophy of religion. But the *Dialogues* is not Hume's only philosophical work on the subject of religion. In addition, two famous sections of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, published just three years before the first draft of the *Dialogues* in 1751, deal with important topics in the philosophy of religion and one of them anticipates aspects of Hume's thinking in the *Dialogues*. Furthermore, several of Hume's essays, 'Of Suicide' and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', for instance, also deal philosophically with religious questions.

But Hume's philosophical writings on religion do not comprise the whole of his work on the topic. For he was also a psychologist, anthropologist and historian of religion, as his book, *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), clearly shows. Furthermore, his six-volume *History of England* (1754–62) emphasizes the role of religion at important points in English history. Parenthetically, Hume was more famous in his own time for that *History of England* than for any of

his philosophical books, and it was to remain the standard work in its field until well into the nineteenth century.

The principal topic in *The Natural History of Religion* is the origin of religious belief, with Hume's approach combining history, psychology, and anthropology, as I said. Essentially his thinking is that the monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all derive from polytheistic religions (NHR: 135, 159). The effect was to suggest, controversially, that the single-deity religions are further removed from original religious feeling than those countenancing multiple gods, the pagan religions of ancient Greece and Rome, for instance. In addition to that historical claim about the origins of religion, in the same book Hume makes a controversial psychological point on the subject. It is that religious belief, whether polytheistic or monotheistic, traces in the end to dread of the unknown (NHR: 176), a point he repeats in the *Dialogues* (DNR: 128). It is a point in which we may see a foreshadow of an idea that would be made famous over a century later by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939).

From time to time in this study of the *Dialogues*, we will see that Hume's other writings in the philosophy of religion, and also his non-philosophical writings on the subject, shed a useful sidelight on aspects of his thinking in the *Dialogues*. But, by and large, it is the *Dialogues* alone and in its own right that we will concentrate on here.

## Hume's philosophy of religion

The main theme in Hume's philosophy of religion is the relationship between faith and reason. Is religious belief supported by reason, and, if it is, how well? Or does the weight of evidence go against it? And if it does, how decisively? Or is the subject matter of religious belief beyond the scope of reason altogether? Due largely to Hume's influence, these questions shape philosophy of religion to this day.

***Basic features of Hume's philosophy of religion: evidentialism,  
deism, irony, and scepticism***

### Evidentialism

There is an important assumption in Hume's philosophical thinking on religion. It is that religious belief is rational if and only if there is sufficient evidence to support it, and that, otherwise, it is not. In a more general form – *any* belief is rational only in direct proportion to the balance of evidence in its favour – the assumption is fundamental in Hume's approach to all philosophical inquiry. He puts the point best himself: 'A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence' (EHU: 110). This view is often called evidentialism, and because of his commitment to it we may classify Hume as an evidentialist.

But while he is among the philosophers most associated with evidentialism, Hume neither originated the theory nor brought it to prominence in modern philosophy, which is to say, philosophy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, it underlies René Descartes's (1596–1650) policy of accepting no belief whatsoever, not even the belief that physical objects exist, without first having an iron-clad assurance of sufficient evidence for it. Furthermore, among British philosophers who influenced Hume, the evidentialist position was emphasized by Locke as a basic principle of any belief system worth taking seriously: 'he governs his assent right and places it as he should who, in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves according as reason directs him' (Locke 1961, Vol. 2: 280).

There are significant differences among the three philosophers just mentioned, Hume, Locke, and Descartes, including differences in their respective versions of evidentialism. But those differences need not detain us here, as, for purposes of our discussion of the evidentialist strain in Hume's philosophy of religion in the *Dialogues*, the generic description of evidentialism that I gave above will suffice.

Evidentialism, the proportioning of assent to evidence, has a lot to recommend it. It reflects our deep intuition that we ought to be able to back up our knowledge-claims with evidence, and it is a good safeguard against superstition. Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), Karl Popper (1902–94), and A.J. Ayer (1910–89) immediately come to mind from

among the many prominent and important recent philosophers committed to it. But there is also serious opposition to the position. In Hume's own day, it was strongly contested by his fellow Scottish philosopher, Thomas Reid (1710–96), although evidentialism continued to be the majority view among philosophers at the time. More recently, it has been attacked by such analytical philosophers as G.E. Moore (1873–1958) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), by the phenomenological philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and by various theistic philosophers, for instance, the American philosopher of religion, Alvin Plantinga (1932–). But other prominent philosophers of religion continue to take an evidentialist approach to their subject; for instance, J.L. Mackie (1917–81), William L. Rowe (1931–), and Richard Swinburne (1934–). In short, evidentialism is a controversial subject in philosophy nowadays, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the philosophy of religion.

Hume weighs the evidence for and against religious belief in three interlocking ways: first, he considers whether the subject matter of religion comes within the scope of reason at all; second, he tests the strength of the case for religious belief; and third, he examines religion's ability to defend itself against a potentially fatal line of criticism. As these three subjects are our principal topics in this book, a preliminary word now about each one: first, the question whether religious belief belongs to reason at all introduces the wider question of scepticism, a subject that is omnipresent in the *Dialogues*, and about which more in a moment; second, the principal theistic supporting argument that Hume examines is the design argument for the existence of a deity, and the bulk of the *Dialogues* is devoted to that topic; and third, the main argument against the rationality of religious belief is an argument from the existence of widespread horrendous evil in a world that is supposedly made by a supremely good, knowing, and powerful deity, this argument being discussed in Parts X and XI of the *Dialogues*.

## Deism

The outcome of the whole discussion, and Hume's final position in the philosophy of religion, is both deflationary and ironic. It is deflationary

in that the strongest religious position he is prepared to accept on the total evidence is a very weak form of deism. But even his acceptance of that is hedged with conditions. Briefly, deism is the view that there is an original supernatural source of the universe, but, while this source is perhaps a personal agent of some sort, with a mind somehow resembling ours, there is not sufficient reason to think such a being is all good, or even overall good, or cares about us.

But Hume does not accept even as much as this generic form of deism. For he is convinced that the facts of evil in the world give us good reason, not just to not endorse, but to *reject* the idea that the supernatural source of the universe, if any, is good or cares about us. Furthermore, deism gives us no particular reason to believe in any kind of life after death for human beings, or in any divine plan for goodness to triumph over evil in the end. Lastly, it gives us no reason to engage in religious practices of any kind, to make prayers, or to worship.

### Irony

Hume's final, weakly deistic, position is deeply ironic. This is because, while inclining towards a weak form of deism, he seriously doubts that we can ever find a sufficiently favourable balance of evidence to justify accepting *any* religious position. His irony, then, is that at the same time that he tends to weakly accept a weak form of the religious hypothesis, a slim and conditional deism, 'attenuated deism' as J.C.A. Gaskin aptly describes it (Gaskin 1988: 7), he undercuts that very tendency itself. And that is the essence of irony, namely, stating something in such a way as to be deliberately self-defeating; that is, to propose something in such a way that, at the very same time it is put forth, the proposition undercuts itself. Thus Hume, on the one hand, inclines to a weak form of deism, yet, as we will see, at the same time he gives us good reason to think that the very debate within which he inclines to deism is incapable of answering its own fundamental questions. What he gives on the one hand, he takes back with the other. That irony, the self-undercutting of the positive side of his philosophy of religion, reflects one of the deepest, most important, and far-reaching aspects of Hume's philosophical thinking, namely, his



scepticism. Briefly, then, an introductory word about scepticism, a topic central to my tale in this book.

### Scepticism

Scepticism, which comes in different forms and strengths, is essentially the view that, apart from the merely formal truths of logic and mathematics, on the one hand, and the indubitable contents of our own immediate consciousness, on the other, we are incapable of knowledge. The core of it is the view that all claims to knowledge of the physical universe are either false or unjustified. The particular form of it that Hume comes to in his mature work, which he calls ‘mitigated scepticism’ (EHU: 161), holds that, in the last analysis, it is not reason or evidence that sustains our most basic beliefs about what is real, but custom and habit (EHU: 159). On that point, recall ‘the whole new scene of thought’ that, as a young man, opened up to Hume, and which both contained the essence of his proposed revolution in ideas and foretold the direction of his life’s work as a philosopher.

According to the mitigated form of scepticism that Hume espouses, we cannot provide good evidence for our basic beliefs about the world or for our system of such beliefs, but that does not mean that we should, or, for that matter, could, abandon them. On Hume’s theory, such beliefs, for instance our belief that material objects exist, are ‘instinctual’, by which he means that they belong to our very nature. Hume puts the point this way in his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time . . . [We] must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho’ [we] cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to [our] choice.

(THN: 187)

Hume does not mean our specifically rational nature. Instead, his idea is that such beliefs belong to our very nature as beings who walk and eat and play, that is, to our animal nature, and we could not function

in the world at all without them. Such beliefs lie too deep for evidence, and they are presupposed in all searches for evidence: ‘we must take [them] for granted in all our reasonings’ (THN: 187). We hold such beliefs pre-conceptually and pre-reflectively; that is, instinctively, as do other animals (EHU: 106). The framework of such basic beliefs marks the limits of evidence, and thereby of Hume’s commitment to evidentialism. And by the same token it is an important reminder of the limits of sceptical doubt.

An obvious question to ask at this point is whether some *religious* beliefs are natural or instinctual too, after the fashion of our unbreakable conviction that physical objects exist or that there are causal connections among them. And some theistic philosophers *do* maintain this, or something very close to it, about certain fundamental religious convictions. The aforementioned Alvin Plantinga is a case in point. For Hume, though, the answer to the question is unequivocally ‘no’. On that, more later.

Scepticism comes up right at the start of the *Dialogues*, where the two main characters, the theist Cleanthes and the sceptic Philo, the latter being the principal spokesman in the *Dialogues* for Hume himself, clash over it. That initial disagreement is about the very genuineness of scepticism, whether it is a serious position or just a sham, that is to say, only a mischievous pretence by clever but shallow naysayers; and this initial disagreement frames the whole subsequent conversation about religion in the book. It would be hard, then, to overstate the importance of scepticism to Hume’s thinking about the rationality of religious belief. And so it would be hard to exaggerate its importance in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

Hume’s scepticism is often grouped with the kind of scepticism that, ironically, came to prominence in the mid-seventeenth century largely as a consequence of Descartes’s efforts to refute it, yet a better ancestral home for Humean scepticism is in Cicero’s (106–43 BC) conception of the position. And Hume himself says as much in Section XII of the *Enquiry*, where he provides a useful taxonomy of sceptical positions (EHU: 149–65). For present purposes, it is unnecessary to examine that taxonomy, yet the Ciceronian model of scepticism that Hume uses for his own position is a useful reminder

that, while indeed a modernist, he also has deep intellectual and cultural roots in the ancient world, especially ancient Rome. Gaskin puts the point well in the ‘Introduction’ to his edition of the *Dialogues*: ‘To an unusual extent, Hume’s intellectual home is the humanism of the great classical authors rather than what he came to regard as the narrow and life-contorting dogmas of Christianity’ (Gaskin 1998: xxi–xxii).

### ***An evidentialist, sceptical, ironic deist***

Evidentialism, scepticism, irony, and deism are the keys to Hume’s philosophical thinking about religion. But there are different ways of finding a balance among them, and those differences will affect the nuance, although perhaps not the substance, of the interpretation we put on Hume’s philosophy of religion. For instance, if we say that, in the last analysis, he is an evidentialist, sceptical, ironic deist, that shades in a somewhat different direction to saying of him that he is an evidentialist, ironic, deistic sceptic, although the differences are not profound. And so it would go for other combinations.

My own view is that, considered specifically as a philosopher of religion, the first of the two characterizations just given is a better fit than any other. This aligns my reading of Hume as a philosopher of religion with Gaskin’s and with Norman Kemp Smith’s, two of the most renowned scholars of Hume’s philosophy of religion, both of whom see him as having been, in the last analysis, a deist of a certain, albeit very weak, kind. But my representation of Hume as a sceptical deist raises a question as, at face value, scepticism and deism pull against each other. After all, deism is a substantive position, whereas scepticism seems to undercut commitment to substantive positions as a matter of principle. In Chapter 10, though, when I come back to this characterization of Hume’s final position, we will see that, if there is tension between his deism and his scepticism, it is low-level tension.

There is disagreement among Hume scholars about another aspect of his final position as a philosopher of religion as well, and serious arguments are available to support the idea that Hume is not

a deist at all, but a theist, or an atheist, an agnostic, or a fideist. Briefly, let us look at those possibilities.

### ***Theism, atheism, agnosticism, and fideism***

The deistic conception of a supernatural designer and creator of the world falls a long way short of what many religious believers in the Judeo-Christian tradition think of as God, belief in whom is the essence of theism.

#### **Theism**

According to theism, there exists, and could not possibly not exist, a personal creator and designer of the universe. This creator is good, indeed perfectly good, in his or her essential nature, and cares about us individually. Furthermore, this being has power, intelligence, and knowledge without limit. The capitalized form of the word ‘god’ is reserved for this being, the God of theism. From time to time, I will refer to this position as standard theism, in order to differentiate it from a weaker, narrower variation on it that Hume discusses in the *Dialogues* (Part XI especially, but the ground is readied in Part II). I shall refer to this narrower version as limited theism.

Limited theism commits to a personal deity who is good and cares about us, who is immensely powerful and knowledgeable, but whose goodness, power, and knowledge are less than perfect or infinite. The fundamental difference between this limited theistic conception of divinity and the deistic conception is that neither goodness (to any degree) nor caring about us are attributed to the god of deism. This does not mean that those properties are necessarily denied of the deistic concept of god, but, rather, that the evidence is insufficient to warrant their attribution. Thus, as we saw before, to *deny* such attributes to the deity, as Hume will in the context of the problem of evil, would be a further weakening of the already weak concept of deity to be found in deism. More importantly, perhaps, that denial means that Hume’s version of deism is not open to theism. That is, it could not, even in theory, be self-consistently developed into either limited or standard theism. Thus, Hume is no theist.

## Atheism

Atheism comes in different forms, the strongest denying *any* kind of deity. But the term is also commonly used to mean denial of the God of theism specifically, thereby relativizing atheism to standard theism. By virtue of his acceptance of a weak form of deism, Hume is no atheist in the strongest sense of the term. Thus it would be false and misleading to call him an atheist, plain and simple. But neither is that the last word on the subject.

In Parts X and XI of the *Dialogues*, we see Hume prepared to grant that there is no formal contradiction between evil and the God of standard theism, '[their] consistence is not absolutely denied' (DNR: 107). None the less, he is convinced that the facts of evil in the world warrant denying various moral attributes to the deity, for instance, perfect goodness and benevolence, or caring about us individually. But those are attributes that, in standard theism, are essential to God. Thus, as he denies those of any deity that might be warranted on the total evidence, Hume *is* an atheist in the sense of the term reserved for denying the God of standard theism. In that context, Gaskin aptly describes him as a 'moral atheist', by which he means that Hume rejects the standard theistic attribution of moral qualities to the deity. The distinguished English philosopher, Bernard Williams (1929–), puts the point well: 'he . . . was certainly an atheist by, say, Christian standards: about the non-existence of the Christian God, it seems clear that he felt no doubts' (Williams 1963: 77).

We may extend the point to cover limited theism too, for, as I said above, Hume is no theist. Standard theism sees the moral attributes of the deity as infinite, thereby giving one kind of meaning to the terms 'perfect goodness', 'perfect justice', and so on. But the limited theism that Cleanthes advocates interprets those terms more narrowly than that. Thus, for instance, in Part XI Cleanthes will portray the deity in limited theism as 'finitely perfect, though far exceeding mankind' (DNR: 105). But Hume's moral atheism covers finite perfection as well as infinite. In short, he is an atheist relative to all forms of theism; that is the significance of his moral atheism.

In sum, then, Hume is a deist, in one sense of the term, and at the same time an atheist, in one sense of that term. Both of those terms,

along with ‘sceptic’, ‘evidentialist’, and ‘ironist’ are needed to do justice to Hume’s thinking on religion.

### Agnosticism

Agnosticism is another term that is used in different senses by different thinkers. However, it is best and most commonly understood relative to both standard theism and atheism, as a position equidistant between them. As such, agnosticism neither affirms nor denies God, on the grounds that the evidence is insufficient to justify a verdict either way. Among Hume scholars, James Noxon, the author of a well-respected book on the development of Hume’s philosophy, classifies him as an agnostic (Noxon 1966: 361).

Because agnosticism is the view that we do not, or cannot, know or justifiably believe whether God exists or not, it would not be unusual to see it as, in practice, dovetailing with scepticism with regard to religious belief. So understood, I do not object to calling Hume an agnostic. But, notwithstanding that, there are two good reasons to resist classifying Hume as agnostic. The first is that, while agnosticism is equidistant from both standard theism and atheism, Hume’s thinking is not. As we saw, he sees the balance of evidence to be distinctly unfavourable to standard theism in particular. The second reason not to classify Hume as an agnostic is his acceptance of a very limited form of deism. And agnosticism, with its connotations of a position that is essentially and strictly non-committal insofar as the existence of a deity is concerned, is likely to mislead us in regard to Hume’s final position on that.

### Fideism

Lastly, there is fideism, a position that draws some strength from Hume’s work, but that is not endorsed or intended by him, notwithstanding Philo’s seeming profession of it at the very end of the *Dialogues* (DNR: 130). Fideism is the view that religious belief, although unable to be justified by reason, is justified by faith alone. It is a position often associated with the Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) and, on a certain interpretation of Wittgenstein,

with some of his religious followers too. Fideism is proposed by the theist, Demea, at the start of Part II of the *Dialogues* (DNR: 43–4) and reiterated by him towards the end of Part III (DNR: 57–9), but then, at face value oddly, he offers a proof of God’s existence in Part IX, thereby adopting a position seemingly incompatible with his initial view. In Chapter 8, I will suggest a way of possibly reconciling these seemingly conflicting aspects of Demea’s position. As noted, Philo, the principal representative in the *Dialogues* of Hume’s own thinking, claims to endorse a fideistic position at the very end of the book. We will see in Chapter 10, though, that the claim is insincere.

Without intending to do so, Hume’s thinking aids fideism, inasmuch as he subjects the rational basis of religious belief to severe criticism, without, in the end, refuting it. The effect is that faith, of some sort, is left standing, but without much rational or evidential support, thus opening the door to a fideistic interpretation of it. If Hume is right in his attacks on religion’s philosophical support, we may see fideists as, in a sense, making a virtue of necessity.

How can we be sure that Hume was not himself a fideist? The reason is that fideism presupposes faith, an existential commitment either to the God of standard theism or to a deity of some other kind, and Hume did not have faith in that sense. He accepted a very weak form of the deistic hypothesis, but solely as a ‘plain philosophical . . . proposition’ (DNR: 129), heavily hedged. What remains of religion for Hume is reason, together with a feeling that order in nature may not be accidental, but no faith. Hume’s deism is completely without significance for morality or anything else bearing on the conduct of life; there is no existential dimension in it at all (DNR: 129).

A final, and I hope not complicating, word about fideism. While Hume is no fideist in the usual sense of the term, there is something to be said for thinking of his work on knowledge and belief at large – his epistemology, that is – as amounting in the end to a kind of secular fideism. I am suggesting that a strictly metaphorical use of the word ‘fideism’ may be useful to characterize Hume’s view that certain fundamental beliefs, not including any religious beliefs, hold independently of any evidence, whether for or against them. But this is secular fideism, not religious. It is a suggestion to drain the word ‘fideism’ of all religious connotations and, thus purged, to then extend

its use to those ‘instinctual’ or ‘natural’ beliefs that we earlier saw to represent the mitigating factor in Hume’s scepticism. At any rate, whatever the merits of taking licence with the word ‘fideism’, back now to the subject at hand.

If we ask whether Hume believed in God, the answer is ‘no, but’. He did not believe in the God of standard theism, or in any variation thereon in limited theism, but he did not rule out all concepts of deity, and neither was he non-committal on the subject. But let us remember that Hume was not eager to make his religious views crystal clear, that ambiguity suited his purposes, and this creates difficulty in definitively pinning down his final position on religion. I will come back to this deliberate ambiguity in the Afterword.

### ***A basic distinction: Hume’s Fork***

Hume draws a fundamental distinction between two kinds of propositions or beliefs that he regards as mutually exclusive. The distinction is crucial in his philosophy of religion, and so it will be useful to have it before us from the outset. In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, he makes the point this way;

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain . . . Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe . . . Matters of fact . . . are not ascertained in the same manner . . . The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible.

(EHU: 25)

Propositions of the former kind are known to be true or false *a priori*, that is, prior to any experience, and in that sense they are completely independent of all experience. By contrast, the truth or falsity of the latter kind of propositions are known *a posteriori*, that is, after (posterior to), or on the basis of, experience. And Hume believed that the best available model of *a posteriori* reasoning was Newton’s.



But what would it mean to know something absolutely and completely apart from any experience whatsoever? It may be useful to think of that along the following lines. Suppose that, in addition to its operating program, we load into a computer a set of logical and mathematical truths, and no more. That is, we load no empirical data whatever into its memory, no information about what exists in the actual world of our experience. As an example of a mathematical truth, think of the proposition, ' $7 + 5 = 12$ ', while an example of a purely logical truth would be the inference rule called *modus ponens*, namely, ' $p$  is true; if  $p$  is true, then  $q$  is true; therefore  $q$  is true'. Now, with the basics of mathematics and logic in its memory, suppose we ask the computer whether means-end order exists on purpose or whether it just happens to exist. The computer will be powerless to answer; no match will be found in its data bank for the terms 'means-end', 'order', or 'on purpose'. The computer has only *a priori* knowledge; all it knows are so-called truths of reason. It knows no matters of empirical fact, and it has no empirical 'expectations'. Nothing existing in actual reality, or, apart from contradictions, not existing there, could 'surprise' it. If we ask our computer for the sum of 7 and 5, it will answer 12. But if we ask it if there are twelve apostles, or seven seas, or five fingers on my daughter's left hand, it will be clueless. For, to answer those questions, it must know something about what exists in fact, for instance, five-fingered humans with left hands. And so, too, it would be with us if all that we knew were *a priori* truths.

Hume's point is not that, in actual practice, a human being ever has only *a priori* knowledge and no more. His point is that a human being, just from his or her store of *a priori* knowledge, would never know what to expect to happen in real life; indeed such a person would have no idea even what *could* happen in real life. Quite simply, such a person would have no notion there even *was* a real life, that is, things above and beyond mathematical and logical truths. So far as such a person would be concerned, anything at all that did not involve an outright contradiction could be true or could occur.

This distinction between the domain of the *a priori*, the world of pure mathematics and formal logic, on the one hand, and, on the other, the domain of the *a posteriori*, which is everything else, is often referred to as Hume's Fork. The name was coined by the contempo-

rary English philosopher and Hume scholar, Antony Flew (Flew 1997: 53). The distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* matters is fundamental in Hume's philosophical methodology and in his philosophy of religion, and it will come up at crucial points in this book.

### Hume's influence

To use a slang term for it, Hume's fingerprints are all over contemporary philosophy of religion. Theism's ability to cope with the problem of evil and, both related to that as well as more broadly, its ability to defend its own rationality, are central topics in philosophy of religion today. In the former case, Hume's distinction between logical and empirical forms of the problem of evil, together with his view that the latter present more vexing difficulties for theism than the former, are orthodoxies among philosophers of religion today. (We will discuss these topics in Chapter 9.) In the latter case, Hume's discussion of theism's rationality comes down to the status of evidentialism. And although, as we saw earlier, that theory has come under severe criticism of late, it remains the point of reference for much philosophical thinking about faith and reason.

A third area in contemporary philosophy of religion where Hume's legacy is strong is the traditional proofs for the existence of God. But his influence there is largely negative. By and large, the design argument has never quite recovered from Hume's attacks upon it, nor from the effects of Charles Darwin's (1809–82) theory of evolution by natural selection, roughly a century after Hume's *Dialogues*. Essentially, Darwin undercut design theorists' most important assumption, namely, that brute nature could not be self-ordering. Interestingly, in Part VIII of the *Dialogues*, we will see Hume anticipate the theory of evolution, inasmuch as we will find him there sketching out an embryonic version of just such a theory.

Although a scarcer commodity in philosophy nowadays than in pre-Humean times, design arguments are not altogether extinct. For instance, the prominent English philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne offers one. However, no version of the design argument that neglected Hume's criticisms would now be taken seriously, or deserve to be. Granting that, however, theistic strategies to deal with

Hume vary. Some current versions of the design argument address Hume head on, attempting to defeat, or at least to rebut, his criticisms, while others try largely to avoid those criticisms by modifying the ground on which the argument stands. Swinburne's argument is a good example of the former approach, while Mark Wynn's book, *God and Goodness* (1999), provides a clear instance of the latter.

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume puts religious belief on trial for its intellectual life. And religious belief has been in the dock ever since, facing essentially the same case that Hume develops in that book. That is the core of his influence in the philosophy of religion. While there is disagreement among Hume scholars about various aspects of his thought, as I mentioned, I think there would be wide agreement on his influence.