

Spectres of False Divinity

Hume's Moral Atheism

Thomas Holden

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
1. Hume's Moral Atheism	1
2. Mitigated Skepticism and Hume's Liminal Natural Theology	19
3. The Argument from Sentimentalism 1: Hume's Critique of Religious Passions	49
4. The Argument from Sentimentalism 2: Religious Passions and the Deity's Moral Status	95
5. The Argument from Motivation	115
6. The Arguments from Evil	145
7. The Arguments from Determinism	181
Conclusion	209
<i>Bibliography</i>	221
<i>Index</i>	241

1

Hume's Moral Atheism

1.1. Introduction

‘[I]f we had no certain and settled notion of the goodness and justice, and truth of GOD, he would be altogether an unintelligible being; and religion, which consists in the imitation of him, would be utterly impossible.’ Thus Archbishop John Tillotson in his popular *Sermons* (1695–1704; published posthumously), distilling a necessary condition for any religion with real implications for practice or conduct.¹ George Berkeley, Dean of Derry and later Bishop of Cloyne, endorses much the same requirement in his study of irreligion and free-thought, the 1732 dialogue *Alciphron*. ‘[A]t bottom the being of God is a point in itself of small consequence, and a man may make this concession without yielding much,’ the more cynical of Berkeley’s characters remarks. So long as the moral attributes of the deity remain in doubt, ‘nothing can be inferred from such an account of God, about conscience, worship, or religion.’² Berkeley’s other characters implicitly admit the point: without the fixed star of a just and good divinity, the bare admission that God exists offers no guidance for moral or religious practice. This view of the preconditions for a practically meaningful religion would be widely shared by the philosophers and theologians of Hume’s generation. It is invoked, for instance, by Bishop William Warburton of Gloucester,

¹ John Tillotson, *Sermons on several subjects and occasions*, 12 vols (London: 1742–4), vii. 2280. This particular sermon (‘Concerning the Perfection of God’) was first published after Tillotson’s death in 1694, in Tillotson, *Sermons*, ed. Ralph Barker, 14 vols (London: 1695–1704).

² George Berkeley, *Alciphron*, in David Berman (ed.), *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1993), 17–161: 105, 107.

the firebrand controversialist and a savage critic of Hume, in his anti-deistic polemics of the 1750s. For Warburton, since the existence of an amoral deity would have no implications for moral conduct, belief in such a being is merely the 'Ape of Religion.'³ Hume himself registers the point through his character Cleanthes, the spokesman for the traditional program of constructive natural theology in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779; published posthumously). Absent some conception of the moral attributes of the deity, Cleanthes suggests, the cosmological speculations of natural theology are for all practical purposes inert: 'For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the Deity, while the moral are still doubtful and uncertain?' (DNR 10.28).

The central claim of this essay is that Hume positively rejects the existence of a god with moral attributes: that he is (what we might call) a *moral atheist*. Whatever beliefs he might have concerning the existence or non-existence of a first cause or designer, for Hume nothing approximating to this traditional conception of the divine could possibly have moral characteristics. Hume is not merely an agnostic on this point, as might at first seem entailed by his skeptical attitude toward speculation about the divine attributes. Nor is his moral atheism merely tentative or provisional in spirit: it is not simply a probationary hypothesis hazarded from a position of little real information. Rather, Hume has what he takes to be a decisive case against the being of a god with moral attributes—an irreligious version of *via negativa* reasoning, concluding in the inconsistency of moral characteristics with the central, identifying features of the deity.

As is well known, Hume maintains in the first *Enquiry* and again in the *Dialogues* that natural theology—the program of using natural human reason to reach conclusions about the being or attributes of the deity—is quite incapable of confirming that the deity has a moral character. If there is a first cause or designer, this being 'discovers himself only by some faint traces and outlines, beyond which we have no authority to ascribe to him any attribute or perfection' (EHU 11.27). So we cannot disprove moral atheism through unaided human

³ William Warburton, *A View of Lord Bolingbroke's philosophy; in four letters to a friend. Letters first and second* (London, 1754), 69.

reason: the speculative program of natural theology fails to rule out an amoral first cause.⁴ Still, this familiar Humean thesis may seem to leave open the *possibility* that the deity has moral attributes, notwithstanding our inability to prove the point. By denying knowledge, it may even seem to make way for faith. But what this assessment misses is the fact that Hume has further arguments in hand: arguments that add up to a positive case for moral atheism. As Hume himself was quite aware, his theory of moral motivation, his determinism, and his sentimentalist metaphysics of morals all point to the exclusion of any original cause of all from the moral sphere. Not only is it quite impossible to prove that the first cause or designer has moral attributes, Hume further holds that no such being could possibly have a moral character. In this essay, I bring out this aspect of Hume's challenge to traditional theism, and examine the relationship between his case for moral atheism on the one hand, and his well-known skeptical critique of natural theology on the other. My claim is that Hume's case for moral atheism is a central plank of his naturalistic and irreligious agenda. It complements his critique of theistic metaphysics in the *Enquiry* and *Dialogues*, and threatens to rule out any practically meaningful religion—any religion at all, that is, in Tillotson's, Berkeley's, and Warburton's morally freighted sense. (I set aside the question of whether Hume accepts the existence of *any* original cause or organizing principle as beyond the scope of this essay.⁵)

In this introductory chapter I fix some basic points of terminology and set out my interpretive thesis in a little more detail. I define

⁴ On this point, see J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 53–58; Nicholas Capaldi, *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1975), 188–97; Stephen Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 279–80. For discussion of the implications of this Humean thesis for religious practice, see Simon Blackburn, 'Playing Hume's Hand,' in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds), *Religion and Hume's Legacy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 3–16.

⁵ Hume clearly holds that there is no prospect of *demonstrating* the existence of an original cause or ultimate organizing principle (T 1.3.3.1–8, 1.3.15.1, TA 11, LG 26–7, EHU 12.29, DNR 9.5–6). But most of the time he seems inclined to grant that there *is* some sort of first cause (LG 34, E 145, DNR 2.3, 11.15) or ultimate organizing principle (LG 27, 30, NHR Introduction 1, 1.5, EHU 11.11, DNR 12.6, 12.7, 12.33) behind the ordered universe. Of course, the precise meaning, basis, and purpose of these admissions deserve close interpretive scrutiny. For commentary on some of the main issues, see Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113–28; J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 74–93, 219–21.

moral atheism, identify Hume as a particularly strong sort of moral atheist (Section 1.2), and relate this doctrine to the early modern period's own ways of thinking about religion, irreligion, theism, and atheism (Section 1.3). Finally, I close out the chapter by introducing two possible large-scale objections to the interpretation of Hume as any sort of moral atheist (Section 1.4). This will help to put some important interpretive issues on the table and set the stage for my big-picture survey of Hume's overall case for divine amorality in Chapter 2.

1.2. Hume's Moral Atheism: The Interpretive Proposal

To fix my interpretive proposal and prepare the way for an examination of Hume's arguments, a more precise definition of moral atheism is required.⁶ Thus far I have characterized the position, somewhat loosely, as the denial of the existence of a god with moral attributes.⁷ But to understand just what this denial amounts to, we need to understand just what is intended by the term 'god,' and what exactly 'moral attributes' are.

First, in Hume's usage, 'God' (along with synonyms like 'the Deity' and 'the Divine Being') picks out the ultimate cause of the universe, or at least the ultimate cause of the order found in the universe. Rather than specifying its meaning by way of a list of definitive intrinsic properties (traditionally, omniscience, omnipotence, and the rest), Hume identifies the referent of 'God' in relational terms: God is the being or principle, whatsoever its intrinsic nature, that produced

⁶ J. C. A. Gaskin first introduced this term of art in the characterization of Hume's philosophy in his 'Hume, Atheism, and the "Interested Obligation" of Morality,' in David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robison (eds), *McGill Hume Studies* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1976), 147–59, where a moral atheist is 'anyone who denies the existence of any god *having moral attributes*' (151). I am adopting Gaskin's term but also stipulating its meaning more precisely for my own purposes.

⁷ In this usage a 'moral atheist' is then neither an atheist who lives according to moral standards, nor someone who denies the force and reality of moral claims. (For this latter usage, see Charles Kingsley, *His Letters and Memories of His Life*, ed. Frances Eliza Kingsley, 2 vols (London: H. S. King and Co., 1877), ii. 75.)

the universe, or at least produced the order of the universe.⁸ For Hume, the idea of God is thus an instance of his category of 'relative ideas': it picks out its referent by way of its relational place rather than (as with a 'positive idea') by specifying its intrinsic character.⁹ Hume's character Philo (widely and in my view correctly regarded as the spokesman for Hume's own views) introduces this approach early in the *Dialogues*, with his interlocutors apparently accepting this

⁸ There are two exceptions to this usage in Hume's texts, but neither of them amounts to a serious counterexample to the current interpretation. (1) In the first *Enquiry* Hume writes of 'The idea of God, as meaning an *infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being*' (EHU 2.6). But here in section 2 ('Of the Origin of Ideas') Hume is invoking the traditional monotheistic conception of a supremely perfect being simply as an illustration of his empiricist thesis that the 'creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience,' even when forming such a sublime idea as this (EHU 2.5). So Hume wants to allow that we can construct some such idea of a supremely good and intelligent being (and in focusing on this particular idea as a test case for empiricism he is directly following Locke (John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), book 2 chapter 23 sections 33–6).) But the term 'God' does not have this connotation when Hume addresses natural theology directly. (2) *The Natural History of Religion* defines religion as '[t]he belief in an invisible, intelligent power' (NHR introduction 1; see also NHR 2.2, 2.5, 4.2), and Hume goes on to refer to such putative invisible agents as so many 'deities' and 'gods' (NHR 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3). So here Hume seems to have an entirely different definition of the meaning of 'god' in play, one that picks out its referent by way of the defining properties of invisibility, intelligence, and potency rather than (as with his usual usage) picking out its referent by way of the relational property of standing to the ordered universe as some sort of original cause or ultimate organizing principle. However, even here in the *Natural History* Hume goes out of his way to emphasize that belief in invisible intelligent powers must be clearly distinguished from belief in an ultimate 'author of nature' or 'original cause of all things,' i.e. a god or deity in his usual sense of the word (NHR 4.1, 5.2). Thus the title of section 4 declares that the polytheistic divinities of ancient myth were 'not considered as creators or formers of the world,' and Hume goes on to explain that for this reason 'the gods of all polytheists are no better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world' (NHR 4.2; see also 4.7). In terminological strictness, then, '[i]t is a fallacy, merely from the casual resemblance of names, without any conformity of meaning, to rank such opposite opinions [as ancient polytheism and modern theism] under the same denomination' (NHR 4.1).

⁹ On Hume's distinction between relative and positive ideas, see Daniel E. Flage, 'Hume's Relative Ideas', *Hume Studies* 7 (1981), 55–73, and 'Relative Ideas Revisited: A Reply to Thomas,' *Hume Studies* 8 (1982), 158–71. (The essential points are also distilled in Flage, 'Relative Ideas Re-Viewed', in Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (eds), *The New Hume Debate: Revised Edition* (New York: Routledge 2007), 138–55). See also Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 50–3, 122–3.

characterization of the subject matter of their debate: 'Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call *God*' (DNR 2.3). Similarly, Hume regularly uses the definite description 'the original cause of all things'—along with correlates like 'the original source of all things,' 'the first causes of the universe,' or 'the original cause'—interchangeably with phrases like 'God' and 'the Deity' (E 145, EHU 8.32, NHR 5.2, DNR 2.20, 11.14, 11.15). In other places Hume identifies the deity by way of its role in producing, not the universe simpliciter, but the *order* of the universe. Thus Philo takes the core of natural theology to concern the character of '*the cause or causes of order in the universe,*' and presents controversy about the divine attributes to be disagreement over the nature of 'the principle which first arranged, and still maintains order in this universe' (DNR 12.33, 12.7). So if there is *either* an ultimate cause of the universe *or* an ultimate source of the order in the universe—a being or principle that might serve as the terminus of either the cosmological or the teleological argument, for instance—then we have a deity.¹⁰ Hume's relational characterization of the referent of 'God' reflects one core feature of the traditional conception of the divine: both the god of scripture and the theoretically articulated god of the philosophers are each traditionally understood as the cause or organizing principle behind the ordered universe, and hence each would satisfy Hume's standards for the application of the term. But in picking out the referent of 'God' purely by way of its place in a system of relations rather than by any particular specification of intrinsic properties, Hume's usage is highly ecumenical, allowing the widest possible debate over the actual nature of this primary being or principle. At the same time, it allows Hume to piously affirm the deity's existence without committing to any substantive conception of the divine attributes, and thus without surrendering hostages to any particular traditional religious world views. Indeed, as Philo notes in the *Dialogues*, many thinkers traditionally regarded as atheists could agree that there is *some* such primary being, and hence

¹⁰ This disjunctive characterization is quite explicit in the first *Enquiry*, where in the dialogue 'Of a Particular Providence and a Future State' the character playing Epicurus frames the debate by identifying 'the gods' as 'the authors of existence *or* order of the universe' (EHU 11.14, my emphasis).

that there is a god in Hume's spare sense, while of course rejecting the theist's particular elaboration of this being's intrinsic character (DNR 12.7).¹¹

For the purposes of this essay, I will be adopting Hume's usage of 'God' and its various correlates to refer to the original cause or organizing principle of the ordered universe. Like Hume, I use the capitalized 'God' as a proper name of whatever being occupies this relational place; but I also use the lower case 'god' (and 'deity,' and so on) as an abbreviation for the definite description 'the original cause or organizing principle of the ordered universe.' For the sake of brevity, I usually shorten the definite description 'the original cause or organizing principle of the ordered universe' simply to 'the original cause' (or 'the primary cause,' 'the first cause,' and so on)—although the reader should bear in mind that this is just shorthand for the more complex disjunctive characterization.

So moral atheism is the position that, if there is an original cause or organizing principle behind the ordered universe, then this being or principle lacks moral attributes. But what exactly does this denial of 'moral attributes' amount to? There are two ways of understanding such a denial, and hence two versions of moral atheism. The weaker position is the denial of a *morally praiseworthy* god.¹² As I will use this predicate phrase, to qualify as morally praiseworthy one needs an *overall* character that is morally laudable when all things are considered, not simply a character that is morally laudable in this or that respect. (No doubt Caligula has a character that is morally laudable in *some* respects, but this is not enough for him to qualify as morally praiseworthy in my sense.) According to weak moral atheism, then, if there is a deity, then it lacks a morally praiseworthy character, and the traditional theistic conception of this primary being as some sort of paragon of virtue or moral worth is simply mistaken. Numerous commentators both in

¹¹ Hume's early memoranda notes indicate that he encountered this way of conceptualizing the matter in Pierre Bayle, the seventeenth-century skeptic. Thus a note drawn from his reading of 'Baile' runs: 'The Center of Unity of all Men with relation to Religion is: That there is a First Cause. As you augment the Proposition you find Non-Conformists, Atheists, Epicureans, Idolaters, those who maintain the Extension, Composition, Necessity of the First Cause etc.' (See E. C. Mossner, 'Hume's Early Memoranda, 1729–1740: The Complete Text,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (1948), 292–518: 500 (note 2.8).)

¹² This is apparently the sense of 'moral atheism' intended by J. C. A. Gaskin in 'Hume, Atheism, and the "Interested Obligation" of Morality,' 151, 155.

Hume's day and our own have taken him to be at least tentatively endorsing this weaker form of moral atheism. This interpretation is typically defended with reference to Hume's treatment of the problem of evil in the *Dialogues* and his apparent preference there for the hypothesis that 'the original source of all things . . . has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold' (DNR 11.14). But advocates of this line of interpretive argument can at best only hope to show that Hume *tentatively* inclines towards weak moral atheism, for his comments about the likely indifference of the deity are presented in the form of a cautious speculative hypothesis, and quite explicitly fall short of a definitive affirmation. (Hume is perfectly clear that we are not entitled to assert the absolute logical incompatibility of the deity's moral goodness and the existence of evil, a conclusion 'too presumptuous for creatures so blind and ignorant' (DNR 11.12).) Furthermore, there may be a deeper problem with this line of interpretive argument, for there is an alternative way of understanding the texts where Hume moves from observations about the world's evils to the hypothesized moral indifference of the creator. This inference proceeds in apparent defiance of Hume's usual doubts about our ability to infer anything substantive regarding the deity's distinctive intrinsic nature from the character of the observed world, suggesting that he may not be altogether in earnest. Perhaps, in drawing up this speculative hypothesis about the deity's presumed moral indifference from the evidence of the world around us, Hume is simply parodying the overreaching style of traditional natural theology.¹³

In any case, there is a stronger version of moral atheism in Hume's texts, or so I shall argue. This stronger version of moral atheism denies the existence, not merely of a *morally praiseworthy* god, but of a *morally assessable* god. On this view, if there is a first cause or organizing principle, this being or principle is not a proper object of moral assessment or evaluation one way or the other. Here the rejection of divine 'moral attributes' is taken in its broadest possible sense. It is not merely that the deity lacks positive moral virtues. Rather, it stands outside the scope of moral assessment altogether. It follows, of course, that the deity is not morally praiseworthy: strong moral atheism entails

¹³ I discuss this interpretive issue and defend this alternative reading in section 6.4.

weak moral atheism. But while weak moral atheism is consistent with a morally reprehensible god, or with a deity that is balanced neutrally between praiseworthy and blameworthy tendencies, for the strong moral atheist the deity stands outside the moral order entirely. The deity is not then amoral in the sense importing culpability, the sense in which a heartless villain might be described as amoral. (Such amorality is of course simply a certain type of immorality.) Rather it is amoral in the sense in which a stone or a snowstorm might be described as amoral—as something removed from the moral realm altogether. Hereafter, whenever I use the phrase ‘moral atheism’ without qualification, I mean to refer to this stronger version of the doctrine. The thesis that Hume is a moral atheist—the central claim of this essay—should then be understood as the thesis that Hume denies the existence of a morally assessable first cause or organizing principle.

1.3. Atheism and Moral Atheism

Neither weak nor strong moral atheism amounts to a form of atheism by the lights of our twenty-first-century use of the term. The moral atheist is simply rejecting the existence of one particular sort of deity, and this leaves open the possibility of other (amoral) types of god. But in Hume's era, the position that there is no god with moral attributes was characterized as a form of atheism, not simply in the vituperative usage loosely applied to any form of unorthodox or supposedly impious belief, but also in a more precise and philosophically rigorous sense. In the current section I sketch this early modern terminological background.

Early modern controversialists often used ‘atheism’ and its cognates in a loose and abusive sense, imputing either some form of heterodox religious belief or attitude, or simply licentious (and thus ‘godless’) behavior—along, of course, with the writer's revulsion at such impiety. The word functioned, as one historian has put it, ‘as a majestic term of reproach and condemnation.’¹⁴ Catholics were atheists to

¹⁴ D. C. Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 1.

Protestants; Protestants were atheists to Catholics. Nonconformists and Independents were atheists to sober-minded Anglicans; the dissolute and libertine were atheists to all. Even Milton's rebel angels, in the midst of their open war against the creator, are, apparently, an 'Atheist crew.'¹⁵ Francis Bacon's *Essays* (1601) registers one version of this inexact and abusive usage. There are, he admits, some who are properly called atheists. But polemicists multiply their numbers by applying the word indiscriminately, and 'all that Impugne a received Religion, or Superstition, are by the adverse Part, branded with the Name of Atheists.'¹⁶

However, as Bacon allows, a more exact sense is also current in this period, a sense that provides the word's core meaning and lends the wider vituperative uses their rhetorical and condemnatory force. First, in this stricter usage, atheism is a matter of theoretically articulated doctrine, not merely the alleged unbelief sometimes taken to be implied by immoral behavior in apparent defiance of God's laws. (Atheism in the strict and philosophical sense is thus 'contemplative' or 'speculative atheism,' not simply the 'practical atheism' of a wanton life.) And second, in this core sense used by early moderns, atheists are those who reject the traditional monotheistic doctrine of a creator god that is unitary, intelligent, personal, moral, and providential: a denial that might involve the outright denial of his being, or simply the rejection of one or more of these defining attributes. Epicurean anti-providentialists and Spinozistic pantheists are atheists by these standards. Deists may or may not be, depending on their specific account of the divine nature.¹⁷ The traditional polytheistic systems of pre-Christian Europe will also qualify as forms of 'superstitious atheism,' as Hume himself remarks in the *Natural History of Religion*

¹⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: New American Library, 1968), 184 (book 6 line 370).

¹⁶ Francis Bacon, 'Of Atheisme,' in *The Essayes or Counsells, Civill and Moral*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 51–4: 52–3.

¹⁷ Consider this from the Boyle lecturer John Harris's *The Atheistical Objections against the Being of a God, and his Attributes, fairly considered and fully refuted* (1698): '[Deists] . . . though in Words they may profess to believe and honour a God, yet in Reality they deny him, and have no Manner of Notion of his true Nature and Perfections. . . . [I]f [a man] have not such a Belief of God, as implies in it a Knowledge of the Perfections of his Nature, he may call himself by as *fine* and *fashionable* Names as he pleases, and pretend to *Deism* and *natural Religion*; but in reality he is an Atheist, and so ought to be esteemed by all Mankind' (quoted in Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, 51).

(NHR 4.2).¹⁸ The theologian and philosopher Samuel Clarke's celebrated 1704 Boyle lecture *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* nicely demonstrates this stricter usage, as Clarke begins his discussion by emphasizing the atheism of denying the various traditional divine attributes and explicitly defines atheists as those 'who either disbelieve the being of God or would be thought to do so or, which is all one, who deny the principal attributes of the divine nature.'¹⁹ Also illustrative are the comments of the religious writer and would-be epic poet Richard Blackmore prefacing his counterblast to Lucretius, *Creation: A Philosophical Poem Demonstrating the Existence and Providence of God* (1712):

there are two sorts of Men, who without Injustice have been call'd Atheists; those who frankly and in plain terms have deny'd the Being of God; and those, who tho' they asserted his Being, denied those Attributes and Perfections, which the Idea of a God includes; and so while they acknowledge the name, subverted the thing. These are as real Atheists, as the former, but less sincere.²⁰

Or, for another example, we might consider the definition of speculative atheism deployed by the Scottish 'common sense' philosopher James Beattie in the specific context of charging Hume with atheism in the savagely polemical *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770):

Perhaps it will be asked, what I mean by the word Atheist? I answer, A reasonable creature, who disbelieves the being of God, or thinks it inconsistent with sound reason, to believe, that the Great First Cause is perfect in holiness, power, wisdom, justice, and beneficence,—is a speculative Atheist.²¹

Not just any form of heterodox religious opinion will qualify as atheistic by these more exact standards: only those that go so far as to deny an attribute regarded as an essential aspect of the traditional theistic god. But moral atheism certainly qualified as a form of atheism

¹⁸ I cite the relevant passage in note 8 above.

¹⁹ Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, and Other Writings*, ed. Ezio Vailati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

²⁰ Richard Blackmore, *Creation: A Philosophical Poem. Demonstrating the Existence and Providence of God*, 2nd edn (London 1712), ix. For commentary, see David Berman, *A History of Atheism: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Routledge, 1988), 98.

²¹ James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in opposition to sophistry and scepticism* (1770) (facsimile reprint: Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Verlag, 1974), 488 note.

properly so-called, for the essential attributes of the theistic divinity included a morally praiseworthy character. As we saw in the extracts from Tillotson, Berkeley, and Warburton opening this chapter, the doctrine of an amoral first cause was widely identified by theologians of Hume's day as a particularly insidious form of unbelief. For these three philosophical prelates at least, the denial of a creator with moral attributes was a form of fifth column atheism, implicit in the dark doctrines of Hobbes and Spinoza, and the threatened upshot of the attack on scriptural religion presented by the rising tide of deists and other so-called 'freethinkers.' Indeed, in British intellectual culture before Hume and Darwin, with the existence of some sort of ultimate designing intelligence apparently beyond serious questioning, moral atheism seems to have been regarded as the most serious philosophical challenge to orthodox belief.²²

In the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century bestiaries of irreligion, the atheism of denying the deity's moral praiseworthiness is typically bound up with the atheism of denying a morally ordered providence—denying, that is, that the deity governs the world according to moral principles. In early modern Christian thought, these two doctrines tend to merge: the orthodoxy that the deity is morally praiseworthy is assimilated with the doctrine that the deity is a providential agent, an active superintendent watching over human history. Divine goodness is not simply a Form of Forms, an abstract transcendental posit or regulative principle mandated by theoretical or practical reason. Rather, divine goodness is manifested quite concretely in the deity's beneficent care for and just government of this world. The denial of a morally structured providential order in our universe is thus tantamount to the denial of God's moral praiseworthiness, and each of these scandalous positions is classified as a form of atheism

²² On the use of 'atheism' and its cognates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*; Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study in the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991–2000), ii. 9–11; Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, ch. 5; A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 19–30; David Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4–5; D. C. Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea*.

properly so called.²³ Thus Ralph Cudworth's compendious attack on irreligious philosophy *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) characterizes the denial of a morally ordered providence as an express form of atheism.²⁴ The classicist Richard Bentley endorses a similar categorization in his 1692 Boyle lectures, as does Bishop Francis Gastrell in the lectures of 1697, and Bishop Joseph Butler in his monumental *Analogy of Religion* (1736).²⁵ But the classification comes out most vividly in the polemical writings of Warburton, where it appears repeatedly in the scourging of suspected deists and freethinkers. For Warburton, any version of 'naturalism'—that is, 'the belief of a God, the Creator and Physical Preserver, but not Moral Governor of the World'²⁶—is a clear and particularly repellent form of atheism:

For tho' the *principles* may be called NATURALISM, yet if *Scripture* has defined an ATHEIST right, to be one who HAS NO HOPE, and is WITHOUT GOD IN THE

²³ According to George T. Buckley, the first use of 'atheism' in English, in an essay by Sir John Cheke from around 1540, carries just this sense of a rejection of a moral providence rather than the outright rejection of any sort of god. George T. Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), 64. More recently, Michael J. Buckley has noted that Cheke's essay is a free translation of Plutarch's *On Superstition*: Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 9.

²⁴ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe, wherein all the reason and philosophy of atheism is confuted and its impossibility demonstrated* (London: 1678), 79.

²⁵ For Bentley, 'the Divine Inspection into the affairs of the World doth necessarily follow from the Nature and Being of God. And he that denies this, doth implicitly deny his Existence . . . the Existence of God and his Government of the World do mutually suppose and imply one another' (Richard Bentley, *The Folly and Unreasonableness of Atheism* (London: 1692), 5–6). Similarly for Gastrell, the atheist is one who 'says there is no God that governs the world, and judgeth the earth' (Francis Gastrell, *The Certainty and Necessity of Religion in general* (London: 1697)); Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), in *The Works of Bishop Butler*, ed. J. H. Bernard, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1900), ii. 269. The same categorization can of course also be found in early modern Continental philosophers, as when the great German moral philosopher and jurist Samuel Pufendorf writes that 'Whoever wholly violates and breaks through this Obligation [to revere God's majesty and obey his commandments and laws], stands guilty of the most heinous Charge of *Atheism*; because he must at the same time deny either the Existence of God, or his *Care of human Affairs*. Which two sins, with regard to their moral Consequences and Effects, are equivalent to each other; and either of them overthrows all Religion' (Samuel Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, tr. Basil Kennet *et al.* with the notes of Jean Barbeyrac (London, 1729), second emphasis mine).

²⁶ William Warburton, *Remarks on Mr. David Hume's Essay on the natural history of religion* (London 1757), 9.

WORLD, our Professor of Naturalism comes within the description. For tho' he acknowledges the being of a God, yet as he is *without God in the world*, that is a Being who presides over it, as the moral Governor of it, which is the foundation in which all Religion stands, Religionists will seek no other title for him. And surely he will be properly defined. For tho' the abstract term *Atheism* carries, as it's principal idea, a relation to God's BEING: yet *Atheist*, the concrete, seems to have it's chief relation to his GOVERNMENT.²⁷

In sum, while moral atheism may not be a form of atheism by our twenty-first-century criteria for the use of the term, in Hume's day it was regarded as a clear form of atheism, both meeting the proper standards for the application of the word, and deserving the opprobrium and condemnatory force associated with it.²⁸

1.4. The Objection from Textual Insufficiency

Before examining the details of Hume's case for moral atheism I need to preempt two possible big-picture objections to the interpretation

²⁷ William Warburton, *A View of Lord Bolingbroke's philosophy; in four letters to a friend. Letters first and second* (London, 1754), 72–3. Although Warburton is attacking Bolingbroke rather than Hume here, he also characterizes Hume as a 'naturalist' in other contexts. See Warburton, *Remarks on Mr. David Hume's Essay*, 9, and *Letters of a late Eminent Prelate to One of His Friends*, ed. Richard Hurd (Kidderminster, 1808), 175.

²⁸ Although the threat of moral atheism was regarded as a particularly pressing challenge in Hume's day, the issue is of course a perennial of natural theology. Consider, for example, Cicero's dialogue *De Natura Deorum*, a work that Hume knew well and borrowed from stylistically when shaping his own *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Cicero's entire discussion takes off from the question of moral atheism and its implications for religious practice. Thus 'the crux and center of the argument is the question whether the gods do nothing, care for nothing, and take their ease detached from all concern with the care and government of the world . . . / There are and there have always been some philosophers who believe that the gods have no concern whatever with the affairs of men. But if this belief is true, what becomes of piety, of reverence and of religion?' The worry is that 'there can be no divine guidance of human affairs if the gods make no distinction between good and evil' (Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, tr. Horace C. P. McGregor (London: Penguin, 1972), 69–70, 230). On Hume's familiarity with and borrowings from *De Natura Deorum*, see Norman Kemp Smith, 'Introduction' to David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 1–75: 60–1; Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), 29–40; Peter S. Fosl, 'Doubt and Divinity: Cicero's Influence on Hume's Religious Skepticism,' *Hume Studies* 20 (1994), 103–120; Christine Battersby, 'The Dialogues as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism,' in Norton, Capaldi, and Robison (eds), *McGill Hume Studies*, 239–52.

of Hume as any sort of moral atheist. According to the first (which I address in the current section), Hume never explicitly endorses moral atheism in any of his writings, and so my proposed interpretation lacks an appropriate textual basis. According to the second (which I address in Chapter 2 below), Hume could not possibly endorse moral atheism given his own well-known skepticism regarding all theological speculation. Each of these objections raises large-scale strategic and methodological questions about the interpretation of Hume that are best addressed at this preliminary stage.

The first objection is that Hume never openly endorses moral atheism in any of his various writings, and so positive textual evidence for this reading is quite lacking. Indeed, one might go further, for in two texts Hume seems to affirm a perfectly contrary view, openly crediting the deity with a morally praiseworthy character. First, in the *Dialogues*, immediately following his relational characterization of the meaning of 'God,' Hume's spokesman Philo asserts that he 'piously ascribe[s] to [this being] every species of perfection' (DNR 2.3). That sounds as if it might include a positive moral character, and in the closing part of the *Dialogues* Philo makes the connection explicit, apparently ruling out moral atheism of all stripes: 'as the Supreme Being is allowed to be absolutely and entirely perfect, whatever differs most from him departs the farthest from the supreme standard of rectitude and perfection' (DNR 12.8). Second, in his private correspondence with his close friend William Mure, Hume makes the following admission: 'It must be acknowledg'd that Nature has given us a strong Passion of Admiration for whatever is excellent, & of Love & Gratitude for whatever is benevolent and beneficial, & that the Deity possesses these Attributes in the highest Perfection' (L i. 51). Thus we have two texts suggesting that the deity has a morally laudable character, and no text that expressly affirms moral atheism. So the proposed interpretation of Hume as some sort of moral atheist can look like a non-starter.

But any student of Hume's philosophy of religion knows that this is a little too quick. Hume often presents his irreligious views in an oblique manner, and his real position sometimes needs to be pieced together both from what is said and what is left unsaid. Moreover, Hume regularly lays down a smokescreen of pious language that is quite insincere. Given the very real possibility of social ostracism,

blackballing, or even prosecution for blasphemy, the motivation for this layering of messages is most obviously prudential, though Hume clearly also enjoys its ironic possibilities. On some occasions he urbanely deadpans his own irreligious views in the language of fideism and holy mystery.²⁹ At other times, Hume piously appeals to one aspect of orthodox religion while attacking another, only to turn the tables in another context.³⁰ Such faux-pious indirection is quite in keeping with the literary and social conventions of Hume's day, and was well understood by his eighteenth-century audience: it is not so much that the irreligious implications of his writings are particularly esoteric or well-hidden (the camouflage is often indeed 'flamboyantly disingenuous'³¹), but the respectable language permits at least a modicum of plausible deniability should it be required.³² In these respects, Hume's case for moral atheism is really no different from his other more familiar irreligious arguments, including his attack on the credibility of miracles, or his critique of the argument from design. Understanding his implied moral atheism thus requires a willingness to follow out his arguments where they lead, and a critical attitude toward the surface pieties of his texts. In addition, some work needs

²⁹ Most notoriously, having argued that there is insufficient historical evidence to justify belief in the miracles of scripture, Hume blithely asserts that 'the CHRISTIAN religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience' (EHU 10.41).

³⁰ Consider Hume's avowed deference to revelation when attacking the credentials of natural theology in the *Dialogues* (DNR 12.33, see also LG 25), or here in 'Of the Immortality of the Soul': 'Nothing could set in a fuller light the infinite obligations which mankind have to divine revelation; since we find, that no other medium could ascertain this great and important truth [i.e. the doctrine of immortality]' (E 598). Such deference is of course belied by Hume's attack on revealed religion in 'Of Miracles' in the first *Enquiry* (EHU 10).

³¹ George Botterill, 'Hume on Liberty and Necessity,' in Peter Millican, ed., *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 277–300: 289.

³² For discussion of these literary and social conventions, see David Berman, 'David Hume and the Suppression of "Atheism",' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (1983), 375–87, and 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying,' in J. A. Leo Lemay (ed.), *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), 61–78; Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, ii. 31–50. For the early reception of Hume's philosophy in the light of these conventions, see James Fieser, 'Hume's Concealed Attack on Religion and his Early Critics,' *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 20 (1995), 83–101.

to be done to see his various writings as providing the materials for an integrated case for moral atheism, for Hume never gathers all of these together in one place. But Hume's works do provide such a case, and his correspondence shows that he was quite aware of this—or so at least I shall argue.

Of course, Hume's apparent pieties cannot be simply ignored. They place a burden of proof on any irreligious interpretation of his philosophy, and even if they are to be ultimately discounted, still they must be explained. But in fact the texts where Hume appears to grant that God has moral attributes all fit the model of pious indirection to a tee. First, Philo's claim that he 'piously ascribe[s] to [God] every species of perfection' is immediately punctured by the following declaration: 'But as all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature' (DNR 2.3). The original pious ascription is thus rendered quite meaningless. The same point holds for Philo's heavily ironic reference to the deity as providing a 'supreme standard of rectitude and perfection'—for, as Philo himself immediately emphasizes, this is quite consistent with the deity's 'benevolence' and 'justice' bearing no meaningful analogy to our own conception of these things (DNR 12.8; see also 11.16). As for Hume's admission in the letter to Mure that God is 'benevolent and beneficent . . . in the highest Perfection': either we similarly read this (in the words of the first *Enquiry*) as so much meaningless 'flattery and panegyric' (EHU 11.27; compare also DNR 4.1), or the claim that we know any such thing is quite contradicted by the actual arguments of the *Enquiry* and *Dialogues*. And in fact this admission has the place of a concession made simply for the sake of the argument, for Hume immediately proceeds to his main point in the letter: his argument that, even if God *is* benevolent, we still cannot have positive feelings toward him, for 'he is not the natural Object of any Passion or Affection' (L i. 51).³³

³³ Furthermore, while this declaration of God's benevolence appears in a letter written to Hume's confidante Mure, it occurs in a section of the letter providing comments on William Leechman's recently published sermon *On the Nature, Reasonableness, and Advantages of Prayer* (Glasgow: 1743), and these comments were intended to be passed

In the following chapter I address the second big-picture objection to the characterization of Hume as some sort of moral atheist: the charge that he could not indulge in such negative dogmatics without contradicting his own pervasive skepticism toward all 'airy sciences' (EHU 1.12), and in particular his own powerful epistemological critique of theological and cosmological speculation.

along to Leechman, Mure's ex-tutor. Leechman was soon to be Professor of Divinity and eventually Principal at Glasgow University, and is just the sort of establishment figure before whom Hume would have been well advised to dilute his irreligious views somewhat. In fact, Hume should probably have been more guarded still in this letter, for its claim that God is not a natural object of human affective attitudes is clearly highly subversive—and the irreverent tone and irreligious substance of the letter cannot have helped when Leechman subsequently decided to join Francis Hutcheson in opposing Hume's candidacy for academic positions at Edinburgh and Glasgow. For details of the exchange with Leechman, see E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 148–9. (I discuss the argument of this letter in Chapter 3.)