

# HUME ON THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

DONALD W. LIVINGSTON  
*Emory University*

**A**lthough Hume often speaks of philosophy and religion as different forms of experience, they are so intimately connected that the one cannot be understood without understanding the other. Both have evolved over time, intermingling to form qualitatively different forms of experience in which their original identities are partially submerged roughly in the way that colors such as blue and yellow may be mixed and submerged into the new color of green. Yet one of the identities may be strong enough to appear in something of its original form as in a yellowish or bluish green. And, of course, both identities can be recovered through analysis. In what follows I examine Hume's views on the nature and origin of religious and philosophical forms of consciousness; how they have evolved to form distinctive modes of religious and philosophical existence; and whether, if at all, these modes of existence are beneficial to society.

## THE ORIGIN OF RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

It was a rationalistic prejudice, strong in Hume's time, that the first religion was theism and that it was known by the first men through the design argument. This rational form of theism has since been corrupted by custom and prejudice into polytheism

and into superstitious forms of theism. Sir Isaac Newton states the view as follows: "So then the first religion was the most rational of all others till the nations corrupted it. For there is no way (w<sup>th</sup> out revelation) to come to y<sup>e</sup> knowledge of a Deity but by the frame of nature."<sup>1</sup>

Hume rejected the rationalistic account of the first religion offered by Newton, Clarke, and other "religious philosophers" in favor of a causal, evolutionary account. That account employed three original propensities of human nature which are necessary for Hume's genealogy not only of religion but, as we shall see, of philosophy as well. (1) Men have a disposition to believe in "invisible, intelligent power" as the cause of things. This disposition is "diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages..." (*NHR*, p. 25). (2) Faced with the flux and contrariety of phenomena, men would despair of understanding the causes of things, "were it not for a propensity in human nature, which leads into a system, that gives them some seeming satisfaction" (*NHR*, p. 33). The system may be metaphorical as in religion or conceptual as in philosophy, but a system of some sort there will be. (3) "There is an universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious" (*NHR*, p. 33).

Because these propensities are universal, religion is natural to man, but it is not inevitable. Propensities have varying strength, and the propensities that make religious belief possible "may easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and...may by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances, be altogether prevented" (*NHR*, pp. 25-26). What then were the particular circumstances of the first men such that the above propensities expressed themselves in the form of religion and not in some other form?

Hume supposes that the first men must have been primitive and barbarous. Without the arts and sciences, man was little more than a "necessitous animal" whose main concern was survival. What prompted the first act of critical reflection was not admiration of regularity and order in the universe but fear at the sudden occurrence of unexpected events which threatened life and security. The regularities of nature were absorbed into habit and did not surface as objects of attention. It was frightening events

contrary to expectation such as a monstrous birth or a violent clap of thunder that triggered the three propensities mentioned above and gave rise to the first explanation of events. This first account was, and had to be, anthropomorphic, metaphorical, and practical. Intelligent power was metaphorically read into the contrary event itself: neptune *is* the violence of a sea at storm. Eventually the human propensity to view things *systematically* was triggered. Neptune is identified not only with the stormy sea but also with the sea when calm. The god is seen to be related to other gods, and, in time, the entire world is populated with gods.

Polytheism, then, was not only the first religion, it was the first systematic account of events, and so is the origin of all theoretical science and philosophy. Although polytheism is the remote ancestor of theorizing, its rationale is practical not theoretical. The gods are the invisible powers which control contrary events. To understand is to placate an arbitrary and demanding personality. The logic of the system is not "the pure love of truth" or "speculative curiosity" about the cause of order in the world, but *fear* (*NHR*, p. 32). Local deities are praised not out of admiration but for the advantage of the believer. The local god is flattered as being greater than alien gods and free of their limits. These exaggerated praises eventually free the god from all limits of the visible world, and he is represented as the only true god, a perfect being who transcends the world of space and time and who is its creator. In this way theism evolves out of polytheism.

But what emerges is not the "true" or "philosophical theism" which Hume accepts.<sup>2</sup> True theism is the belief in a perfect, supreme intelligence who created a universe governed by law. Such a belief, Hume says, conforms to "the principles of reason and true philosophy," and inspires men to scientific inquiry into the laws that govern the universe and to moral conduct. It should "banish every thing frivolous, unreasonable, or inhuman from religious worship, and set before men the most illustrious example, as well as the most commanding motives of justice and benevolence" (*NHR*, p. 59). Only a being who could inspire such practice is worthy of what Hume calls "rational worship and adoration" (*NHR*, p. 52).

True theism entails a belief in a "general providence" but not in a "particular providence." The former is the belief that the universe is the result of purposive intelligence which expresses

itself in the form of law. The latter is the belief that the creator "disturbs...at every turn, the settled order of events, by particular volitions" (*NHR*, p. 50). What Hume calls "vulgar theism" carries with it belief in a particular providence, and so is not fully emancipated from its polytheistic roots—the rationale of which is nothing but a strategy for effecting a particular providence. Vulgar theism, then, contains a contradiction. The same being represented as perfect and not governed by human passions is also viewed as "the particular cause of health or sickness; plenty or want; prosperity or adversity" and capable of responding to prayers. But a being who responds to prayers has passions very like our own.

The propensity of the imagination to metaphorically identify invisible, intelligent power with visible things exacerbates the contradiction and generates what Hume calls a "flux and reflux" of polytheism and theism. The abstract conception of a perfect being renders the "active imagination of men, uneasy" (*NHR*, p. 57). Soon an order of "inferior mediators or subordinate agents are invented which interpose betwixt mankind and their supreme deity" (*NHR*, pp. 57-58). These demigods or middle beings resemble the human and are seized upon to satisfy the polytheistic need for "a particular providence." Thus theism descends insensibly back to idolatry: "The virgin Mary, ere checkt by the reformation, had proceeded, from being merely a good woman to usurp many attributes of the Almighty" (*NHR*, pp. 52-53). Eventually the very vulgarity of these middle beings is seen to conflict with the notion of a perfect being, and the religious mind begins again the painful ascent back in the direction of theism only to fall, in time, back towards polytheism. The absurd "flux and reflux" of polytheism and theism can be restrained and moderated, but it can never be overcome (*NHR*, p. 58).

### THE ORIGIN OF PHILOSOPHY AND TRUE THEISM

The view of Newton and other religious philosophers that theism (established by the design argument) was the first religion implied also that the first theists were philosophers and that religion and philosophy were coextensive in their origins. Hume argues to the contrary that the first philosophers were polytheists and that polytheism itself is a form of atheism. Consequently, the

first philosophers were atheists. Why Hume thought polytheism to be a form of atheism will be examined shortly. In the meantime, we should ask what were the conditions which made philosophical questioning possible. Hume's answer is the cultivation of the arts and the security brought on by "the institution of good government" (*NHR*, p. 35). The rationale of polytheism is fear brought on by extraordinary life-threatening events. The normal regularities of experience are absorbed into habits which have proved successful in the struggle for survival and never surface as objects of attention or curiosity. But with the appearance of the arts and good government, security and leisure emerge, and a space is opened up in which, for the first time, regularity and order become objects of attention. "Superstition flourishes when life is governed by accident" (*NHR*, p. 35). As makers of society, men become aware of order in their own works and this enables them to attend to order and regularity in the world. Philosophy has its origin in the *polis* of polytheistic culture.

Hume mentions "Thales, Anaximander," and "Anaximenes, Heraclitus" as the first philosophers. They all sought to give an ultimate explanation of the world by fixing on some privileged item in the world, "fire, water, air, or whatever they established to be the ruling element" and metaphorically identifying it with the whole (*NHR*, pp. 43, 44n, 45). In these first theories, three principles of philosophical reflection are manifest: the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion. Philosophical theory is *ultimate*: it transcends the world of experience and is unconditioned. The thought behind it is radically *autonomous*: it is entirely emancipated from polytheistic custom and tradition. There is no attempt, for example, to provide an explanation of the world as a whole by magnifying the powers of one of the gods within the world. Philosophical theory extends *dominion* over everything within its scope, and its scope is total: the gods themselves are generated from the ultimate cause and are subject to its laws (*NHR*, p. 45).

Hume seems to think that philosophical reflection with its demand for ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion is *sui generis*, the result of natural propensities which spontaneously arise under conditions of security and leisure. That these conditions first appeared in polytheistic culture was an accident, though one for which a historical explanation can be given. The sudden appearance

of critical philosophical reflection in the world may be seen as a leap to a higher form of human experience. The experience is of a higher form because it is more inclusive: (1) the gods were offered by polytheists as explanations not of regularity and order but of frightening and extraordinary events; with the emergence of philosophy, regularity and order are objects of speculation; (2) an explanation is now possible for the gods themselves.

Hume stresses the fact that the first philosophers were atheists and, indeed, that polytheism itself was atheistic. The polytheists were atheists not because they denied the existence of a supreme author of the universe, but because they simply had no such idea. Theirs was an atheism of innocence or ignorance. Hume describes the first philosophers as "superstitious atheists," who had no notion of a "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*, p. 38). And so "Thales, Anaximander, and the early philosophers, who really were atheists" had no difficulty giving an ultimate explanation of the world based on radically autonomous reason while at the same time being "very orthodox in the pagan creed" (*NHR*, p. 44n).

The development of philosophical theism out of philosophical atheism is different from the development of vulgar theism out of polytheism. The latter is motivated by fear, the former by the original human propensity to order experience into a system. Hume describes this as the motive of "speculative curiosity" or "the pure love of truth" (*NHR*, p. 32). Philosophical theism emerges by critical reflection on the thinking of the first philosophical atheists, and its appearance, Hume thinks, marks a superior achievement in understanding. The reason is that the imagination can understand reality only by metaphorically identifying its own parts with the world: "The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: By abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: And slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity" (*NHR*, p. 27). The great achievement of the first philosophers was to shift polytheistic attention away from the contrarieties of experience to the experience of regularity. It was now not the horror of a monstrous birth which demanded explanation in the form of a

“particular providence” but the regularity of normal birth. However, the first philosophers were limited by the rationale of polytheism insofar as they metaphorically identified the “secret and unknown causes” of the world by reflecting on themselves as passive recipients of nature. The objects of attention were regularities and cycles such as birth and death, and the explanatory entities were such things as water, air, earth, and fire. The polytheistic philosophers had not yet learned to distinguish “the nobler parts” of their frame “from the grosser.” They had not yet achieved a deep view of themselves as *agents*.

But Hume holds that once men have established the habit of organizing the regularities of experience into systems, they naturally begin to view these systems as a unity which is the result of intelligent activity: “A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of this visible system, we must adopt, with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author.” And the “uniform maxims...which prevail thro’ the whole frame of the universe, naturally, if not necessarily, lead us to conceive this intelligence as single and individual...” (*NHR*, p. 92).

Philosophical theism does not arise out of fear but from the speculative play of the intellect as it searches in its own nature for metaphors with which to understand the world. Man emerges from being a passive recipient of nature to being an autonomous agent. Nature is no longer conceived as an order of cycles determined by the power of fire, water, air and the like: what Hume calls the “blind, unguided powers of nature” (*NHR*, p. 44n). Rather, nature is conceived as an intelligible system guided by a general providence, and man is conceived as an agent participating in this divine activity.

Although philosophical theism arises naturally, it is not a natural belief on the order of belief in external objects and causal regularities. Hume taught that such beliefs are universal and, in primitive form, are shared even with animals. They cannot be suppressed by reflection alone. True theism, then, is not natural in that it occurs everywhere and at all times, but it is natural in that it spontaneously arises in the security of the *polis* after men have established the habit of organizing regularities into systems: “it scarce seems possible, that any one of good understanding

should reject that idea, when once it is suggested to him" (*NHR*, p. 92). Moreover, true theism is a hardy plant; and although difficult to start (being the contingent result of historical circumstances and philosophical reflection), once planted it needs little care. It is, in part, for this reason that Hume rejected the theory of the religious philosophers that theism, founded on reflection, must have been the first religion and had since been corrupted by polytheism: "If these opinions be founded in arguments so clear and obvious as to carry conviction with the generality of mankind, the same arguments, which at first diffused the opinions, will still preserve them in their original purity....Reason, when very obvious, prevents these corruptions: When abstruse, it keeps the principles entirely from the knowledge of the vulgar, who are alone liable to corrupt any principles, or opinions" (*NHR*, p. 29).

True theism, then, is a belief won by a philosophical elite, and in the philosophical community is virtually irreversible. Philosophers, however, are not free of the prejudices of the wider vulgar community of which they are a part; and so philosophical theism is never held in pure form. Hume taught as a principle that one should not expect coherence of belief in abstract theories, especially theories of religion and philosophy (*NHR*, p. 78n). Hume mentions Anaxagoras as "the first undoubted theist among the philosophers" followed by Socrates, Xenophon, and Plato. All of these were very much under the influence of polytheistic superstitions. Xenophon, Hume observes, was in the grip of auguries, sacrifices, oracles, and beliefs such as that sneezing is a lucky omen. The same was true of most other pagan philosophical theists, including Hume's own hero Cicero (*NHR*, p. 73). The Stoics were especially remarkable for blending philosophical theism with pagan superstition: "the force of their mind, being all turned to the side of morals, unbent itself in that of religion" (*NHR*, p. 77). Marcus Aurelius "received many admonitions from the gods in his sleep," and "Panaetius was the only Stoic, amongst the Greeks, who so much as doubted with regard to auguries and divinations." Epictetus believed in the "language of rooks and ravens" (*NHR*, p. 77).

Turning to modern theists, Hume observes: "I maintain, that Newton, Locke, Clarke, etc. being Arians or Socinians, were very sincere in the creed they profest: And I always oppose this argument to some libertines, who will needs have it, that it was



impossible, but that these great philosophers must have been hypocrites" (*NHR*, p. 79). Indeed, the philosophical libertines themselves may not know what they really believe. They may accept the tenets of philosophical theism and many of the tenets of vulgar theism while denying them. And so "might seem determined infidels, and enemies to the established religion, without being so in reality; or at least, without knowing their own minds in that particular" (*NHR*, p. 74).

### THE RELATION OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN ANCIENT AND MODERN SOCIETY

The polytheistic religions of the ancient world were typically state religions. The task of these civic religions was to preserve the sacred tradition of the political community and its relation to the divine order. Hume observes that polytheistic religion was remarkably tolerant about the gods of other polytheistic regimes. The case was otherwise with theism: "The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of god, is as remarkable as the contrary principle in polytheists.... So sociable is polytheism" (*NHR*, p. 61). Moreover, theism is not only intolerant towards other religions, it tends to give rise to implacable divisions within the theistic society between orthodox and heretical sects. One supreme object of worship demands one form of worship and one creed: "the several sects fall naturally into animosity, and mutually discharge on each other, that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions" (*NHR*, pp. 59-60). Theism generates actual violence within the theistic community and requires an oppressive regime to contain it. Polytheism, of course, has also been inhumane and at times has even required human sacrifice in its rituals. But though such practices are abhorrent, Hume observes that sacrificing a few individuals chosen by lot does not affect the rest of society very much: "Whereas virtue, knowledge, love of liberty, are the qualities, which call home the fatal vengeance of inquisitors; and when expelled, leave the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption, and bondage" (*NHR*, pp. 61-62). Hume concludes that "few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are more pernicious to political society than this corruption of theism, when carried to the utmost height" (*NHR*, p. 61).

Although theism is more intolerant than polytheism, it is not the only form of thinking that is intolerant and in some respects it is not the worst. Philosophy, which first appeared in polytheistic society, brought with it a form of intolerance and hostility peculiar to itself. Philosophical consciousness, as we have seen, is structured by the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion. Philosophical disagreements are ultimate, and each antagonist thinks that his own opinion has a title to rule: philosophers should be kings. Moreover, philosophical beliefs are determined by the thinker's autonomous reason and cannot be abandoned on pain of losing his integrity as a thinker and, indeed, as an *existent*. For it is a peculiarity of philosophical thinking to exercise total dominion over the thinker and to define the meaning and value of his entire existence. To abandon his philosophical beliefs is nothing less than to betray the meaning and worth of his own existence. Philosophy is generated out of the free play of "speculative curiosity," and so, even more than vulgar theism, tends to break up into sects which stand in implacable opposition. It is for this reason Hume taught that philosophical sects in polytheistic society were more zealous and fanatical than religious sects (*NHR*, p. 63). Philosophy, however, was not a threat to society because it was contained by the polytheistic civic religion. As long as the regime itself was not threatened, philosophy flourished in innumerable sects each holding a self-proclaimed title to truth and dominion at the expense of the others: Epicureanism, stoicism, cynicism, skepticism, Pythagoreanism, the peripatetic philosophy, etc.

Over time philosophy spread throughout the learned part of the polytheistic world, bringing with it the natural (though not inevitable) inclination to theism that Hume thinks attends philosophical consciousness. So by the time Christianity appeared in the polytheistic world, intellectual circumstances, at least, were ripe for its reception: "where theism forms the fundamental principle of any popular religion, that tenet is so conformable to sound reason, that philosophy is apt to incorporate itself with such a system of theology" (*NHR*, p. 65). The merger of pre-philosophic theism (Christianity) and philosophy is the union of two distinct forms of intolerance and oppression driven by different motives. Philosophy is motivated by "speculative curiosity"; vulgar theism by insecurity and fear. Although pre-philosophic

vulgar theism tends to produce warring sects, it is not as prolific as philosophy (with its free and autonomous play of the speculative intellect) in generating them. This means that a vulgar pre-philosophic theism that takes on philosophical shape and seeks to justify itself philosophically will generate a qualitatively distinct form of religion that would be the most intolerant and oppressive imaginable. The philosophical part of the religion will generate endless sects, and these will be a blend of philosophical arrogance (due to ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion) with the insecurity and fear due to vulgar theism. This new *philosophical religion* will both constantly generate these sects and be forced to suppress them.

To return to the color metaphor. The mixing of vulgar pre-philosophic theism with philosophy produces a new but disagreeable hue. The Christianity that emerged at the close of the pagan world is just such a blend: "But as philosophy was widely spread over the world, at the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions...to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtilty of argument and science. Hence naturally arose keenness in dispute, when the Christian religion came to be split into new divisions and heresies: And this keenness assisted the priests in their policy, of begetting a mutual hatred and antipathy among their deluded followers" (*NHR*, pp. 62-63). It is in large part its capture by philosophical consciousness that "has contributed to render CHRISTENDOM the scene of religious wars and divisions" (*NHR*, p. 62).

But the civil discord within Christendom has not always taken the same form. Hume distinguishes between ancient and modern forms of civil discord within Christendom. These can be explained in the following way. Those born in a theistic culture who are inclined to philosophical reflection will have little trouble seeing their own philosophical reason confirmed by the theistic tradition: "speculative reasoners naturally carry on their assent, and embrace a theory, which has been instilled into them by their earliest education, and which also possesses some degree of consistence and uniformity" (*NHR*, p. 65). Given this merger of philosophy and vulgar theism two things might happen: (1) the philosophic part (motivated by speculative curiosity and the love of truth) could regulate the vulgar theistic part (motivated by insecurity

and fear—which Hume calls “superstition”); or (2) the superstitious part could regulate the philosophical part to serve its own ends. Typically, it is the latter that happens: “But as these appearances do often, all of them, prove deceitful [that philosophy and vulgar theism are compatible], philosophy will soon find herself very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition” (*NHR*, p. 65). Such was the case with ancient Christendom, but in modern times the philosophic part of Christianity has been progressively moving to the surface.

In the *History of England*, Hume charts the beginning of the change at the fifteenth century. The conflict in modern religion between Catholicism and Protestantism is interpreted as the internecine struggle within Christendom between its vulgar theistic part and its philosophic part. Hume developed two critical concepts with which to understand the conflict: “Enthusiasm” and “Superstition.” Protestantism is regularly identified with the former, Catholicism with the latter. Both contain the belief of all popular religion in a particular providence. What distinguishes them is that “superstition” is founded on piety to a tradition and to its rituals; whereas “enthusiasm” rejects tradition in favor of the authority of the interpretations of one’s own mind. In the *History*, Hume observes that Protestantism and especially Puritanism resembles more a system of metaphysics than a religion. Protestantism is to be compared to the “Stoics [who] join a philosophical enthusiasm to a religious superstition” (*NHR*, p. 77). The expression “philosophical enthusiasm” is important, for it means that there is a form of fanaticism peculiar to the philosophical mind itself. We have observed Hume’s teaching that philosophy naturally divides into sects and that philosophical sects in the ancient world were more fanatical than religious ones. This process was played out again after the Reformation as philosophical enthusiasm (which was the sublimated logic of Protestantism) shattered the Reformation into countless sects, each claiming an ultimate title to dominion.

The most radical expression of the philosophical enthusiasm internal to Protestantism occurred in the English civil war, which Hume examined in the volumes covering the Stuart kings in the *History of England*. Europe stood astonished to see the Puritans

make war on their sovereign, Charles I, and eventually execute him. Once in control the Puritans themselves split into warring sects each with a theory of the ultimate foundations of society and government which they were prepared to impose on others by force. The result was a dictatorship under Cromwell where the whole of society was regulated by religious-philosophical theory. Hume observes that this was carried so far as to attempt even the regulation of recreation. The Puritans set aside the second Tuesday in the month for recreation, but as Hume dryly observes, "the people were resolved to be merry when they themselves pleased, not when the parliament should prescribe it to them" (*H*, v, pp. 452-53n).

The degree of regulation imposed by the Puritans resembles the total dominion over the life of the individual claimed by the philosophical sects of the ancient world. The civic character of polytheistic religion meant that "religion had, in ancient times, very little influence on common life, and that, after men had performed their duty...at the temple, they thought, that the gods left the rest of their conduct to themselves..." (*EM*, p. 341). But with the birth of philosophy a new guide to life appeared which demanded total control: "In those ages, it was the business of philosophy alone to regulate men's ordinary behaviour and deportment; and...this being the sole principle, by which a man could elevate himself above his fellows, it acquired ascendent over many, and produced great singularities of maxims and conduct" (*E*, p. 341). The total control demanded by philosophical consciousness was confined by the polytheistic magistrate, in the ancient world, to private sects. But in modern Christendom, *philosophical consciousness* is internal to the state religion. Consequently, *its* demand for dominion "is now supplied by the modern religion, which inspects our whole conduct, and prescribes an universal rule to our actions, to our words, and to our very thoughts and inclinations" (*EM*, pp. 341-43). Emphasis must be placed on what Hume calls "the modern religion" which is not merely vulgar theism (superstition), but vulgar theism blended with philosophy (philosophical enthusiasm). It is its *philosophical* component that, in large part, gives modern religion, such as that of the Puritan regime, its totalitarian character. A century later the philosophical element in modern religion had gained such ascendancy that

Hume could say that "religion...is nothing but a species of philosophy" (*EU*, p. 146).

By the time of the Enlightenment, then, a radical change had occurred in the relation of philosophy to religion in European culture. Christendom began as a marriage of "philosophical enthusiasm" and "vulgar theism." In Hume's time the tables had turned, and the theistic part of Christianity, at least in the learned world, sought to justify itself in purely secular philosophical terms. The governing maxim of many theists was no longer Augustine's "*credo ut intelligam*," but the Enlightenment maxim that one should proportion one's belief to the evidence, where evidence was thought of as empirical and scientific. As religion became more philosophical, it became more secular. The secularization of religion was part of a wider secularization of society, and so Hume could observe in 1742: "There has been a sudden and sensible change in the opinions of men within these last fifty years, by the progress of learning and of liberty. Most people, in this island, have divested themselves of all superstitious reverence to names and authority: The clergy have much lost their credit: Their pretensions and doctrines have been ridiculed; and even religion can scarcely support itself in the world. The mere name of *king* commands little respect; and to talk of a king as God's vice-regent on earth, or to give him any of those magnificent titles, which formerly dazzled mankind, would but excite laughter in every one" (*E*, p. 51). In this climate of opinion, philosophical consciousness began to appear on the scene entirely emancipated from its connection with vulgar theism.

### THE *TREATISE* AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUPERSTITION

When he wrote the *Treatise*, Hume thought of these emancipated philosophers as forming an elite group which did philosophy mainly for the pleasure of it, but might also hope to be of some use to society by suggesting reforms for improvement. In the first *Enquiry*, Hume thought that the superior stability of modern governments over ancient ones was due in part to the cultivation of philosophy (*EU*, p. 10). In the *Treatise*, he presented emancipated philosophy under modern conditions as a benevolent force. Even its errors, being confined to a few, are of little danger to

society. "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous" (*T*, p. 272). Hume, however, does not deny that philosophy is a potential threat to society, for in the same passage he mentions the cynics as a sect "who from reasonings purely philosophical ran into as great extravagancies of conduct as any *Monk* or *Dervise* that ever was in the world" (*T*, p. 272). This is compatible with his position in "Of Parties," written shortly after the *Treatise*, that philosophical sects in the ancient world were more fanatical than parties of religion.

Hume did not ask, in the *Treatise*, why one should expect philosophy in modern society to be a benevolent force. In the *Essays*, he explained how "philosophical enthusiasm" in the ancient world was contained by the non-philosophical pagan civic religion. But this solution is not possible in modern society since the state religion ("the modern religion"), in Hume's view, embodies the errors of "philosophical enthusiasm" within itself. The only restraint on emancipated philosophical error in modern society must come from philosophy itself. And the question arises of whether the elite, philosophically reflective part of society can be expected to carry out the sort of self-criticism that would keep philosophical criticism moderate and humane. The question was not a lively one for Hume when he wrote the *Treatise* because the number of emancipated philosophers was small and the structure of society was such that they had little influence. The pressing problem for Hume in the *Treatise* was not the errors of philosophy emancipated from vulgar theism but the errors of religious philosophy.

But the question of whether emancipated philosophy would have critical self-knowledge sufficient to recognize and correct its own errors began to be pressing as philosophy became more and more popular. The *philosophes* saw themselves as an elite vanguard leading the masses to higher philosophical self-consciousness. Diderot wrote: "Let us hasten to make philosophy popular."<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of philosophical consciousness on a popular level was more advanced in Britain than in France. Hume observed that it had given rise to a radically different sort of political party which was unique to modern times and which he viewed with alarm. This new sort of party was based not on interest or affection but on metaphysical principle: "Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern

times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable *phaenomenon*, that has yet appeared in human affairs" (*E*, p. 60).

Such parties were possible only in an age in which philosophical consciousness had in some way filtered down to the populace. Centuries of instruction by Christendom with its union of philosophy and vulgar theism had made it possible for even the vulgar to participate in a confused sort of philosophical-religious thinking. But now the philosophical consciousness informing modern political parties is entirely secular, as Hume makes clear in "Of the Original Contract" where he observes that "no party, in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one; we accordingly find, that each of the factions, into which this nation is divided, has reared up a fabric of the former kind, in order to protect and cover that scheme of actions, which it pursues" (*E*, p. 465). Politics in modern society is *metaphysical* politics. The implacable opposition and fanaticism of the ancient philosophical sects which had been contained by the pagan civic religion could now be reenacted in the political arena. The spectacular errors and absurdities of philosophical reflection, the total inversions of experience, and the alienation from common life that is a peculiarity of the philosophical intellect are no longer confined to the closet but are free to inform public policy.

The philosophical intellect informed by the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion is free to indulge the wildest and most dangerous theories about the real. It naturally gives rise to endless sects each with a claim on the real and a title to rule. The greatest care and attention is needed, even among the most responsible philosophers, to avoid being misguided by the illusion-making character of their own autonomous philosophical reflection. But such care and attention has seldom been exercised by philosophers and is certainly not to be expected of the new philosophically informed masses: "The people being commonly very rude builders, especially in this speculative way, and more especially still, when actuated by party zeal; ...their workmanship must be a little unshapely, and discover evident marks of that violence and hurry, in which it was raised" (*E*, p. 466). The populace is now vulnerable to a new breed of demagogues who will lead their deluded followers by the passions, not of religious



fanaticism, but of "philosophical enthusiasm."

Diderot had issued the call to make philosophy popular. By the next century, Marx could write: "the philosophical consciousness itself has been pulled into the torment of struggle. What we must accomplish is the ruthless criticism of all that exists."<sup>4</sup> Where Diderot and Marx celebrated the capture of all aspects of human existence by secular philosophical consciousness, Hume lamented it, referring to his own time, sardonically, as "this philosophic age" (*EM*, p. 197n). Hume considered this a disaster not because there is anything wrong with critical reflection or theorizing as such but because there is something seriously wrong with philosophical theorizing improperly conceived. In Part IV, Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume forged a distinction between true and false philosophical criticism—a distinction of the greatest importance for understanding his philosophical and historical writings. I have discussed this fundamental distinction elsewhere and cannot do justice to it here.<sup>5</sup> But this can be said. Hume tries to show in Book I, Part IV that the traditional notion of philosophical reflection (i.e., reflection informed by the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion) distorts, constricts, and if pursued consistently finally alienates one entirely from the experience of common life. Hume carries the reader dialectically through "a gradation of three opinions, that rise above each other, according as the persons, who form them, acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge. These opinions are that of the *vulgar*, that of a *false philosophy*, and that of the *true*; where we shall find upon enquiry, that the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge" (*T*, p. 223, emphasis mine).

Vulgar consciousness is not unreflective or uncritical; rather, it is merely *philosophically* unreflective consciousness. False philosophy is vulgar consciousness come to philosophical self-awareness. Such thinking structured by the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion imagines itself emancipated from *all* the prejudices and customs of common life and with the authority to *totally* restructure vulgar consciousness in a philosophically acceptable way. Hume tries to show, however, that philosophical criticism which consistently supposes itself emancipated from *all* the prejudices and customs of common life ends in *total* skepticism. Philosophers in fact seldom end in total skepticism, only

because they are not really emancipated from the prejudices of common life but unknowingly smuggle in some favorite prejudice which gives content to and hides what are otherwise entirely empty philosophical principles. True philosophy emerges when the philosopher recognizes that this is the condition of philosophical reflection and comes to affirm the prejudices of common life as the ground of thought and proceeds to form critical principles *within* that ground and not in opposition to it.

Hume's reform of philosophy in Book I, Part IV requires that one abandon the principle of *autonomy* (the philosopher is not the spectator of common life but a *participant* in it) and the principle of *dominion* (it is not autonomous reason that has a title to rule but custom—and custom is always social, requiring deference to others). True philosophy is critical reflection on custom carried out within the domain of custom. It is, if one likes, criticism of custom, by custom, and for custom. Or as Hume puts it: "Philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life methodized and corrected" (*EU*, p. 162).

The false philosophical consciousness imagines itself the sovereign spectator of the whole of custom. Custom is no longer a mode of participation but an alienated *object* of reflection. The philosopher seeks a theory of this totality purged of the authority of any custom within it. But such theories always end in taking a favorite part of custom and ontologically reducing much, if not all, of the rest to it: "When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phaenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning" (*E*, p. 159). Thus Thales took water and reduced everything to it. The history of philosophy is filled with such magical inversions. Benevolence is really self-love, property is theft, to be is to be perceived, man is condemned to freedom, etc. Oakeshott once observed that everything Marx touched turned to superstition.<sup>6</sup> Hume taught that everything the false philosopher touches is transformed into a strange inverted world over which the philosopher alone has dominion. Hume, like Oakeshott, recognized in false philosophical consciousness a secular form of superstition: "Do you come to a philosopher as to a *cunning man*, to learn something by magic or witchcraft, beyond what can be known by common prudence and discretion?" (*E*, p. 161).

THE *TREATISE* AND POSTMODERN CULTURE

Hume recognized his own age as one in which philosophical consciousness was on the way to becoming the dominant form of culture. In our own time it has become the dominant form: we live in what might be called the first philosophic age. Hume taught that modern philosophic religion imposed universal rules "to our action, to our words, and to our very thoughts and inclinations" (*EM*, pp. 341-43). Likewise, secular philosophical consciousness informs every aspect of contemporary culture. Writing at the height of the cold war Camus had this to say about the dominion of (what Hume would have called) false philosophical consciousness in politics: "There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic.... We are living in the era of...the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults, and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges.... In more ingenuous times, when the tyrant razed cities for his own greater glory, when the slave chained to the conqueror's chariot was dragged through the rejoicing streets...the mind did not reel before such unabashed crimes, and judgment remained unclouded. But slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy...in one sense cripple judgment. On the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself."<sup>7</sup>

The spontaneous collapse of communist regimes throughout eastern Europe may be viewed as the long overdue Humean unmasking by "true philosophy" of the spectacular absurdities of failed economic systems ruling in the name of social justice and of totalitarian regimes ruling in the name of human freedom. What Camus called "a curious transposition" of concepts "peculiar to our times" is what Hume called "philosophical chymistry" (alchemy) whereby false philosophical consciousness inverts the object of its reflection into its opposite (*EM*, p. 297). If the cold war is over, the political world we live in is still very much a world of contrary philosophical systems seeking instantiation and dominion. And so it is a world vulnerable to the secular superstitions of false philosophical theorizing. And not just the political world. The whole of culture: morals, art, literature, architecture, manners, and

language are vulnerable to the inversions of "philosophical chymistry" as carried out by countless forms of "critical theory" such as structuralism, deconstructionism, feminism, etc., each seeking dominion through the ancient philosophical project of "unmasking" and "consciousness raising." But if Hume's teaching in Book I, Part IV of the *Treatise* that there is a distinction between true and false forms of philosophical consciousness is correct, then some of the unmaskers will need to be unmasked and some of the consciousness raisers will need to have their consciousness raised from the level of false philosophy to that of "true philosophy [which] approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge" (*T*, p. 223).

In a philosophic age, the discovery of this distinction between true and false philosophical criticism is of fundamental *ethical* importance. It is of ethical importance because in a philosophic age no normative question of practice can escape being structured by philosophical consciousness whose dominion, by the very nature of philosophical thinking, is and must be total. Spinoza could title his great work on substance *Ethics* because he thought the question of being is prior to the question of how to live. But modern thinkers after Hume and Kant rejected this thesis in favor of the doctrine that substance itself is structured by human consciousness. In Book I, Part IV of the *Treatise* Hume shows how philosophical consciousness itself is a deeper notion than substance insofar as substance is a construction of philosophical consciousness. In a philosophic age all objects of culture are *philosophically constructed* objects. (This is part of what is meant by describing contemporary culture as "postmodern.") In such an age it is not the question of being but an understanding of the difference between true and false philosophical consciousness that is prior to the question of how to live. In this way the *Treatise*, especially Book I, Part IV, is a deep work in ethics.

The Enlightenment also imagined itself to possess the solution to the problem of ethics. That solution was for philosophical consciousness to purge itself of vulgar theism and to replace it as the dominate form of culture. It never occurred to the *philosophes* that the philosophical intellect itself might contain a form of error, superstition, self-deception, and destruction the equal to anything in vulgar theism. This error is all the more difficult to discover because philosophical reflection (informed by the principles of

ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion) is done in the name of *reason*, and how can "reason" be a source of error and self-deception? In this naive confidence in the philosophical intellect as self-justifying, Diderot issued the call to make philosophy popular. But before this call had gone out, Hume had already seen, in the *Treatise*, the need for a radical criticism of philosophy itself. In the heyday of the Enlightenment Hume had issued a call for a deeper form of Enlightenment, one devoted to unmasking the kingdom of darkness internal to the philosophical intellect itself. It was a call that in our "postmodern" culture has scarcely been heard.

1. Quoted by James Force in "The Newtonians and Deism" in James Force and Richard Popkin, *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), p. 59.
2. I have discussed the nature of Hume's belief in "philosophical theism" in *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), chap. 6.
3. Quoted in Thomas A. Spragens, *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 83.
4. *Karl Marx on Revolution*, 13 vols., Saul K. Padover, ed. and trans. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), I, p. 516.
5. See *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, chap. 1.
6. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 309.
7. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 23.

**Abbreviations for David Hume's Works  
Used Throughout This Volume**

*E* *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985.

*EU* *David Hume's Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

*I* *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. C. W. Hendel. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955; *EM* *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

*H* *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second, 1688*, based on the edition of 1778 with the author's last corrections and improvements. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983.

*L* *The Letters of David Hume*, J. Y. T. Grieg. 2 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

*NHR* *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. A. Wayne Colver and *DHR* *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. John Valdimir Price. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

*T* *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition with text revised and variant readings by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

# Reason Papers

*A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies*

**Essays to Commemorate the 250th Anniversary  
of the Completion of David Hume's  
*A Treatise of Human Nature***

Edited by Stuart D. Warner

## Articles

- Hume on the Origin and Evolution of Religious  
and Philosophical Consciousness ..... Donald W. Livingston 3
- The Virtue of Political Skepticism ..... James T. King 24
- Hume's Account of Property ..... Nicholas Capaldi 47
- David Hume on the Public Interest ..... Stuart D. Warner 74
- Spinoza and Hume on Individuals ..... Douglas Den Uyl and Lee Rice 91
- Natural Rights, Philosophical Realism, and Hume's  
Theory of Common Life ..... Douglas B. Rasmussen 118

## Discussion Notes

- In Defense of Moore's "Proof of an External World" ..... John O. Nelson 137
- Race Isn't Merit ..... Eugene Sapadin 141

## Book Reviews

- William G. Scott and David K. Hart's *Organizational  
Values in America* ..... David L. Norton 149
- Hans-Hermann Hoppe's *A Theory of Socialism  
and Capitalism* ..... Daniel Shapiro 154

---

**REASON PAPERS** is published at the Department of Philosophy, Auburn University, AL 36849. Send orders (\$7.00 per copy in US and Canada, \$8.00 elsewhere; make checks payable to Reason Papers) to Professor Tibor R. Machan, *Reason Papers*, Department of Philosophy, Auburn University, AL 36849. Manuscripts should be accompanied with return postage and envelope. Copyright©1990 by the Department of Philosophy, Auburn University. All rights reserved.

---