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Hume's Separation of Morality from Religion

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ABSTRACT

Hume's Separation of Morality from Religion

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This thesis is designed to show how Hume provides a constructive alternative to theistic morality. The thesis is divided into two Parts. Part I explores the reasons why Hume maintains that there is no necessary connection between religion and morality. A discussion of the deist controversy in the eighteenth century is provided. Hume's analysis of the origins of religious belief and his attack on the argument from design are examined in detail.

Part II is designed to show how Hume points the way towards a secular morality by grounding morality in the passions as opposed to reason. His arguments against the rationalist school of thought are reviewed, and the theories of Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston are treated in some detail. Finally, Hume's account of moral obligation, the distinctly secular feature of his moral theory, is discussed.

It is concluded that the question of the existence of a Supreme Being in relation to morality is not a relevant issue for Hume.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to show how Hume provides a constructive alternative to theistic morality. The thesis is divided into two parts. In Part I it is seen how Hume demonstrates that there is no necessary connection between religion and morality. More specifically, four of Hume's arguments are examined. These form his attack against the claim that religion can serve as an adequate foundation for morality.

Apart from the sociological argument, in which Hume points to the discrepancy between the professed moral principles of religious institutions and the corrupt practices of many of its members, the other arguments constitute a critique of the argument from design. Hume attacks the argument from design at two levels; the empirical level and the logical level. At the empirical level Hume questions the claim that anyone who is capable of reasoning can infer the existence of a Supreme Being simply from his observations of the order of nature. At the logical level Hume questions the claim that observations concerning the natural order are sufficient grounds for inferring the existence of a Supreme Being endowed with moral attributes.

Part II is designed to show how Hume points the way towards a secular morality by grounding morality in the passions as opposed to reason. Here his arguments against the rationalist school of thought in ethics are reviewed, and the theories of Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston are treated in some detail.

Finally, Hume's account of moral obligation, the distinctly secular feature of his moral system, is examined. Here he shows that man's actions are governed and motivated by self-interest and not by any divine decree, nor by any immutable laws apprehended by reason. It follows that, for Hume, the question of the existence of a Supreme Being in relation to morality is at best irrelevant.

CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, religion and morality were so closely related that they were "generally presumed to be inseparable companions."[1] One result was that, to the early eighteenth century mind, the rejection of theism necessarily implied the rejection of all moral standards. The reason for this was that religion was considered by most moralists of the time to be the only true foundation of morality.

This position makes sense only if we postulate a benevolent and omnipotent Creator who governs the universe and whose will, as revealed in the Scriptures, constitutes a code of conduct for all men. To obey this code is to be rewarded with eternal life and to disobey it is to incur eternal damnation.

It was the questioning of one of these tenets, namely revelation, that led to the deist controversy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Although Hume is associated with the deists, he cannot, strictly speaking, be numbered among them.[2] A brief look at

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[1]Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, edited with Introduction by John M. Robertson, 2 vols. (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963), 1:237. [Hereafter cited as Characteristics]

[2]Leslie Stephen, History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century, with a Preface by Crane Brinton, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), 1:73. [Hereafter cited as English Thought]

some of the principal issues of deism will provide us with the necessary background against which Hume's arguments concerning natural religion* can be seen. The deists had raised the fundamental issue concerning reason and religion. It was Hume who drew the final inference that reason cannot furnish us with any conclusive proof regarding claims made by religion.

The deist controversy revolved around the issues of natural and revealed religion. The deists, in general, believed that the essential truths of religion could be discovered by reason alone.[3] Revealed religion allowed for too many conflicting interpretations. It was therefore impossible to derive any certainty from it. Certainty about God and his attributes was to be sought and found in nature. It was there that he had fully revealed himself. The essence of deism then, lies in "its clear-cut distinction between natural and revealed religion, coupled with its contention that the former can (and should) stand independently on the sole basis of reason."[4]

The deists' insistence on natural or rational religion as distinct from revealed supernatural religion had several historical causes. The most significant philosophically, was John Locke's theory of knowledge. Locke, in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, had argued against the existence of innate ideas, including the idea of God. This argument, for Locke at least, did not weaken the case for the existence of God. He maintained that God's existence could be demonstrated with the same

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[3]Ibid., 1:93.

[4]Cornelio Fabro, God in Exile: Modern Atheism, ed. and trans. Arthur Gibson (New York: Newman Press, 1968), p. 226. [Hereafter cited as Modern Atheism]

*The term 'natural religion' is to be understood as defined by Hume.

certainty as a geometrical proposition. This proof, according to Locke, rested chiefly on causality.[5]

Locke has been justly called one of the founders of deism.[6] Ironically, this is not due to his views on religion. For Locke, there was no conflict between faith and reason; Christianity was reasonable. His religion could be reduced to two essential truths: There is a God and Jesus Christ was the Messiah. The truth of the former can be shown by observing the works of nature, the latter by the historical records of the miracles performed by Christ.[7] It was Locke's discussion concerning the limits of our understanding that provided the basis for the deists' polemics on religion:

> Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas; How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy, and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From Experience: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self. Our Observation employ'd either about external, sensible Objects; or about the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves, is that, which supplies our Understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the Fountains of Knowledge, from whence all the Ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.[8]

Starting from this premise then, the deists devised arguments to show that the 'truths' of revealed religion run contrary to or lie

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[5]John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. with an Introduction, Critical Apparatus, and Glossary by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 4, X, p. 620. [Hereafter cited as Locke, Essay]

[6]Fabro, Modern Atheism, p. 275.

[7]John Locke, The Reasonableness of Christianity, abridged, ed. with Introduction by I.T. Ramsay (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford U. Press, (1958) p. 37. [abridgments consist mainly of giving fewer scriptural discussions]

[8]Locke, Essay, II, 1, p. 104.

beyond our experience, and consequently beyond our understanding. This, as we have seen, was not Locke's conclusion. But this fact did not prevent deists such as John Toland in Christianity not Mysterious and Matthew Tindal in Christianity as Old as the Creation from drawing the inference. Hence the task, or more properly the vogue, began to be to subject all of the claims of revealed religion to rational scrutiny and to accept only those principles which conformed to ordinary experience. Consequently, it became increasingly difficult to reconcile the claims of an historical religion, such as Christianity, with the abstract principles of philosophers. As Leslie Stephen records in his History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century:

> How could the tutelary deity of a petty tribe be the God who ruled over all things and all men? How could . . . the God worshipped by Christians . . . be still the ruler of the whole earth, in which Christians formed but a small minority, and of the universe, in which the earth was but as a grain of sand on the seashore? Or how, again, could the Personal Deity, whose attributes and history were known by tradition, be the God whose existence was inferred by philosophers from the general order of the universe; or regarded as a necessary postulate for the discovery of all truth?[9]

What were the moral implications of all this? Clearly, if a personal God to whom we are all accountable, is replaced by an abstract concept roughly equivalent to nature, then his code encounters a similar fate. Morality becomes instinctive; a natural code engraved on the hearts of all men. Hence, to be moral is to follow one's own nature or sentiments. In the Earl of Shaftesbury's words, "Sense of right and

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[9]Stephen, English Thought, 1:68.

wrong . . . [is] as natural to us as natural affection itself."[10] This is but a mere step away from a completely secular morality.

The Christian apologists had been quick to cry foul, or heresy, and with justification. For, as Hume was to show later, the deists' position pushed to its logical conclusion ultimately led to skepticism. Moreover, the apologists had failed to realize that they had unwittingly lent skepticism a helping hand for, as Stephen points out, "Many an honest crusader, who had assumed in all sincerity the badge of the true faith, was in fact a rationalist to the core . . . ."[11]

The apologists shared with the deists a basic assumption: Reason coupled with observation could provide proof for the existence of God and his attributes. The order and unity of the universe, to any reasonable man, pointed to only one conclusion; the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. Traditionally, this is known as the argument from design. To the eighteenth century mind, this argument was considered to be unassailable, upholding the very heart of religion. It was not with undue caution therefore, that Hume, in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, systematically launched his attack against it. He showed in this work that although the argument from design is not incompatible with our observations of the world, it does not constitute proof for the existence of any god at all. Moreover, even if the argument successfully established the claim that a belief in a god is reasonable, it would be in effect a useless claim, since it could have no practical bearing on our lives. This follows because the moral attributes of this god are not

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[10]Shaftesbury, Characteristics, 1:260.

[11]Stephen, English Thought, 1:76.

capable of being legitimately inferred from the state of affairs found in the world.

In the chapter that follows we will be concerned with showing how Hume arrives at the conclusions stated above.

CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND MORAL CONDUCT

Section 1. The Origins of Religious Belief

Hume's writings on religion may be viewed as answering two basic claims of rational theists. The first is that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, even though its ideals are not always realized, is socially useful. This follows because religion was believed to be able to furnish the best grounds for moral action. The second claim is that by the natural light of reason alone we can come to know God and his attributes by observing the beauty and order in the universe. Hume's answer to the first claim is found mainly in the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and in The Natural History of Religion. His answer is clearly a negative one: The Christian religion 'as found in the world', very often does not promote good conduct, but provides motives for the most flagrantly immoral behaviour. In Hume's words, "What so pure as some of the morals, included in some theological systems? What so corrupt as some of the practices, to which these systems give rise?"[1]

Hume's Natural History which appeared in 1757, is so negative in tone towards organized religion that it has occasioned one commentator

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[1]David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, ed. A. Wayne Colver and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. John Valdimir Price (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976) p. 95. [Hereafter cited as N.H.R.]

to remark:

> Except for an occasional compliant genuflection to the powers of Church and State which any "knower" can recognize, the Natural History has few ambiguities. At times its overwhelming pessimism about human nature seems so pervasive and the hostility to Christianity so flagrant that one wonders whether the circumspect Hume did not secrete the wrong dissertation.[2]

Manuel, of course, is referring to the posthumously published Dialogues. The Dialogues is the work in which Hume deals directly with the second claim. The tone is not as unambiguously negative as that of the Natural History and this might be the reason Manuel questions Hume's discretion. Nevertheless, it is in the Dialogues that Hume delivers his most damaging blow to natural religion. To show how he does this is the purpose of the following sections.

In the Natural History Hume's attack is directed at two commonly held beliefs of his time. The first of these was the assumption that the belief in a Supreme Being is a natural instinct in man.[3] The other was the belief in the social usefulness of Christianity.[4] Hume's argument against the first claim involves an enquiry into the origins of religious belief.

Religious belief, according to Hume, is not an original instinct

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[2]Frank E. Manuel, The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 170.

[3]This claim is based on the argument from general consent; that is, that religious belief is natural to man since it always has been and continues to be prevalent. J. C. A. Gaskin, Hume's Philosophy of Religion (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978) pp. 143-45. [Gaskin, Religion]

[4]Locke, Montesquieu and Voltaire were among those who argued in favour. See Fabro, Modern Atheism, chap. 3 and Stephen, English Thought, vol. 1, chap. 3.

in man on a par with sexuality, self-love, gratitude, etc. "since every instinct of this kind has been found absolutely universal."[5] Religious belief, or belief in an 'invisible, intelligent, power', although generally widespread, is not universal. He writes:

> The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exceptions, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas, which it has suggested.[6]

The religion of the primitive man, according to Hume, was polytheistic and not monotheistic. Early man was incapable of inferring any ideas of invisible powers from the contemplation of the works of nature. The theistic idea of a Supreme and Almighty Creator was "too big for . . . [his] narrow conceptions, which . . . [could] neither observe the beauty of the work, nor comprehend the grandeur of its author."[7] The primitive religions sprang from man's fear of future events; that is, the 'concern for happiness'; 'the dread of misery'; 'the terror of death'. Hence for Hume, to quote Manuel again, "Religion was born not of reason but of a passion, and a sordid one at that . . . ."[8]

The significance of Hume's argument is twofold. First, by asserting that religious belief is not a primary instinct in man, but a derivative one, human nature without religion becomes a distinct possibility. Second, by grounding religious belief in the passions and not in reason, Hume casts doubt on the confidence of the theists and deists of his day in being able to demonstrate the existence of God and his attributes solely by the natural light of reason.

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[5]Hume, N.H.R., p. 25. [6]Ibid. [7]Ibid., p. 35.

[8]Manuel, Gods, p. 173.

Section 2. Some Consequences of Natural Religion

The social usefulness of religion was founded on the claim that religion affords the best grounds for moral action. The theists asserted that the individual's obligation to his neighbour, and to society at large, is grounded in the fear and love of God. Consequently, this moral obligation is more binding, and therefore more effective, in holding man's passions in check, than any code which is grounded merely in human nature.

In the Dialogues Hume has Cleanthes say the following

> Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it. For if finite and temporary rewards and punishments have so great an effect, as we daily find: How much greater must be expected from such as are infinite and eternal?[9]

Philo's answer is "How happens it then . . . if vulgar superstition be so salutary to society, that history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs?"[10] He concedes that rewards and punishments are indeed effective in controlling behaviour, nevertheless these measures are effective only

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[9]David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, edited, with Introduction by Norman Kemp Smith, The Library of Liberal Arts (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1947) pp. 219-20. [Hereafter cited as Dialogues]

if they occur within the foreseeable future. The more distant in time the consequences are thought to be the less effective they are in controlling our behaviour. Philo says:

> Consider, I beseech you, the attachment, which we have to present things, and the little concern which we discover for objects so remote and uncertain. When divines are declaiming against the common behaviour and conduct of the world, they always represent this principle as the strongest imaginable (which indeed it is) and describe almost all human kind as lying under the influence of it, and sunk into the deepest lethargy and unconcern about their religious interests. Yet these same divines, when they refute their speculative antagonists, suppose the motives of religion to be so powerful, that, without them, it were impossible for civil society to subsist; nor are they ashamed of so palpable a contradiction. It is certain, from experience, that the smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct, than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems.[11]

As mentioned in the previous chapter the belief that religion is the only safeguard of morality was so strong that it was considered virtually impossible for an atheist to be a morally good person. Hume attacks this belief by making the observation that "the highest zeal in religion and the deepest hypocrisy, so far from being inconsistent, are often or commonly united in the same individual character."[12] Hume argues strongly for what might seem quite evident to a twentieth century

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[11]Ibid., pp. 220-21.

[12]Ibid., p. 222.

reader;[13] that is, that religious fervour and good morals do not necessarily coincide. In the Natural History he writes:

> Hence the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion: Hence it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals from the fervor or strictness of his religious exercises, even tho' he himself believe them sincere.[14]

As unpopular as this view may have been at the time it was written, nevertheless it was not new. Pierre Bayle had in the seventeenth century contended against the conventional wisdom of his day that an atheist may be virtuous. And Shaftesbury following Bayle wrote:

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[13]In a 1973 article a clergyman writes as follows: "to hold that there is a necessary connection between religion and morality, is not to be committed to holding that only religious believers can perform morally good actions. It is not the case that without religion or religious belief one cannot act morally (how the unbeliever's actions can be supernaturally meritorious, is another question). Equally, it is not the case that believers can (or think they can) become incapable of immoral action. Many an atheist is honest and chaste and reliable, unselfish, generous, and kind. On the other hand, many a believer has been dishonest and unjust, insensitive to the feelings of his own family or to the needs of the poor. This is of course a truism of Catholic morality and daily experience, but perhaps it deserves to be stated." Eric D'Arcy, "'Worthy of Worship': A Catholic Contribution", in Religion and Morality, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., Anchor Books (New York: Doubleday, 1973) p. 194.

[14]Hume, N.H.R., p. 90.

> We have known people who, having the appearance of great zeal in religion, have yet wanted even the common affections of humanity, and shown themselves extremely degenerate and corrupt. Others again, who have paid little regard to religion, and have been considered as mere atheists, have yet been observed to practise the rules of morality, and act in many cases with such good meaning and affection towards mankind as might seem to force an acknowledgement of their being virtuous.[15]

The more interesting part of Hume's answer, which he merely hints at in the Natural History, is that in the sphere of morals man not only does act but is obliged to act apart from any reference to the deity. Man's moral obligation, he maintains is not towards any deity but towards society and himself. He writes,

> . . . the moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretence to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is esteemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves.[16]

On the following page he asserts that:

> In restoring a loan, or paying a debt, his [a man's] divinity is no way beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many would have performed, were there no god in the universe.[17]

From what we have seen then, Hume's answer to the claim that religion is useful to society is definitely in the negative. The reasons he gives are that religion, as a social institution; does not necessarily promote good morals. In many cases, it is outrightly detrimental to the good of society. Moreover, moral obligation is not based on any special relationship between man and God. Moral obligation, according to Hume, is merely what we owe to ourselves and to society. Consequently, a man's

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[15]Shaftesbury, Characteristics, 1:237. [16]Hume, N.H.R., p. 89.

[17]Ibid., p. 90.

morals are not determined by his religion, but by his nature and by the society in which he lives.[18]

The essay "Of a Particular Providence and a Future State", which comprises section XI of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, is Hume's more direct and more philosophical discussion of the social utility of religion. The essay is significant in that it is the first place in which Hume discusses the argument from design, and it may be seen as an introduction to the more complex treatment that the argument receives in the Dialogues.

Section XI was originally entitled "Of the Practical Consequences of Natural Theology".[19] This is the more appropriate title since the issue which is discussed is primarily about the practical consequences we can derive, if any, from the argument from design. Kemp Smith calls the later title "Of a Particular Providence and a Future State" misleading. He remarks,

> . . . the main argument of the section--occupying no less than 14 of its 17 pages--is not what its title would lead us to expect, a discussion of the doctrines of a particular providence and of an after-life, but a discussion of "the chief or sole argument for a divine existence", the argument from design.[20]

Hume's stated aim in this section is not to question the validity of the argument, but rather to examine what can and cannot be inferred from it. Natural theologians, in claiming that they can demonstrate the existence of a First Cause or Supreme Being from the order and 'wise arrangement' of the universe go on to infer that this Being possesses

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[18]For a detailed discussion of Hume's account of moral obligation see Chapter 4, infra.

[19]Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 51.

[20]Ibid.

unlimited attributes such as infinite power, goodness and intelligence. They assert moreover, that this Being "guides the course of events, and punishes the vicious with infamy and disappointment, and rewards the virtuous with honour and success, in all their undertakings."[21]

Hume's claim is that none of the above can be inferred from the argument from design. Even if we accept the conclusion that there is a Supreme Being in the universe, we would not be justified in ascribing to this Being any moral or natural attributes beyond what is found in the ordinary course of nature. Consequently, we would not be justified in making any inferences concerning principles of conduct beyond what is found in ordinary experience, since these principles would then themselves be founded on an unwarranted assumption. In sum, for Hume, to assert that there is a Supreme Being in the universe is to assert something which is of no practical consequence; that is to say, useless.

In this section of the Enquiry Hume uses the dialogue form. It is a literary device which he also employs later in the Dialogues. The dialogue form permits Hume to discuss freely sensitive religious issues by placing the arguments in the mouths of fictitious characters; in this case of 'a friend'. Hume takes on the part of the narrator giving an account of a conversation he had with a friend who

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[21]David Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, 2nd ed., edited with an Introduction, Comparative Tables of Contents, and Analytical Index by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 140. [Hereafter cited as Enquiries]

> . . . loves sceptical paradoxes; where, though he advanced many principles, of which I can by no means approve, yet as they seem to be curious, and to bear some relation to the chain of reasoning carried on throughout this enquiry, I shall here copy them from my memory as accurately as I can, in order to submit them to the judgement of the reader.[22]

The friend is asked to suppose himself to be Epicurus defending, before the Athenian people, the claim that the denial of a divine existence and consequently of a providence and future state does not undermine the foundations of society and loosen the ties of morality. Hume is to represent the Athenian people, or rather "the more philosophical part of his [Epicurus'] audience, such as might be supposed capable of comprehending his arguments."[23]

'Epicurus' takes as his starting point the general view of his audience, namely that

> . . . the chief or sole argument for a divine existence . . . is derived from the order of nature; where there appear such marks of intelligence and design, that you think it extravagant to assign for its cause, either chance, or the blind and unguided force of matter.[24]

Proponents of this argument, continues Epicurus, reason from effects to causes. Because we observe order in the work we infer a capacity to plan in the worker. In inferring a cause from a known effect, the two must be proportioned. We can never be justified in supposing the cause to have any qualities beyond what is sufficient to produce the effect. For instance, a body of ten ounces raised on a scale can only serve as sufficient evidence that the counterweight exceeds ten ounces. This evidence, however, can never serve as grounds that it exceeds one hundred ounces. Consequently,

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[22]Ibid., p. 132. [23]Ibid., p. 134. [24]Ibid., p. 135.

> If the cause, assigned for any effect, be not sufficient to produce it, we must either reject that cause, or add to it such qualities as will give it a just proportion to the effect. But if we ascribe to it farther qualities, or affirm it capable of producing other effects, we can only indulge the licence of conjecture, and arbitrarily suppose the existence of qualities and energies, without reason or authority.[25]

By viewing the "Mona Lisa", for example, we can safely infer that Leonardo da Vinci was a master painter. We cannot legitimately infer further, simply on the evidence of the painting, that he was an engineer and scientist.

Similarly, if we allow that the gods are the causes of the order in the universe, we can ascribe to them only "that precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence, which appears in their workmanship; but nothing farther can ever be proved . . ."[26] To ascribe further and greater attributes to the deity is just an hypothesis. We cannot, argues Hume's Epicurus, reason from the effect (universe) to the cause (Jupiter) and then "descend downwards, to infer any new effect from that cause; as if the present effects alone were not entirely worthy of the glorious attributes, which we ascribe to that deity."[27]

The process is such that, on observing certain phenomena in nature, we look for the cause. Upon imagining ourselves to have found him, we proceed to ascribe to him supreme intelligence and benevolence. We then look back at the world, with its evils and imperfections, and find it impossible that he could have produced it. We contend that this cannot possibly be the whole picture; this life is but a part of a greater plan which will be known to us later in another life.

What we have done, in effect, is reverse the order of the argument.

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[25]Ibid., p. 136. [26]Ibid., p. 137. [27]Ibid.

We have added attributes to the cause beyond that which our experience of the effect warrants. We have then looked back at the effect and have added to it in order to make it more worthy of the cause. What was originally professed to be the sole evidence (experience) has become "merely a passage to something farther; a porch, which leads to a greater, and vastly different building. . . ."[28]

Admittedly, the 'religious hypothesis' is one way of accounting for the visible phenomena but "no just reasoner will ever presume to infer from it any single fact, and alter or add to the phenomena, in any single particular."[29] All we can appeal to, as regards our conduct, is experience. Even if we grant the conclusion of the argument; that is, that there exists a First Cause or Author of the Universe, this conlusion would be useless.

> It is useless; because our knowledge of this cause being derived entirely from the course of nature, we can never, according to the rule of just reasoning, return back from the cause with any new inference, or making additions to the common and experienced course of nature, establish any new principles of conduct and behaviour.[30]

Hume, at this point, raises an objection. He asks, if experience is the only standard we can use in judging matters of fact, why may we not argue, as the theists do, by employing the method of analogy? If we saw a half-finished building, could we not infer that it was the work of 'design and contrivance'? Again, if we saw a human footprint on the beach, could we not conclude that a man had passed that way, and that he had also left the imprint of the other foot even though it was now effaced by the water?

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[28]Ibid., p. 141. [29]Ibid., p. 139. [30]Ibid., p. 142.

> Consider the world and the present life only as an imperfect building, from which you can infer a superior intelligence; and arguing from that superior intelligence, which can leave nothing imperfect; why may you not infer a more finished scheme or plan, which will receive its completion in some distant point of space or time?[31]

The friend's reply is, that there is an 'infinite' difference between the two subjects. The analogy between the two does not hold. In the case of human artifacts we can legitimately reason from effect to cause and make fresh inferences back from the cause regarding the effect. This type of reasoning rests on the fact that we are acquainted with man whose motives and designs we know from experience.

> When, . . . we find, that any work has proceeded from the skill and industry of man; as we are otherwise acquainted with the nature of the animal, we can draw a hundred inferences concerning what may be expected from him; and these inferences will all be founded in experience and observation.[32]

This is not the case, however, when we reason concerning the works of nature. We know the Deity only through his product. This being is unique in the universe, "not comprehended under any species or genus."[33] The natural world, from which place we infer this unique being, is itself unique. We have no previous or other experience of this unique cause and effect as in the case of human beings and their artifacts. We are therefore not able to add anything further to nature than what is already given. The source of our error in this area is that, when we argue, we put ourselves in the place of the Supreme Being and assume that he conducts himself in the same manner as we would conduct ourselves were we in his situation. That this view is mistaken is shown by the fact that in "the ordinary course of nature . . . almost everything is

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[31]Ibid., p. 143. [32]Ibid., p. 144. [33]Ibid.

regulated by principles and maxims very different from ours. . . ."[34] and that "it must evidently appear contrary to all rules of analogy to reason, from the intentions and projects of men, to those of a Being so different, and so much superior."[35]

Hume concedes that this is indeed a difficulty and goes on to propose another difficulty. Is it possible, he asks, for a cause to be known solely from its effect? In causal reasoning it is only when we observe two species of objects constantly conjoined that we infer one from the other. But, when the effect is singular in kind we cannot reasonably infer anything about its cause. For "both the effect and cause must bear a similarity and resemblance to other effects and causes, which we know, and which we have found, in many instances to be conjoined with each other."[36] When we argue as the proponents of the argument 'from design' do, this is not the case. On the contrary, they take the universe, a 'singular and unparalleled' effect, as evidence for a Deity, a 'singular and unparalled' cause. Hume ends by telling his friend "I leave it to your own reflection to pursue the consequences of this principle."[37]

The reason for Hume's understatement of the latter difficulty is fairly clear. The criticism is more damaging to the theists' position than the one levelled against it by his friend. Whereas the latter challenges the consequences which can be derived from the argument from design, Hume's objection challenges the very basis of the argument. "It" as Kemp Smith notes, "raises the question whether the argument from design, as an argument from analogy, can allow of being formulated in a

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[34]Ibid., p. 146. [35]Ibid. [36]Ibid., p. 148. [37]Ibid.

tenable manner."[38]

As significant as Hume's criticism is, it is the direction pointed to by the 'friend's' argument which is more relevant to our present purpose. The latter has cast doubt on the legitimacy of ascribing unlimited moral attributes to the Deity solely on the basis of ordinary experience and observation. Hume develops the argument further in the Dialogues and, as we shall see in the next section, it is sufficient to do irreparable harm to the case for natural theology. For, it is not necessary to show that there is no God. It is sufficient to show that we have no grounds to suppose God to have the moral attributes traditionally ascribed to him. The concept of a benevolent and omnipotent God is fundamental to natural theology. To eliminate it or alter it is to demolish the case for natural religion and consequently for any morality based on it.

Section 3. The Moral Attributes of God

The question of the attributes of God is intimately connected with the problem of evil. Any claims which are made concerning the perfection and goodness of God must include some attempt to reconcile these with the appalling evil found in the world. The problem can be formulated in the following manner: If God is all-powerful, then he must be able to prevent evil. If God is all-good, then he must want to prevent evil. Why then is there evil in the world? If God is able to prevent evil and not willing to do so, then he cannot be all-good. If he is willing and not able, then he cannot be all-powerful.

Hume addresses himself to this problem in Parts X and XI of the

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[38] Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 56.

Dialogues. Before proceeding to the main argument however, some preliminary remarks are in order.

The protagonists of the Dialogues are Cleanthes, who maintains that the most decisive argument for the existence of God is the argument from design; Demea, who believes that the existence of God can be demonstrated a priori and that the nature of God remains a mystery to man; and Philo,[39] the skeptic, who devotes himself to showing just how inadequate the argument from design really is. The conversations that take place between them are reported by Pamphilus, Cleanthes' pupil. The matter in question, Pamphilus tells us in the introduction, is the nature of God, "his attributes, his decrees, his plan of providence."[40] The existence of God is not in question for, "What truth so obvious, so certain, as the being of a God[?]"[41]

The distinction is made again by Demea, at the beginning of Part II, "The question is not concerning the being but the nature of God. This, I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us."[42] Philo agrees with Demea by saying,

> . . . the question can never be concerning the being, but only the nature of the Deity. The former truth, as you well observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God, . . ."[43]

Some critics have argued that Philo's agreement cannot be taken seriously in view of the aim of his general argument. Their contention

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[39]For a detailed discussion of who speaks for Hume see Appendix.

[40]Hume, Dialogues, p. 128. [41]Ibid. [42]Ibid., p. 141.

[43]Ibid., p. 142.

has been that Philo's aim is to disprove the existence of God.[44] Others have maintained that this is not the case.[45]

J. C. A. Gaskin in Hume's Philosophy of Religion presents another view which I believe to be more plausible. Gaskin maintains that in looking at the Dialogues with Christian preconceptions the discussion about God's nature is in the end a discussion about the existence of the Christian God, "because he [Hume] argues that the god which might exist could not be known to have any of the distinguishing features which the Christian God is supposed to have.[46] On the other hand, "from the point of view of assenting to the existence of some god the discussion in the Dialogues is 'concerning the nature of that Divine Being'."[47]

Gaskin's view, as we shall presently see is particularly borne out by the arguments presented in Part X.

As we mentioned earlier, Philo and Demea have agreed that what is in question is the nature of God and not the existence of God. Since

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[44]See Nelson Pike, Introduction to Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion by David Hume (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., 1970), p. 194-95; T. H. Huxley, Hume (London: 1887; reprint ed., New York: Ams Press Inc., 1968), pp. 146-52; A. H. Basson, David Hume (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co. Ltd., Penguin Books, 1958; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, OP 49732, n.d.) p. 105-6.

[45]William H. Capitan, "Part X of Hume's Dialogues", American Philosophical Quarterly Vol. III (1966); reprinted in Hume, ed. V. C. Chappell, Anchor Books (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1966) pp. 384-95; F. Copleston, A History of Philosophy, 7 vols. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1946-62), 5:307-10. A. J. Ayer, Hume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 93.

[46]Gaskin, Religion, p. 168.

[47]Ibid.

Cleanthes does not speak we can presume that he is also in agreement. Philo has conceded that there is an original cause of the universe and we call it God. In the same passage, Philo proceeds to state his position further,

> Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to him [God]; because these words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions, by which we can express our adoration of him. But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas any wise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men. He is infinitely superior to our limited view and comprehension; and is more the object of worship in the temple, than of disputation in the schools.[48]

And on the next page he asserts that

> Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations: I need not conclude my syllogism: You can draw the inference yourself.[49]

Cleanthes' response to Philo is the argument from design:

> Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions . . . All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed.[50]

Cleanthes presents 'this argument a posteriori' as evidence not only for the existence of a god, but also as evidence that this god is similar

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[48]Hume, Dialogues, pp. 142-43.

[49]Ibid. p. 142-3. [50]Ibid.

to the human mind.

The two major camps then, are clearly defined. Philo, on the one hand, maintains that on the basis of experience we cannot know very much about the nature of God; Cleanthes, on the other hand, claims that experience supplies us with very strong evidence for supposing God to be somewhat similar to the human mind, though much greater.

Part X opens with Demea and Philo reflecting on the evils found in the world. "The whole earth, believe me, Philo," says Demea, "is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want, stimulate the strong and courageous: Fear, anxiety, terror, agitate the weak and infirm."[51] Philo adds some observations of his own, "Observe too . . . the curious artifices of nature, in order to embitter the life of every living being. . . . On each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction."[52] Man is no exception to this rule. Philo continues,

> Man, it is true, can, by combination, surmount all his real enemies, and become master of the whole animal creation: But does he not immediately raise up to himself imaginary enemies, the daemons of his fancy, who haunt him with superstitious terrors, and blast every enjoyment of life? . . . His very sleep and dreams furnish new materials to anxious fear: And even death, his refuge from every other ill, presents only the dread of endless and innumerable woes.[53]

Philo then, addresses himself to Cleanthes and asks,

> And it is possible . . . that after all these reflections, and infinitely more, which might be suggested, you can still persevere in your anthropomorphism, and assert the moral attributes of the Deity, his justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude, to be of the same nature with these virtues in human creatures? His power we allow infinite: Whatever he wills is executed: But neither man nor any other animal are happy: Therefore he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite: He is never

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[51]Ibid., p. 194. [52]Ibid., pp. 194-5. [53]Ibid., p. 195.

> mistaken in choosing the means to any end: But the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity: Therefore it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge, there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these.[54]

Cleanthes' reply to Philo is that if he can demonstrate the above to be the case; that is, that man is unhappy or corrupted , then there is an end to all religion. "For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the Deity, while the moral are still doubtful and uncertain?"[55] Cleanthes' answer reveals a full appreciation of the challenge which Philo's argument poses. In essence, Philo's question is this: How can you maintain that the world, imperfect and full of misery as it is, is indisputable proof for the existence of an all-good, all-wise and all-powerful God? If you are using the terms 'good', 'wise' and 'powerful' in their ordinary sense, then clearly the evidence does not support your claim. The implications of the propositions, 'There is evil in the world,' and 'There exists a being who is all-powerful, all-wise and all-good,' are logically incompatible. To deny the first, as Philo rightly points out, is to go against "everyone's feelings and experience."[56] To deny the second, as Cleanthes also rightly points out, is to demolish the case for natural theology. For, to deny that God is all-powerful, all-wise and all-good implies that God cannot be the source of all that is good; that God is not concerned for the welfare and happiness of man; or that God is powerless to prevent the evil that afflicts man. In sum, it amounts to a denial of the existence of the Christian God since to accept any one of the above as true would diminish and thereby destroy the perfection of God.

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[54]Ibid., p. 198. [55]Ibid., p. 199. [56]Ibid., p. 201.

Nelson Pike has suggested that the above argument is deficient since Philo is not recognizing that God might have a morally sufficient reason for allowing suffering.[57] Thus, according to Pike, Philo's argument does not disprove the proposition 'There exists a being who is all-powerful, all-wise and all-good'. Pike is making the assumption that Philo's aim is to disprove the existence of God. I do not believe this to be the case. Philo's aim here is simply to show that the evidence which natural theologians offer as indisputable proof for the attributes of God is inadequate.

Demea, then, intervenes to offer the solution to these 'difficulties'. The theodicy Demea proposes is what Hume elsewhere calls the 'porch view' of life.

> This world is but a point in comparison of the universe: This life but a moment in comparison of eternity. The present evil phenomena, therefore, are rectified in other regions, and in some future period of existence. And the eyes of men, being then opened to larger views of things, see the whole connection of general laws, and trace, with adoration, the benevolence and rectitude of the Deity, through all the mazes and intricacies of his providence.[58]

Demea's theodicy presents a number of problems. The most obvious of these is that it assumes a 'future period of existence'. Hume deals with this subject in his essay "On the Immortality of the Soul" and predictably, comes to the skeptical conclusion that it is difficult to prove by reason alone that there is an after life. He writes, "By what arguments or analogies can we prove any state of existence, which no one ever saw, and which no way resembles any that ever was seen?"[59]

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[57] Pike, Introduction to Dialogues, pp. 186-94.

[58] Hume, Dialogues, p. 199.

[59] David Hume, Essays, Moral, Political and Literary, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 604.

Another problem with Demea's theodicy as William H. Capitan points out, is that this view "presuppose[s] that God is a moral agent--that he will, because of his nature, rectify the present evils of man--when this is precisely the point at issue."[60]

This assumption has already been criticized by Hume in the first Enquiry.[61] To reason from the intentions of men to the intentions of a Supreme Being, so different and so superior to man, according to Hume, is to go against all the rules of analogy. It does not follow that because a person who is a moral agent would want to correct the evil found in the world that God too would wish to do so. It has not been established nor can it be established that God's nature resembles man's nature in this respect.

Cleanthes realizes that Demea's 'solution' cannot, in any substantial way, answer Philo's argument. The most it can do is to establish the mere possibility of a benevolent God; something which incidentally, Philo does not exclude. For Cleanthes however, establishing the possibility of God's benevolence is not good enough; he wants to establish it as a certain truth. It is for this reason that he attacks Demea's 'solution' in such a forceful manner stating,

> . . . No! These arbitrary suppositions can never be admitted, contrary to matter of fact, visible and uncontroverted. Whence can any cause be known but from its known effects? Whence can any hypothesis be proved but from the apparent phenomena? To establish one hypothesis upon another is building entirely in the air; and the utmost we ever attain, by these conjectures and fictions, is to ascertain the bare possibility of our opinion; but never can

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[60] Capitan, "Part X of Hume's Dialogues", p. 392.

[61] Hume, Enquiries, p. 146.

we, upon such terms, establish its reality.[62]

The only way opened to us to establish the benevolence of God, according to Cleanthes, is to deny the existence of evil. He says,

> Your representations are exaggerated: Your melancholy views mostly fictitious: Your inferences contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness: Pleasure than pain: Happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments.[63]

Philo's reply is that this runs counter to everyone's feelings and experience. Moreover, it is an impossible task to 'compute', 'estimate', and 'compare' the pains and pleasures in the lives of all of mankind, "And thus by your resting the whole system of religion on a point, which, from its very nature, must for ever be uncertain, you tacitly confess, that that system is equally uncertain."[64]

Philo then allows a hearing to what will never be believed and what Cleanthes can never prove; that is, that human happiness exceeds its misery. Even were this granted it would still not take Cleanthes very far. From a being who is said to have infinite goodness, we should expect no misery at all in the world. So the question still remains, "Why is there any misery at all in the world?"[65] The only way to escape this reasoning is to plead ignorance of these matters. And this is what Philo says he has maintained all along.

Then Philo, for the sake of argument, makes a further concession. He allows that evil is compatible with infinite power and goodness in the Deity. This would still not improve Cleanthes' case. The most that can

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[62]Hume, Dialogues, pp. 199-200. [63]Ibid., p. 200.

[64]Ibid., p. 201. [65]Ibid.

be derived from this concession is a mere 'possible compatibility' and clearly, this is not enough. Cleanthes must prove these pure and unmixed attributes from the present phenomena which are mixed and confused. Even if the phenomena were pure and unmixed; that is, if there were no evil in the world, there would still be insufficient grounds to infer a Being with infinite attributes, because the phenomena are finite.

In Part XI Cleanthes, realizing that on the basis of his initial argument he cannot meet Philo's challenge makes a final attempt to preserve the human analogy by fundamentally altering his original position. He states that

> . . . if we abandon all human analogy, as seems your intention, Demea, I am afraid we abandon all religion, and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration. If we preserve human analogy, we must for ever find it impossible to reconcile any mixture of evil in the universe with infinite attributes; much less, can we ever prove the latter from the former. But supposing the Author of nature to be finitely perfect, though far exceeding mankind; a satisfactory account may then be given of natural and moral evil, and every untoward phenomenon be explained and adjusted. A less evil may then be chosen, in order to avoid a greater: Inconveniences be submitted to, in order to reach a desirable end: And in a word, benevolence, regulated by wisdom, and limited by necessity, may produce just such a world as the present.[66]

Thus Cleanthes has already, in essence, conceded the victory to Philo. He has conceded that it is impossible to prove the existence of a Being with infinite attributes from the given phenomena. Cleanthes' original position, as stated at the beginning of Part X, by his own admission is untenable. His modified position will not fare any better. As Philo points out, the most it can prove is that the idea of a being

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[66]Ibid., p. 203.

with finite attributes is not inconsistent with the given phenomena;

> . . . however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference. Conjectures, especially where infinity is excluded from the divine attributes, may, perhaps, be sufficient to prove a consistence; but can never be foundations for any inference.[67]

In the final analysis all that can be concluded is that the universe may be the work of some being who remotely resembles human intelligence. Nothing more can be known about this being on the basis of reason and experience.

> If the whole of natural theology . . . resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forebearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections which lie against it?[68]

Thus, Hume here in the guise of Philo avoids the charge of atheism insofar as he does not deny the existence of some god. But, he leaves us with no doubt that this god is not the Christian God.

It can be argued that the concept of the god with which we are left at the end of the Dialogues is vacuous since nothing very definite

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[67]Ibid., p. 205. [68]Ibid., p. 227.

can be said about it.[69] This type of objection however can be answered by pointing out that Hume has indeed affirmed something about the nature of this god and that is that it is a cause of order in the universe.[70]

Nevertheless, from a practical and religious point of view Hume's god is devoid of any significance. It is a remote and impersonal cause totally indifferent to the affairs of men. As Gaskin puts it, "assent to the existence of god in the sense allowed by Hume is valueless for any theistic religion. It carries no duties, invites no action, allows no inferences and involves no devotion."[71]

In sum we have looked at four separate arguments made by Hume which when combined form a powerful attack against the claim that natural religion can serve as an adequate foundation for morality. The first argument is an historical argument. Here, Hume's position is that religious belief originated in the passions, namely fear, and not in reason. He thus casts doubt on the argument that the existence of a Supreme Being is so evident that even primitive man was able to make this inference based solely on his observations of the world. The second argument is a sociological argument. Here, Hume points out the contradiction between the moral principles which are espoused by religious institutions and the corrupt practices of many of its members.

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[69]Huxley remarked that ". . . if we turn from the Natural History of Religion, to the Treatise, the Inquiry, and the Dialogues, the story of what happened to the ass laden with salt, who took to the water, irresistibly suggests itself. Hume's theism, such as it is, dissolves away in the dialectic river, until nothing is left but the verbal sack in which it was contained." Hume, p. 146.

[70]Capitan, "Part X of Hume's Dialogues", pp. 386-7.

[71]Gaskin, Religion, p. 167.

Thus Hume questions the effectiveness of religion as an institution to promote good morals. The last two are logical arguments and are by far the most damaging. Hume's first argument shows that we do not have sufficient grounds to ascribe unlimited attributes to a Supreme Being. His second argument goes further; he shows that we do not have sufficient grounds to ascribe any moral attributes to a Supreme Being. The conclusion of both these arguments is that natural religion stands on uncertain ground insofar as it cannot provide adequate evidence for the moral attributes of God. Consequently according to Hume, natural religion cannot be considered an adequate foundation for morality; since man cannot base his actions on what he does not know.

CHAPTER III

THE ROLE OF REASON IN CONDUCT

Section 1. The Rationalists

As we have seen in Part I, Hume argues for the independence of morality from theology. In the first Enquiry and the Dialogues, Hume has clearly shown that we have no empirical evidence to infer a God who is both omnipotent and benevolent. This invalidates any argument which the natural theologian might offer in favour of inferring moral rules from theological premises. As a consequence, Hume maintains that moral precepts based on theological doctrines must be considered as grounded in faith and not in experience. This, of course, is a conclusion which not all Christians would reject; as Terence Penelhum observes,

> It is ". . . possible that by showing that such doctrines [of revealed religion] cannot be based on scientific reflection but only held on faith he [Hume] is showing something that many religious believers would not resist but welcome. Not all Christians have ever believed in the reasonableness of Christianity."[1]

The question that we will be concerned with in Part II is what theory does Hume propose in order to replace a theologically based morality? In other words, if the will of God according to Hume is

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[1]Terence Penelhum, Hume, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. 170.

not the basis on which our moral distinctions and consequent moral rules rest, how then do we make moral distinctions? Moreover, if the will of God does not bind us to do good and avoid evil what obliges us to be moral?

Before we proceed to examine Hume's answer to these questions an historical note is in order. Prior to the deist controversy revelation was, for the most part, the unquestioned law. Once revelation became a subject for dispute however, moralists and theologians turned to the laws of nature for confirmation of the old truths. This shift in emphasis from revealed law to natural law resulted in moral inquiry becoming appreciably more complex. To quote Stephen,

> So long . . . as the older theological conception of the universe is unhesitatingly accepted, the only moral enquiry which is likely to flourish is casuistry, or the discussion as to the details of that legal code whose origin and sanction are abundantly clear. But wider speculations as to morality inevitably occur as soon as the vision of God becomes faint; when the Almighty retires behind second causes, instead of being felt as an immediate presence, and his existence becomes the subject of logical proof, or belief is refined into sentiment.[2]

The 'wider speculations' which occurred in the eighteenth century, were divided into two major camps: the 'rationalists' or intellectual school and the 'sentimentalists'. Those who belonged to the former maintained that moral distinctions are based on reason while the latter maintained that they are based primarily in human sentiment; that is to say that man is endowed with a moral sense. Hume, as we shall see, belongs to this latter school of thought.

Because Hume's position regarding reason in ethics is largely

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[2]Stephen, English Thought, 2:1.

advanced in answer to the rationalists, we will briefly look at the theories of two of them, Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston. Both Clarke's and Wollaston's doctrines are criticized by Hume in the Treatise.

The rationalists in claiming that morality rests on reason were concerned to show that morality is not an arbitrary matter subject to human convention. Clarke, for instance, maintains that there is a real difference between good and evil present in the nature of things. These moral features are immutable and eternal. Moreover, according to Clarke, there are real and fixed relations which persons and circumstances bear to each other that determine the fittingness[3] or unfittingness of human behaviour. He writes,

> . . . there is a Fitness or Suitableness of certain Circumstances to certain Persons, and an Unsuitableness of others, founded in the nature of Things and the Qualifications of Persons, antecedent to all positive appointment whatsoever; Also that from the different relations of different Persons one to another, there necessarily arises a fitness or unfitness of certain manners of Behaviour of some persons towards others. . . .[4]

These relations of fittingness and unfittingness are also present in the nature of things and are independent of both human convention and the Divine Will:

> . . . as the Addition of certain Numbers, necessarily produces a certain Sum, and certain Geometrical or Mechanical Operations, give a constant and unalterable Solution of certain Problems

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[3]In using the term 'fittingness' instead of 'fitness' I am following Rachael M. Kydd, Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise, (London: 1946; reprint ed., New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1964).

[4]Samuel Clarke, Discourse upon Natural Religion, reprinted in The British Moralists, 2 vols. in 1, edited with Introduction and Analytical Index, by L. A. Selby-Bigge, with a new Introduction by Bernard H. Baumrin, The Library of Liberal Arts (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1964), 2:4.

> or Propositions, so in moral Matters, there are certain necessary and unalterable Respects or Relations of Things, which have not their Original from arbitrary and positive Constitution, but are of eternal necessity in their own Nature. For Example: As in Matters of Sense, the reason why a thing is visible, is not because 'tis Seen, but 'tis therefore Seen, because 'tis visible, so in matters of natural Reason and morality, that which is Holy and Good . . . is not therefore Holy and Good, because 'tis commanded to be done, but is therefore commanded of God, because 'tis Holy and Good . . . Hence God himself, though he has no Superiour, from whose Will to receive any Law of his Actions, yet disdains not to observe the Rule of Equity and Goodness, as the Law of all his Actions in the Government of the World . . . To this Law, the infinite Perfections of his Divine Nature make it necessary for him . . . to have constant regard. . . .[5]

How are we to determine then, according to Clarke, whether a course of action is morally right or wrong? In his scheme, reason apprehends the relations which acts bear to circumstances and pronounces them fit or unfit. These circumstances include the proper end towards which actions are performed; that is, the public benefit. The relations of fittingness or unfittingness are apprehended in the same manner as mathematical relations. Clarke maintains that just as a person would be considered illogical or unreasonable if he were to deny that two plus two equals four, so would he be considered illogical to will an immoral or unfitting act. In short, to will immoral acts according to Clarke is a contradiction or absurdity:

> In a word; All wilful wickedness and perversion of Right, is the very same Insolence and Absurdity in Moral Matters, as it would be in Natural Things, for a man to pretend to alter the certain Proportions of Numbers, to take away the Demonstrable Relations and Properties of Mathematical Figures, to make Light Darkness, and Darkness Light, or to call Sweet Bitter, and Bitter Sweet.[6]

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[5]Ibid., 2:31-32.

[6]Ibid., 2:15.

Man is obliged to follow the dictates of his reason and it is only through reason that he discovers that which is fitting. Reason does not only show us what is the fitting and right thing to do, but also imposes an obligation on all rational beings to follow its dictates. Thus right conduct, for Clarke, is equivalent to reasonable conduct in the sense that only that which is fitting is reasonable.

A question one might want to ask at this point is, if distinguishing between right and wrong is such a simple matter, why is it that men do not always choose to do that which is fitting or right? Clarke's answer is that man does not always follow the dictates of his reason, but is influenced in the opposite direction by his passions.

> Wherefore all rational Creatures, whose Wills are not constantly and regularly determined, and their Actions governed, by right Reason and the necessary differences of Good and Evil, according to the eternal and invariable Rules of Justice, Equity, Goodness and Truth, but suffer themselves to be swayed by unaccountable arbitrary Humours, and rash Passions, by Lusts, Vanity and Pride, by private Interest, or present sensual Pleasures; These, setting up their own unreasonable Self-will in opposition to the Nature and Reason of Things, endeavour (as much as in them lies) to make things be what they are not, and cannot be. Which is the highest Presumption and greatest Insolence, as well as the greatest Absurdity, imaginable. 'Tis acting contrary to that Understanding, Reason and Judgment, which God has implanted in their Natures . . . 'Tis attempting to destroy that Order, by which the Universe subsists. 'Tis offering the highest affront imaginable to the Creator of all things, who made things to be what they are. . . .[7]

Clarke does allow that in some rare cases it may be difficult to distinguish between right and wrong. The distinction might become blurred as when two colours run into each other from opposite ends of a canvas making it 'not possible' to see where the one ends and the

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[7]Ibid., 2:14-15.

other begins. This explains, according to Clarke, why "there may be some latitude in the judgment of different Men, and the Laws of divers Nations."[8] Nevertheless, no matter how blurred the area may appear, the difference between right and wrong remains real. Clarke's choice of words is unfortunate since he asserts that in the case of the two colours it might "not be possible even for a skilful Eye to determine exactly where the one ends, and the other begins,"[9] whereas, "it may perhaps be very difficult in some nice and perplext cases (which yet are very far from occurring frequently), to define exactly the bounds of Right and Wrong."[10] Clearly there is a problem here. One would have expected the conclusion to be that in some instances it is not possible to distinguish between right and wrong. This conclusion, of course, would be unacceptable to Clarke. For Clarke "negligent Misunderstanding and wilful Passions or Lusts, are . . . the only Causes which can make a reasonable Creature act contrary to Reason, that is, contrary to the eternal Rules of Justice, Equity, Righteousness and Truth."[11]

Wollaston also holds with Clarke that immorality consists in making things 'be what they are not', and thus to will immoral acts is an absurdity or contradiction. Wollaston, however, arrives at this conclusion by a different chain of reasoning.

For Wollaston actions convey a meaning concerning some state of

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[8]Ibid., 2:10. [9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid. [11]Ibid., 2:13.

affairs.[12] "There are many acts . . ." Wollaston says, "such as constitute the character of a man's conduct in life, which have in nature, and would be taken by any indifferent judge to have a signification, and to imply some proposition, as plainly to be understood as if it was declared in words. . . ."[13] Whatever conveys meaning, continues Wollaston, can be either true or false. Thus we can ascribe to actions truth values in the same manner as we ascribe them to propositions:

> The thing is the very same still, if into the place of words be substituted actions . . . what is to be understood, has a meaning: and what has a meaning, may be either true or false: which is as much as can be said of any verbal sentence.[14]

What makes an action true, according to Wollaston, is whether it is in agreement with some state of affairs. That is to say that when I act as if something is the case, and it is in fact the case; or when I act as if something is not the case, and it is in fact not the case; then my action is a true action. For example, "If a body of soldiers, seeing another body approach, should fire upon them . . . this action [would] declare that they [are] enemies. . . ."[15] and if they are in

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[12]Kydd, in Reason and Conduct, maintains that Wollaston holds the view that "all acts are assertions." p. 32. Stanley Tweyman makes a good case for reading Wollaston as saying that actions imply propositions, or that, ". . . corresponding to every action there must be a proposition through which the same meaning can be conveyed. . . ." Reason and Conduct in Hume and his Predecessors, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 89.

[13]William Wollaston, The Religion of Nature Delineated, reprinted in The British Moralists, 2:362.

[14]Ibid., 2:363.

[15]Ibid., 2:362.

fact from opposing sides then the action is a true action. Similarly, what makes an action false is its disagreement with some state of affairs. That is to say that when I act as if something is not the case, and it is in fact the case; or when I act as if something is the case, and it is in fact not the case; then my action is a false action. To continue the above example, suppose the soldiers were not in fact from opposing sides, "The salute here was in nature the salute of an enemy, but should have been the salute of a friend: therefore it implied a falsity."[16]

Wollaston speaks of false actions as being contradictory:

> I lay this down then as a fundamental maxim, That whoever acts as if things were so, or not so, doth by his acts declare, that they are so, or not so; as plainly as he could by words, and with more reality. And if things are otherwise, his acts contradict those propositions, which assert them to be as they are.[17]

For example, when I steal a horse my action is a false action because it implies the false proposition 'This horse belongs to me'. This proposition contradicts the true proposition implied by the actual state of affairs; namely that 'This horse belongs to my neighbour'.

From the principles given above, Wollaston derives the following theory of morals. The terms 'true' and 'right' are used synonymously as are 'false' and 'wrong'. Wollaston then claims that any act which implies a true proposition is right and any act which implies a false proposition is wrong. "No act" he states "(whether word or deed) of any being, to whom moral good and evil are imputable, that interferes with any true proposition, or denies anything to be as it is, can

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[16]Ibid., 2:363.

[17]Ibid., 2:364.

be right."[18] And further on he says, "And indeed it is true, that whatever will bear to be tried by right reason, is right; and that which is condemned by it, wrong."[19] Thus all immorality for Wollaston consists in falsehood or contradiction.

Wollaston's theory I believe is aptly summarized by Leslie Stephen who remarked, "Thirty years' profound meditation had convinced Wollaston that the reason why a man should abstain from breaking his wife's head was, that it was a way of denying that she was his wife."[20]

As we have seen then, both Clarke and Wollaston maintain that reason is able to apprehend the moral feature of good and evil which are present in the very nature of things. Moreover, on the basis of these distinctions, reason is able to arrive at moral rules which ought to guide human behaviour. For Clarke and Wollaston and the rationalists in general, morality is founded on those constant moral features which are present in the order of nature.

For our present purpose, the chief interest of the claims made by Clarke and Wollaston are found in the underlying assumption concerning the origin of order in the universe. The assumption is that God, or the Author of nature, is the source of this order. For instance, Clarke

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[18]Ibid., 2:364. [19]Ibid., 2:372.

[20]Stephen, English Thought, 1:109. Wollaston's views were also severely criticized by his own contemporaries; for example, John Clarke of Hull wrote, ". . . who besides himself could have found out, for instance, that to commit fornication, is to deny that there is so much as one woman in the world; and to get drunk, is to deny that there is one drop of liquor, strong or small, for a man to quench his thirst with, upon the face of the whole earth." See Examination of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil (1725), p. 45, in Kydd, Reason and Conduct, p. 36.

speaks of "the Creator of all things, who made things to be, what they are. . . ."[20] Wollaston uses the terms 'laws of nature' and 'laws of the Author of nature' interchangeably: "the law of nature or rather . . . of the Author of nature is, that every intelligent, active and free being should so behave himself as by no act to contradict truth; or, that he should treat everything as being what it is."[21] When Clarke and Wollaston then maintain that moral rules are based on the laws of nature, essentially they are maintaining that moral rules are based on the laws of God, or that God is the ultimate source of our moral rules. This is not to say, however, that Clarke and Wollaston hold that morality is dependent on the will of God. Rather, their position is that God, in his infinite wisdom, made all things according to right reason, and we (including God) observe and are bound by moral rules, not because God wills them, but because they conform to right reason.[22]

Hume's position concerning ethics is consistent with his position concerning religion. In religion Hume argues that the experienced order of nature does not allow us to draw any conclusions about the nature of God. In ethics he maintains that no observable fact in nature nor any relation of ideas entertained by reason will allow us to arrive at any conclusion concerning good and evil. In other words, the natural order cannot be maintained to be the source of our moral distinctions and precepts. For Hume, the source of our moral

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[20]Clarke, Discourse, 2:15.

[21]Wollaston, Religion of Nature, 2:374-75.

[22]See pp. 38 & 39 supra.

distinctions and precepts lies solely in human nature, more specifically, in the passions.

In the following sections we will look at some of Hume's chief arguments against the rationalists. This will be done by showing how Hume argues that moral distinctions are not discerned by reason. The significance of the argument for us is that Hume is indirectly attacking the theological presupposition on which the rationalist system rests. In a letter to Francis Hutcheson, Hume makes the following remark:

> I wish from my Heart, I could avoid concluding, that since Morality, according to your Opinion as well as mine, is determin'd merely by Sentiment, it regards only human Nature & human life . . . If morality were determined by Reason, that is the same to all rational Beings: But nothing but Experience can assure us, that the Sentiments are the same. What Experience have we with regard to Superior Beings? How can we ascribe to them any Sentiments at all?[23]

Section 2. Reason and the Will

Rationalists like Clarke and Wollaston, were concerned to show that good and evil, right and wrong, are not arbitrary notions which evolved out of human conventions, but rather are real distinctions discovered by reason and found in the very nature of things. Hume's quarrel with the rationalists is not concerning the reality of moral distinctions. He grants that moral distinctions are real and dismisses those who deny their reality as not arguing seriously. In An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals he writes

> Those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions, may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants; nor is it conceivable, that any human creature could ever seriously

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[23] J. Y. T. Greig, ed., The Letters of David Hume, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1:40.

> believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of everyone. The difference, which nature has placed between one man and another, is so wide, and this difference is still so much farther widened, by education, example, and habit, that, where the opposite extremes come at once under our apprehension, there is no scepticism so scrupulous, and scarce any assurance so determined, as absolutely to deny all distinction between them. Let a man's insensibility be ever so great, he must often be touched with the images of Right and Wrong; and let his prejudices be ever so obstinate, he must observe, that others are susceptible of like impressions. The only way, therefore, of converting an antagonist of this kind, is to leave him to himself. For, finding that nobody keeps up the controversy with him, it is probable he will, at last, of himself, from mere weariness, come over to the side of common sense and reason.[24]

Part of Hume's dispute with the rationalist thesis that moral distinctions are discerned by reason is that it fails to explain why moral precepts or beliefs influence conduct. We find the argument in Book III of the Treatise in the section entitled "Moral Distinctions not Deriv'd from Reason". Hume starts from the premise that moral rules or precepts influence action. Reason by itself cannot influence action. Therefore, moral precepts or rules are not conclusions of reason:

> Since morals . . . have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone . . . can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.[25]

To examine Hume's argument we begin by showing why he maintains that reason alone cannot influence action. Hume treats this subject

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[24]Hume, Enquiries, pp. 169-70.

[25]Hume, Treatise, p. 457.

in Book II, Part III, of the Treatise in the sections entitled "Of Liberty and Necessity" and "Of the Influencing Motives of the Will".

Hume identifies the will as an impression, and thus it is impossible to define. He does, however, provide us with a description: "by the will, I mean nothing but the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind."[26]

The question which Hume wants to consider concerning the will is "that long disputed question concerning liberty and necessity",[27] that is, whether the will is self-determined or whether it is determined by external causes. Hume begins by reviewing his observations concerning the operations of external bodies. His purpose is to decide whether the principles which have been found to apply to bodies can also be applied to human behaviour. Hume's analysis of causality found in Book I of the Treatise has shown that there are two elements which are required in order to establish a necessary connection between two objects, constant conjunction and the inference which the mind makes from one to the other:

> 'It has been observ'd already, that in no single instance the ultimate connexion of any object is discoverable, either by our senses or reason, and that we can never penetrate so far into the essence and construction of bodies, as to perceive the principle, on which their mutual influence depends. 'Tis their constant union alone, with which we are acquainted; and 'tis from the constant union the necessity arises. If objects had not an uniform and regular conjunction with each other, we shou'd never arrive at any idea of cause and effect; and even after all, the necessity, which enters into that idea, is nothing but a determination of the mind to pass from

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[26]Ibid., p. 399.

[27]Ibid.

> one object to its usual attendant, and infer the existence of one from that of the other. Here then are two particulars, which we are to consider as essential to necessity, viz. the constant union and the inference of the mind; and wherever we discover these we must acknowledge a necessity.[28]

These two elements, according to Hume, are also found to apply to the relationship which actions bear to motives, tempers and circumstances. Any observation concerning the "common course of human affairs"[29] argues Hume, will reveal that there is a constant conjunction between actions and such conditions of the agent.

> There is a general course of nature in human actions, as well as in the operations of the sun and the climate. There are also characters peculiar to different nations and particular persons, as well as common to mankind. The knowledge of these characters is founded on the observation of an uniformity in the actions, that flow from them; and this uniformity forms the very essence of necessity. . . . As long as actions have a constant union and connexion with the situation and temper of the agent, however we may in words refuse to acknowledge the necessity, we really allow the thing.[30]

These observations will also reveal that, when we consider human conduct, we habitually make inferences concerning men's motives, tempers and circumstances. He writes:

> There is no philosopher, whose judgment is so riveted to this fantastical system of liberty [free will], as not to acknowledge the force of moral evidence, and both in speculation and practice proceed upon it, as upon a reasonable foundation. Now moral evidence is nothing but a conclusion concerning the actions of men, deriv'd from the consideration of their motives, temper and situation.[31]

Thus, the same necessity attributed to the motion of external objects can be attributed to human actions. And, as it is the observer who introduces the necessary connection between two objects, so too

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[28] Ibid., p. 400. [29] Ibid., p. 401. [30] Ibid., p. 402-03.

[31] Ibid., p. 404.

in the case of human behaviour, it is the observer of the action who introduces the necessity:

> The necessity of any action, whether of matter or of the mind, is not properly a quality in the agent, but in any thinking or intelligent being, who may consider the action, and consists in the determination of his thought to infer its existence from some preceding object. . . .[32]

Hume concludes with the remark "having prov'd that all actions of the will have particular causes, I proceed to explain what these causes are, and how they operate."[33]

So far, Hume has argued that the relationship between motives and actions is causal. He then goes on to explain what constitutes a motive for action. It is in this context that Hume raises the issue of the alleged conflict between passion and reason:

> Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, 'tis said, is oblig'd to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, 'till it be entirely subdu'd, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle. On this method of thinking the greatest part of moral philosophy, ancient and modern, seems to be founded; nor is there an ampler field, as well for metaphysical arguments, as popular declamations, than this suppos'd pre-eminence of reason above passion. The eternity, invariableness, and divine origin of the former have been display'd to the best advantage: The blindness, unconstancy and deceitfulness of the latter have been as strongly insisted on.[34]

According to Hume then, it is customary to suppose that reason and passion are the two possible motives or principles that produce actions. From the above passage it seems that the criterion Hume uses to identify a motive is its capacity to produce an action.

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[32]Ibid., p. 408. [33]Ibid., p. 412. [34]Ibid., p. 413.

To clarify Hume's position it is necessary to distinguish between the characteristic features of reason and passion. In Hume's scheme reason can only 'direct' or 'guide' actions. Whereas passions 'produce', 'cause' or 'influence' actions.[35]

Hume argues further that if reason is able to produce actions, it must do so in either of two domains. These are demonstrative reasoning and causal reasoning. The understanding, according to Hume, can only make judgments concerning two things, the abstract relations of ideas where it employs demonstrative reasoning as in mathematics; and matters of fact, where it employs causal reasoning as in judgments concerning cause and effect.

Demonstrative reasoning alone can never be a motive to action because its function is limited to perceiving relations between ideas, whereas the will or volition concerns itself with impressions. The knowledge of mathematics, for example, is useful in our everyday lives. However, mathematics by itself does not influence our actions. Its influence is indirect in the sense that it can be used as a means to achieve some end or purpose. Hume gives us the example of the merchant:

> A merchant is desirous of knowing the sum total of his accounts with any person: Why? but that he may learn what sum will have the same effects in paying his debt, and going to market, as all the particular articles taken together.[36]

Mathematical knowledge or demonstrative reasoning alone did not cause the merchant to add up his accounts. Demonstrative reasoning can

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[35]I take 'influence' here to mean "to affect the condition of, to have an effect on." See Oxford English Dictionary, reprinted ed. (1961), s.v. "Influence".

[36]Hume, Treatise, p. 414.

only help us in achieving our end if the desire is already present. Demonstrative reasoning, Hume concludes "never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects. . . ."[37]

Causal reasoning alone can never be a motive to action either according to Hume. Causal reasoning can assist us in identifying the object of our desire or aversion, and direct us concerning the means of attaining or avoiding it:

> 'Tis obvious, that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction. 'Tis also obvious, that this emotion rests not here, but making us cast our view on every side, comprehends whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect. Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation; and according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation.[38]

Reason can in this case direct or guide the passions. It is reason which discovers that a passion is based on a false judgment; such as when the object of our fear or hope does not exist, or when we choose means insufficient to attain our ends. It is only insofar as the ends are concerned that reason cannot judge.

Hume is concerned with stressing that it is evident that "the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it. 'Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object. . . ."[39] Hume does recognize however, that we have a natural inclination to believe that reason can judge concerning ends. He attributes this belief to a confusion of reason with the calm passions. He writes,

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[37]Ibid. [38]Ibid. [39]Ibid.

> 'Tis natural for one, that does not examine objects with a strict philosophic eye, to imagine, that those actions of the mind are entirely the same, which produce not a different sensation, and are not immediately distinguishable to the feeling and perception. Reason, for instance, exerts itself without producing any sensible emotion . . . Hence it proceeds, that every action of the mind, which operates with the same calmness and tranquillity, is confounded with reason by all those, who judge of things from the first view and appearance.[40]

Hume tells us that the "sensations are not evidently different"[41] but he does offer us a criterion whereby we can distinguish between them. The calm passions consist of certain desires and tendencies such as benevolence, the love of life, aversion to evil, etc. These, according to Hume, are known more by their effects such as the actions they might produce rather than by any immediate, intense emotion; whereas reason judges concerning truth or falsehood.

Thus, reason can direct our actions, but it cannot provide a motive for them. It is the passions that move us to act, in that they provide the impulse or desire required to pursue or avoid an end. This desire arises from the prospect of pain or pleasure which we believe the end will bring us. If the prospective end or object does not affect us, then evidently we will not have any desire to pursue it. The prospect of pain or pleasure cannot be evoked by any discovery which causal reasoning might make concerning means to ends. Consequently, Hume concludes that reasoning cannot influence our actions:

> It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us. Where the objects

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[40]Ibid., p. 417.

[41]Ibid.

> themselves do not affect us, their connexion can never give them any influence; and 'tis plain, that as reason is nothing but the discovery of this connexion, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us.[42]

R. D. Broiles makes the following criticism concerning the role Hume assigns to reason. He writes:

> Hume is correct that reason never causes actions, but he is not correct in what he means by this and the conclusions he draws from it. There is something odd in speaking of reason causing actions. In answer to the question "What caused him to do that?" one would be a bit puzzled at the reply, "Reason caused him to do that", . . . we say that certain reasons influenced the agent's decision or course of action. But we don't speak of the reasons as the cause of the action.[43]

Broiles goes on to say that "Reason dictates the actions that ought to be taken, but it does not cause actions."[44]

I think the interpretation that Broiles is proposing here is misleading. When Hume speaks of reason as being incapable of providing a motive for action he is referring to the judgments of reason or the 'conclusions of reason'. What Hume is arguing is that no conclusion or judgment of reason can influence our actions. Hence, whether 'reason dictates the actions that ought to be taken' is precisely what is at issue here for Hume. As we have seen, the rationalists maintain that reason can dictate conduct.

Given then that reason can only guide but never produce action, Hume concludes that in reality there is no conflict between passion and

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[42]Ibid., p. 414.

[43]R. D. Broiles, The Moral Philosophy of David Hume, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 77.

[44]Ibid., p. 78.

reason. If reason cannot produce an impulse to act, it follows that reason cannot produce a similar impulse required to prevent action:

> Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion but a contrary impulse; and if this contrary impulse ever arises from reason, the latter faculty must have an original influence on the will, and must be able to cause, as well as hinder any act of volition. But if reason has no original influence, 'tis impossible it can withstand any principle, which has such an efficacy, or ever keep the mind in suspence a moment. Thus it appears, that the principle, which opposes our passion, cannot be the same with reason, and is only call'd so in an improper sense.[45]

Hence, according to Hume,

> We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.[46]

Hume complements this startling assertion with equally startling examples:

> 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter.[47]

These passages, however, are not so startling when we consider what Hume has been saying all along. Reason can direct action only once the desire to act is already present. Therefore reason is subordinate to the passions; for without them, reason cannot enter into the arena of actions. Moreover, passions cannot be said to be unreasonable or contradictory. According to Hume, a passion is an "original existence",[48] that is, it is not a copy of anything else. A contradiction

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[45]Hume, Treatise, p. 415. [46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid., p. 416. [48]Ibid., p. 415.

consists in a disagreement between ideas. Although I think Hume is right on this point, nevertheless there remains the fact that we do consider ends, such as the ones he mentions, as irrational. A. J. Ayer makes the following suggestion as to how to circumvent the problem. He writes:

> I think that what we mean by this [irrational ends] is that they are choices which no sensible man would make. There is an obvious risk of circularity here, since his choice of ends enters into our conception of what constitutes a sensible man. A possible way of escape is just to take it as a matter of fact that a person who habitually chooses ends of a certain type arouses in the average spectator an impression of folly. We can then define the irrationality of ends in terms of the behaviour of such a person, and their rationality as its opposite.[49]

Thus we can say that a person who chooses ends of a particular type behaves in a foolish manner. We might even say that his behaviour arouses in us, the observer, a sense of disapproval.

In sum, Hume does not totally exclude the influence of reason on action, but he limits reason to the intermediary function of directing action towards the desired end.

The above argument is open to a major objection. Hume has argued that reason alone cannot move or influence action. In other words reason alone cannot excite the passions so that we are moved to act, only another passion can do that. Hume has also argued that

> . . . reason, in a strict and philosophical sense, can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion.[50]

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[49]Ayer, Hume, p. 89.

[50]Hume, Treatise, p. 459.

Thus, it seems that Hume is not arguing consistently when he contends that reason alone cannot influence action.

S. Tweyman maintains that Hume can be made consistent on this point,[51] and I agree. Hume has shown that ends are indifferent to reason. If the desire to pursue the end is not present, reason is incapable of moving us to act. When reason arouses in us a desire to pursue or possess object A by informing us that it exists, it is the desire to possess object A that moves us to act, and not the fact that it exists. If we do not desire it, its existence is indifferent to us. Reason informs us of the existence of many objects, but it cannot tell us which ones to pursue; these are preferences. It is the passions that discriminate concerning the ends which we will pursue. Similarly, when reason shows us the means to achieve an end, if the end is indifferent to us we will not be motivated to go through the necessary steps in order to achieve it. It is the original desire to achieve the end that moves us to act, and not the fact that we perceive the means to achieve it. Therefore, I believe that Hume is consistent in maintaining that reason alone cannot influence conduct.

Section 3. Moral Distinctions

The other part of the argument which Hume levels against the rationalists concerns the nature of moral distinctions. This is also found in Book III of the Treatise in the section entitled "Moral Distinctions not Deriv'd from Reason". Hume's argument is that in order to show that moral distinctions and precepts are not derived from reason, all that is required is to determine "Whether 'tis by means of

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[51] Tweyman, Reason, p. 137. [52] Hume, Treatise, p. 456.

our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy?"[52] The answer to this question according to Hume, will refute "All [those] systems [which] concur in the opinion, that morality, like truth, is discern'd merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison."[53]

The above requires some explanation since it is not immediately clear how it is related to the argument we have just discussed. In arguing that reason does not influence conduct directly, Hume has in effect argued that ideas do not influence conduct directly, since the content of reason consists of ideas. Only the passions can influence conduct directly, and in Hume's scheme individual passions are impressions of reflection:

> Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. Secondary, or reflective impressions are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. Of the first kind are all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures: Of the second are the passions, and other emotions resembling them.[54]

It is only impressions which can influence action directly, according to Hume. Hence, what Hume must do is to show that moral distinctions are impressions of reflection, and that our moral rules and ideas refer to these impressions and not to other ideas. For, according to Hume, our ideas may be accounted for, in either of two ways, either they are caused by a preceding impression, or by another idea.

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[52]Hume, Treatise, p. 456.

[53]Ibid., p. 456-7. [54]Ibid., p. 275.

We are told:

> . . . as our ideas are images of our impressions, so we can form secondary ideas, which are images of the primary. . . .[55]

What we have taken for granted is that Hume believes that we possess moral ideas. While it is true that, in his discussion on moral distinctions Hume does not refer specifically to moral ideas, he does refer to them elsewhere. For example, when Hume discusses justice he asks "Why we annex the idea of virtue to justice, and of vice to injustice."[56] And in The Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals he writes

> Had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the mind, the words, honourable and shameful, lovely and odious, noble and despicable, had never had place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever have been able to render them intelligible, or make them convey any idea to the audience.[57]

Moreover, it follows from Hume's theory of perception that if we have the impression of something we also have the idea. The reason for this is that every impression causes a corresponding idea:

> . . . any impressions either of the mind or body is constantly followed by an idea, which resembles it, and is only different in the degrees of force and liveliness. . . . This priority of the impressions is . . . proof, that our impressions are the causes of our ideas. . . .[58]

In order to show that moral distinctions are impressions, Hume begins by looking at the two functions of reason, namely demonstrative and causal. He examines first the suggestion that the moral characters of things rest in some relation of ideas. He says:

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[55]Ibid., p. 6. [56]Ibid., p. 498.

[57]Hume, Enquiries, p. 214. [58]Hume, Treatise, p. 5.

> There has been an opinion very industriously propagated by certain philosophers, that morality is susceptible of demonstration; and tho' no one has ever been able to advance a single step in those demonstrations; yet 'tis taken for granted, that this science may be brought to an equal certainty with geometry or algebra.[59]

This as we have seen is roughly the position that Samuel Clarke holds. Hume then sets out to explore the consequences of maintaining this opinion:

> If you assert, that vice and virtue consist in relations susceptible of certainty and demonstration, you must confine yourself to those four relations, which alone admit of that degree of evidence; and in that case you run into absurdities, from which you will never be able to extricate yourself.[60]

The only four possible relations that hold between ideas, for Hume are resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions of quantity and number.[61] Hume dismisses the possibility of a different moral relation as unintelligible;

> Shou'd it be asserted, that the sense of morality consists in the discovery of some relation, distinct from these, and that our enumeration was not compleat, when we comprehended all demonstrable relations under four general heads: To this I know not what to reply, till someone be so good as to point out to me this new relation.[62]

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[59]Ibid., p. 463. [60]Ibid.

[61]"Three of these relations are discoverable at first sight, and fall more properly under the province of intuition than demonstration. When any objects resemble each other, the resemblance will at first strike the eye, or rather the mind; and seldom requires a second examination. The case is the same with contrariety, and with the degrees of any quality. . . . We might proceed, after the same manner, in fixing the proportions of quantity or number, and might at one view observe a superiority or inferiority betwixt any numbers, or figures . . . As to equality or any exact proportion, we can only guess at it from a single consideration; except in very short numbers, or very limited portions of extension; which are comprehended in an instant, and where we perceive an impossibility of falling into any considerable error. In all other cases we must settle the proportions with some liberty, or proceed in a more artificial manner." Hume, Treatise, p. 70.

[62]Ibid., p. 464.

Although fittingness would not qualify as an a priori moral relation, Hume argues against Clarke as if he had not specified any moral relation at all.

According to Hume any purported moral relation would be unintelligible unless it fulfilled the following conditions. The first condition is that this relation must be shown to hold between internal actions or states of mind and external objects. The reason for this is that "moral good and evil belong only to the actions of the mind, and are deriv'd from our situation with regard to external objects . . ."[63] If the relation belongs to the internal actions of the mind we would be guilty of crimes in ourselves. This possibility is absurd since, according to Hume, we cannot be guilty of a crime "independent of our situation, with respect to the universe."[64] Hume goes on to say that if the relation belongs to external objects alone, then animals and inanimate objects would also be "susceptible of moral beauty and deformity".[65]

The second condition which a moral relation must fulfill is that it must have a necessary connection with the will so that every time a rational being perceives this relation to hold between himself and some state of affairs, he feels compelled to act in the same manner. This condition is impossible to fulfill since Hume has already shown that the demonstrative relations which reason is able to discover cannot have any influence on the will by themselves. Moreover, it would be impossible to show a priori that, if this relation existed it would be binding on everyone who perceived it every time. We cannot know, prior to experience, that the discernment of this relation will necessarily cause the same effect every time. This of course is based on

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[63]Ibid., p. 464. [64]Ibid., p. 465. [65]Ibid.

Hume's analysis of cause and effect, namely that the understanding cannot judge concerning cause and effect a priori.

Hume chooses two examples which are clearly considered immoral, ingratitude and incest. Concerning the first he writes:

> . . . let us chuse any inanimate object, such as an oak or elm; and let us supoose, that by the dropping of its seed, it produces a sapling below it, which springing up by degrees, at last overtops and destroys the parent tree: I ask, if in this instance there be wanting any relation, which is discoverable in parricide or ingratitude? Is not the one tree the cause of the other's existence; and the latter the cause of the destruction of the former, in the same manner as when a child murders his parent? 'Tis not sufficient to reply, that a choice or will is wanting. For in the case of parricide, a will does not give rise to any different relations, but is only the cause from which the action is deriv'd; and consequently produces the same relations, that in the oak or elm arise from some other principles. 'Tis a will or choice, that determines a man to kill his parent; and they are the laws of matter and motion, that determine a sapling to destroy the oak, from which it sprung. Here then the same relations have different causes; but still the relations are the same: And as their discovery is not in both cases attended with a notion of immorality, it follows, that that notion does not arise from such a discovery.[66]

Similarly, Hume argues, incest is considered immoral when man is involved, whereas when animals are involved the same relationship is not considered immoral. It cannot be argued that what makes the act different is that animals do not possess the faculty (reason) which perceives the wrong in such a relationship. For, before a wrong can be perceived it must exist:

> Their want of a sufficient degree of reason may hinder them from perceiving the duties and obligations of morality, but can never hinder these duties from existing; since they must antecedently exist, in order to their being perceiv'd.[67]

In both instances the relations are the same, but they do not evoke the same moral judgment. The two conditions for a moral relation

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[66]Ibid., p. 467.

[67]Ibid., p. 468.

are not satisfied, since those relations which are discovered are external to the mind and they can also take place independent of the will. Hume concludes therefore, that moral distinctions cannot be discerned by reason in its demonstrative capacity.

It is equally true, according to Hume, that reason cannot discover any moral features in matters of fact. He writes:

> Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.[68]

For Hume then, the moral features of things are not qualities in the objects themselves, but perceptions of the mind. He compares these to secondary qualities such as sound, colour, heat and cold. Reason cannot discover these for when we perceive a green object, the greenness does not consist in a demonstrable relation nor do we make inferences concerning it.[69] Just as the greenness of an object is perceived directly through an impression, so is the virtue or vice of a situation or act perceived directly through an impression. The similarity consists in having the impression; not in having to agree on what it is.

Hume then, makes the following criticism concerning Wollaston's theory:

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[68] Ibid., pp. 468-69.

[69] We may infer the colour of an object if we do not see it directly but we are speaking here of the case when an object is perceived directly.

> Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason.[70]

To speak of truth or falsehood in action as Wollaston does, is to Hume philosophically inappropriate. Hume's basis for this argument is a correspondence theory of truth: A judgment is true if and only if, it agrees with a matter of fact or some specified relation of ideas. He states elsewhere in the Treatise that only judgments can be true or false, "nothing can be contrary to truth or reason, except what has a reference to it, and . . . the judgments of our understanding only have this reference. . . ."[71] For Hume passions, actions and volitions are original facts and do not refer to anything else. Therefore, they can be neither true nor false.

Insofar as Hume interprets Wollaston as saying that actions can be true or false then I think that Hume's criticism is correct. Actions cannot be either true or false. However, if we interpret Wollaston as saying that actions imply propositions, then Hume's criticism does not so easily apply, since he and Wollaston would partly agree on this point; that is, we ascribe truth-values to propositions or judgments and not to acts or circumstances.

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[70]Ibid., p. 458.

[71]Hume, Treatise, pp. 415-16.

Hume, however, is correct in maintaining that "actions do not derive their merit from a conformity to reason, nor their blame from a contrariety to it. . . ."[72] In other words, the moral goodness of an action does not consist in its truth or validity; nor do we ascribe blame to actions which are the result of false judgments. These are mistakes of fact and cannot be said to be immoral. One is more to be pitied than blamed if one makes such an error. Hume then anticipates the objection that although mistakes of fact are not blamed, 'mistakes of right' often are. By 'mistakes of right' I take Hume to mean those actions which are the result of an erroneous understanding of what is right. Hume's reply to this type of objection is that before we can judge that someone has a mistaken understanding of what is right, we must first have a standard of what is right or wrong. He writes:

> Shou'd it be pretended, that tho' a mistake of fact be not criminal, yet a mistake of right often is; and that this may be the source of immorality: I would answer, that 'tis impossible such a mistake can ever be the original source of immorality, since it supposes a real right and wrong; that is, a real distinction in morals, independent of these judgments.[73]

Hume raises a further criticism against Wollaston concerning the latter's contention that a wrong action is one which denies things to be as they are. Hume interprets Wollaston as saying that a wrong action is one which causes others to arrive at false conclusions. He gives the following example to illustrate the absurdity of such a position:

> 'Tis certain, that an action, on many occasions, may give rise to false conclusions in others; and that a person, who thro' a window sees any lewd behaviour of mine with my neighbour's wife, may be so simple as to imagine she is certainly my own. In this respect my action resembles somewhat a lye or falsehood. . . .[74]

Hume goes on to say that

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[72]Ibid., p. 458. [73]Ibid., p. 460. [74]Ibid., p. 461.

> . . . if I had used the precaution of shutting the windows, while I indulg'd myself in those liberties with my neighbour's wife, I should have been guilty of no immorality; and that because my action, being perfectly conceal'd, wou'd have had no tendency to produce any false conclusion.[75]

Hume here appears to have misinterpreted Wollaston. I agree with J. L. Mackie who maintains that "Wollaston identifies wrongness with an action's declaring that things are otherwise than they are, not with its communicating this falsehood."[76] Thus, Hume's criticism does not apply.

In sum we have looked at how Hume argues correctly against rationalists like Clarke that moral truths are not analogous to mathematical truths, and that they are not discerned in the same manner. Moreover, Hume justly demands, of those who maintain that morality can be demonstrated, that such a demonstration be produced for, " 'Tis impossible to refute a system, which has never yet been explain'd".[77] Similarly, Hume is correct in arguing against Wollaston that morality is not a question of truth or falsehood, and that moral qualities are not inherent in matters of fact.

As we have seen in Part I, observations concerning the natural order of things were considered good grounds for inferring the existence of a Superior Being endowed with intelligence. The rationalists, in postulating a moral order inherent in the natural order of things attempted to construct a system of morals which is autonomous, that is to

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[75]Ibid., p. 461 n.

[76]J. L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1980), p. 56.

[77]Hume, Treatise, p. 464.

say, independent of the will of God. Nevertheless, their system rested on the belief that the source of both the natural and moral order is God, thus retaining the dependence of morality on religion. In arguing against the existence of a moral order inherent in the natural order of things Hume succeeds in casting doubt on the rationalist system and consequently also on its theological foundation.

CHAPTER IV

HUME'S ACCOUNT OF MORAL OBLIGATION

The final part of this study will be concerned with Hume's attempts to formulate a moral theory independent of religion. We will limit our discussion to his account of moral duty or obligation. It is the answer that Hume provides to the question, 'Why ought I to do that which I recognize to be the good', which is the distinctly secular feature of his moral theory.

Theistic systems of morality and secular ones quite often give similar answers to the question, 'What ought I to do', in a specific moral situation. For instance, a theist and a non-theist may, and almost always will, agree that if a person has promised to return a sum of money to a friend by a specific date, then that person ought to keep his promise. What they will invariably disagree on are the grounds or reasons why that person ought to keep his promise. Before we consider Hume's account of moral obligation then, let us look briefly at the theist's reasons for doing good and avoiding evil.

The theist's reasons for fulfilling his moral obligations are that ultimately God wills that he should fulfill them. Among other things, God's will is understood to be morally good.[1] This is so because God is a perfect Being and perfection includes goodness. This

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[1]James M. Gustafson, "Religion and Morality from the Perspective of Theology", in Religion and Morality, p. 135.

goodness is expressed in his concern for the welfare of man. Thus God wills what is good for man.

The theist's sense of duty or his obligation to be obedient to the will of God is grounded in the personal and loving relationship which he has with God. It is this relationship that dictates his moral obligation towards his fellow man. James M. Gustafson expresses it thus:

> . . . the religious person in the West measures his qualities of moral life, as well as his deeds, in relation to what he comprehends God's will to be. His obligations, even strictly moral ones, are obligations to God. . . .[2]

More specifically,

> The members of the community are obligated to keep the more distinctively moral commands not because (or at least, not only because) an ethical justification can be given them . . . Rather they are obligated to keep them because they are God's will. They are in accordance with God's nature as holy. This holiness is not simply an otherness which inspires an awesome response; it is also a moral holiness. An infraction of the moral rules is an offense against God. It would logically follow . . . that the word sin refers not only to a moral wrong, but to a relationship of disobedience to God . . . It also follows logically . . . that a right relationship to God is expressed not only in cultic practices, but also in adherence to the moral commands.[3]

A further consideration which prompts the theist to moral rectitude is the threat of punishment and the hope of reward in the afterlife.

Hume's account of moral obligation is found chiefly in the Treatise, Book III, Part II, in the sections entitled "Justice Whether a Natural or Artificial Virtue" and "Of the Origin of Justice and

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[2]Gustafson, "Religion and Morality from the Perspective of Theology", p. 147.

[3]Ibid., p. 134.

Property". Hume maintains that our sense of duty originally springs from our natural affections independent of reason or custom. These passions are then nurtured and directed by artificial or social forces such as custom and education.

Hume distinguishes between two types of motives that induce us to act; natural and artificial ones. Natural non-moral motives arise prior to, and are independent of, the influence of custom or reason. Artificial motives are shaped by the social milieu. This distinction is necessary since Hume's aim is to show that certain duties which at the time were considered to be natural, such as performing just acts or keeping promises, are in fact social products.

Hume's first argument is a logical one. He writes:

> To suppose, that the mere regard to the virtue of the action, may be the first motive, which produc'd the action, and render'd it virtuous, is to reason in a circle. Before we can have such a regard, the action must be really virtuous; and this virtue must be deriv'd from some virtuous motive: And consequently the virtuous motive must be different from the regard to the virtue of the action.[4]

For Hume, actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives. When we say that we act out of a sense of duty, or from a regard for the virtue of that action, we are in fact saying that the motive that prompts us to act is a regard for the motive that prompts us to act. Since this is obviously unproductive, Hume suggests that there must be a motive which is prior to that sense of duty which prompts us to act.

The motive behind our sense of duty Hume terms a natural motive. If we examine our duties apart from the influence of society, we will find that these are determined by our passions or inclinations. These

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[4] Hume, Treatise, p. 478.

inclinations are what influence or dictate the motive which is appropriate to a given situation. The action which ensues constitutes a natural duty. An action can never be a duty unless there exists in human nature some natural inclination to perform it. Hume gives the following example:

> We blame a father for neglecting a child. Why? because it shews a want of natural affection, which is the duty of every parent. Were not natural affection a duty, the care of children cou'd not be a duty; and 'twere impossible we cou'd have the duty in our eye in the attention we give to our offspring. In this case, therefore, all men suppose a motive to the action distinct from a sense of duty.[5]

The only exception that Hume allows is when a person acts out of a sense of duty because he feels hatred towards himself for lacking a motive which is 'common in human nature'.[6] He may then perform the action "from a certain sense of duty, in order to acquire by practice, that virtuous principle, or at least, to disguise to himself, as much as possible, his want of it."[7] But, even in a case such as this one, it is not simply the mere regard for the moral worth of the action which prompts the person to act. It is the hatred which he feels towards himself that prompts him to do his duty, coupled with the desire to achieve the end which is 'to acquire by practice' that which he feels he lacks.

Our natural duties, according to Hume, are determined by the passions' 'general force in human nature'.[8] He writes:

> A man naturally loves his children better than his nephews, his nephews better than his cousins, his cousins better than strangers, where every thing else is equal. Hence arise our common measures of duty, in preferring the one to the other. Our sense of duty always follows the common

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[5]Ibid. [6]Ibid., p. 479. [7]Ibid. [8]Ibid., p. 433.

and natural course of our passions.[9]

Hume here seems to view the 'natural course of our passions' as a standard or norm whereby our natural duties are judged. In the following passage he is more explicit:

> In judging of the beauty of animal bodies, we always carry in our eye the oeconomy of a certain species; and where the limbs and features observe that proportion, which is common to the species, we pronounce them handsome and beautiful. In like manner we always consider the natural and usual force of the passions, when we determine concerning vice and virtue; and if the passions depart very much from the common measures on either side, they are always disapprov'd as vicious.[10]

Hume has been justly criticised for maintaining that any inclination, and hence any motive, which is usual or does not deviate from the norm is commendable, whereas any motive that deviates significantly from the norm is blameable. On this view, a man who performs an exceptional act of courage would be as reprehensible as a man who performs an exceptional act of cowardice. While it is true that we do not expect either ourselves or others to go around performing acts of heroism, it does not mean that we blame such acts if they do happen to occur.

As Jonathan Harrison puts it, "Men can, obviously, deviate from the normal in ways which are admirable, as well as in ways which are wrong."[11] Also, T. H. Green accuses Hume of reducing "all morality to that of the average man in his least exalted moments."[12]

Hume can also be criticised for the example, quoted above, which

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[9]Ibid., p. 483-84. [10]Ibid., p. 483.

[11]Jonathan Harrison, Hume's Theory of Justice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 3.

[12]R. L. Nettleship, ed., Works of Thomas Hill Green, 3 vols., (London: 1908; reprint ed., New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), 1:370.

he uses to illustrate the origins of our natural duties. While it may be true that in Western society a man usually prefers his children to his nephews, and his nephews to his cousins, it is not universally true. In a matrilineal society for instance, a man will have stronger ties to his sister's children than to his own children.[13] Thus the preference we have for our various relations would seem to be socially conditioned, rather than original or natural to man as Hume contends. Hume's choice of example is excusable however, since he could not have known about the existence of such societies.

Hume maintains that natural motives are self-interested,

> . . . in the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confin'd to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintance; and 'tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons.[14]

It follows that just actions are comparatively remote from our usual concerns, since justice requires a disinterested motive. He writes:

> The idea of justice can never . . . be taken for a natural principle, capable of inspiring men with an equitable conduct towards each other. That virtue, as it is now understood, wou'd never have been dream'd of among rude and savage men.[15]

According to Hume the idea of justice arose strictly out of self-interest. Man has needs which are beyond his capacities to satisfy when he is alone. In order to correct this natural imbalance he joins forces with other men to form a society. For

> 'Tis by society alone he is able to supply his defects, and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them. By society all his infirmities are compensated; and tho' in that situation his

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[13]See Ruth Benedict's description of the Dobu people in Patterns of Culture, with an Introduction by Franz Boas, and a new Preface by Margaret Mead, Sentry Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), chap. 5.

[14]Ibid., p. 488. [15]Ibid.

> wants multiply every moment upon him, yet his abilities are still more augmented, and leave him in every respect more satisfied and happy, than 'tis possible for him, in his savage and solitary condition, ever to become.[16]

The bonds that form the basis of society are the natural attraction between the sexes and the love of family. Although these bonds are a considerable uniting force in society, they are nevertheless necessarily restricted to a small circle of people whose interests often clash with the rest of society. Thus a remedy is required in order to prevent men from following their natural inclinations to act solely in their own and their relations' interest.

The understanding provides men with such a remedy, by allowing them to perceive the advantages which result from abstaining from others' possessions. Men enter into a convention in order to "bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry."[17] Hume stresses that this convention is not an explicit one, such as a promise, but rather an implicit one. It is a 'common sense of interest'[18] much like two people pulling the oars of a boat in unison.

How is it then that we come to regard just acts as morally good, and unjust acts as morally evil? In a constricted social milieu the advantages resulting from just acts are immediately apparent. As society becomes larger and more complex, the disadvantages that result from a breach in the rules of justice are not as readily perceived. Nevertheless, we do not fail to see the disadvantages of an act of injustice when it is perpetrated against us. Also, when an act of

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[16]Ibid., p. 485. [17]Ibid., p. 489. [18]Ibid., p. 490.

injustice is perpetrated against someone else, we disapprove of it. While we approve of an act of justice when it is performed by someone else. Through sympathy we are able to view acts of justice as virtuous, whether they are performed by ourselves or others. Thus, Hume maintains that

> . . . self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends virtue.[19]

Sympathy or benevolence however, by itself, is not sufficient to counter-balance our natural impulses. As we have seen, given the choice, we will naturally choose to act in our own and our relations' interests, rather than act in a disinterested fashion. Hume writes:

> 'Tis certain, that no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper direction to counter-balance the love of gain, and render men fit members of society, by making them abstain from the possessions of others. Benevolence to strangers is too weak for this purpose. . . .[20]

It becomes necessary therefore for other influences to strengthen our emotional reaction towards virtuous action. These other influences are habit which is inculcated by the family, education and 'the artifice of politicians'.

Our concern for our reputation is an added powerful reinforcer to performing virtuous acts. According to Hume:

> There is nothing, which touches us more nearly than our reputation, and nothing on which our reputation more depends than our conduct . . . For this reason, every one, who has any regard to his character . . . must fix an inviolable law to himself, never, by any temptation, to be induc'd to violate those principles, which are essential to a man of probity and honour.[21]

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[19]Ibid., p. 499-500. [20]Ibid., p. 492. [21]Ibid., p. 501.

Hume concedes that in some cases observing the rules of justice might not be advantageous to society, as when a man of a 'beneficient disposition' returns a fortune to a miser. He "has acted justly and laudably, but the public is a real sufferer."[22] Moreover, some acts of justice might not serve our best interests. For example, the man who returns a fortune to a miser cannot be said to be acting in his best interest. Even if he does not want the fortune it is not in his best interest to return the money, since it will be to the detriment of society and ultimately to his own detriment as a member of that society. Nevertheless, Hume maintains that on the whole the advantages exceed the disadvantages. He writes:

> But however single acts of justice may be contrary, either to public or private interest, 'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well-being of every individual. 'Tis impossible to separate the good from the ill. Property must be stable, and must be fix'd by general rules. Tho' in one instance the public be a sufferer, this momentary ill is amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which it establishes in society. And even every individual person must find himself a gainer, on ballancing the account; since, without justice, society must immediately dissolve, and every one must fall into that savage and solitary condition, which is infinitely worse than the worst situation that can possibly be suppos'd in society.[23]

In sum, for Hume the original non-moral motive which creates the natural obligation to perform just acts is self-interest. The moral artificial motive which creates the moral obligation is the feeling of approval we get from seeing just acts performed, and the disapproval we feel at their omission.

A. C. MacIntyre in his paper, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought'" employs Hume's account of justice in support of his claim that Hume derived

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[22]Ibid., p. 497. [23]Ibid. p. 497.

a moral conclusion from non-moral premises and is therefore inconsistent with the standard interpretation which commits him to the view that such a move is invalid. MacIntyre maintains that:

> Hume clearly affirms that the justification of the rules of justice lies in the fact that their observance is to everyone's long-term interest; that we ought to obey the rules because there is no one who does not gain more than he loses by such obedience. But this is to derive an "ought" from an "is".[24]

I believe MacIntyre is wrong and that, in this case, Hume has not derived an 'ought' from an 'is'. As we have seen, Hume does claim that it is to our advantage to observe the rules of justice and that this constitutes our original motive for entering into a mutual agreement or convention. However, this original motive is a non-moral motive. We make the commitment because it is in fact useful. The moral motives are the feelings of approval we experience when we witness or perform acts which conform to the rules of justice; and the feelings of disapproval we experience when we witness or perform acts which run counter to the rules of justice. Hume is not saying, as MacIntyre claims, that we ought to obey the rules because it is to our advantage. What Hume is saying is first, that we as a matter of fact, agree to obey the rules because it is to our advantage; and second, that we ought to obey the rules because we feel a sense of satisfaction or approval when we do obey them, and a sense of dissatisfaction or disapproval when we do not obey them.

In grounding moral obligation in human nature Hume provides a viable alternative to the theistic moral systems of his time. By

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[24]A. C. MacIntyre, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought'", The Philosophical Review, Vol. LXVII (1959) reprinted in Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 248.

showing that we have powerful motives built into our nature that induce us to fulfill our obligations, he has provided a good counter-argument to the claim that religion is useful to society. Hume has demonstrated that man's primary motivation in fulfilling his moral obligations is that, it is ultimately, to his advantage, and to that of the society in which he lives. The source of moral obligation for Hume lies solely in human nature and cannot be traced to a Supreme Being.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters I have argued that Hume provides a constructive alternative to theistic morality. The study consists primarily in an analysis of Hume's attacks on some major theories advanced by eighteenth century moralists and theologians.

We have seen how Hume's major writings on religion are mainly a critique of the argument from design. This argument is criticised at two levels: The empirical level and the logical level. Empirically, Hume maintains that, it cannot be claimed that the idea of a Supreme Being is easily inferred from observations of the order of nature because even primitive man would be able to make this inference; he did not make it. Hume's analysis of the origin of religious belief shows quite the contrary, that religious belief did not originate in reason but in the passions, namely fear. Also Hume makes a separate logical point: It cannot be maintained that our observations of the order of nature are sufficient grounds for inferring a Supreme Being who is both omnipotent and benevolent. I conclude that Hume is correct in maintaining that natural religion cannot serve as an adequate foundation for morality since the moral attributes of God cannot be established conclusively.

Moreover, we have seen how Hume's attack on rationalist moral systems is also an indirect attack against a theological foundation in ethics. I have attempted to show this by first isolating a characteristic feature of the rationalist system; that is, the claim that moral entities are inherent in the natural order of things and are

discerned by reason. The theological presupposition is that ultimately our notions of good and evil can be traced back to God since God is the source of the natural order. I then go on to show that Hume is correct in arguing that reason cannot discern any moral entities in the natural order of things. The reason for this is that moral distinctions cannot be shown to consist in any relation of ideas nor in any matter of fact. Hume therefore concludes that morality cannot be based on any feature of the external world independent of human nature.

In the last chapter I have shown how Hume, by grounding moral obligation in self-interest, succeeds in separating morality from religion. I have argued that what distinguishes a theistic morality from a secular one is the answer each gives to the question 'Why ought I to do that which I recognize to be the good'. Hume's answer is that our moral obligation is based on natural self-interest and not on any relationship which man might conceive himself to have with a Supernatural Being.

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APPENDIX

The controversy over which character speaks for Hume in the Dialogues centers around Pamphilus' verdict given at the end of the work. That is that, "upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot but think, that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth."[1]

Some critics have maintained that the above expresses Hume's true assessment of the matter, thus in essence making Cleanthes the hero.[2] Others have been of the opinion that Cleanthes is the contrived hero but that Philo has Hume's sympathies.[3]

Kemp Smith in his introduction to the Dialogues gives a very thorough and convincing defense of the latter position. His thesis is that

> . . . Philo, from start to finish, represents Hume; and that Cleanthes can be regarded as Hume's mouthpiece only in those passages in which he is explicitly agreeing with Philo, or in those other passages in which, while refuting Demea, he is also being used to prepare the way for one or other of Philo's

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[1]Hume, Dialogues, p. 228.

[2]Charles W. Hendel, Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume, The Library of Liberal Arts (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1963), p. 267; John Hill Burton, Life and Correspondence of David Hume, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1846; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1968), 1:329; B. M. Laing, David Hume, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1932), p. 179.

[3]Stephen, English Thought, 1:272; Huxley, Hume, p. 153; Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 59. For a detailed list of earlier critics see Kemp Smith, p. 59.

independent conclusions.[4]

Kemp Smith for instance points to the lack of intellectual self-consistence of both Demea and Cleanthes while Philo's position is consistent throughout. He also shows how Hume contrives certain passages so that Cleanthes may save face, when he cannot answer Philo's criticisms, in order to maintain a dramatic balance. Moreover, Kemp Smith shows that Philo's reversal in Part XII[5] is not, on closer scrutiny, a reversal at all, and so on.

Recently, James Noxon has raised some questions concerning Kemp Smith's thesis.[6] In his article Noxon asks

> . . . can we suppose that Philo is meant to represent Hume, when we know that Hume wrote to William Strahan of the skeptic being "indeed refuted" and of having confessed "that he was only amusing himself by all his Cavils"? Is it plausible that Hume composed a set of Dialogues in which the spokesman for his own views is "indeed refuted" and "only amusing himself"?[7]

I believe it is plausible that Hume would want to make the skeptic appear as if he were refuted even though in reality he is not. Kemp Smith has shown in detail how "Cleanthes is really managed by Philo", but that "the reader's respect for Cleanthes must be maintained to the very close of the Dialogues, otherwise their dramatic balance would be upset."[8] Moreover, we know from Hume's letters that he asked his friend Gilbert Elliot for suggestions on how to go about strength-

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[4]Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 59.

[5]See p. 83 n., infra.

[6]James Noxon, "Hume's Agnosticism", The Philosophical Review, vol. LXXIII, (1964) reprinted in Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays.

[7]Ibid., p. 372.

[8]Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 64.

ening Cleanthes' argument.[9]

Is it plausible, we may ask, that Hume would need suggestions as to how to strengthen one of his own arguments? I think not.

Concerning Kemp Smith's contention that Philo's reversal in Part XII[10] is merely a "conventionally required proviso",[11] Noxon asks "why Hume would pay such deference to social convention in a work for posthumous publication when he had shown so little in books published during his lifetime."[12] This, Noxon maintains, 'counts heavily' against Kemp Smith's thesis. I disagree. Granted that Hume's attacks on religion are often and best described as vitriolic, nevertheless, Hume was careful not to transgress the limits of 'good taste' for his time

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[9]Hume writes, "You wou'd perceive by the Sample I have given you, that I make Cleanthes the Hero of the Dialogue. Whatever you can think of, to strengthen that side of the Argument, will be most acceptable to me." J. Y. T. Greig, ed., The Letters of David Hume, I:153-54.

[10]The passage in question reads as follows "But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment, which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our Faith. A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity: While the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy, disdains any farther aid, and rejects this adventitious instructor. To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian. . . ." Hume, Dialogues, p. 227-28.

[11]Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 74.

[12]Noxon, "Hume's Agnosticism", p. 374-75.

or fall foul of the law.[13] As Gaskin shows, Hume demonstrated considerable concern for social convention in his publications;

> . . . he modified Section XI of the Enquiry into a dialogue in which his own opinions are hard to isolate, he withdrew two of the Five Dissertations from publication, he modified passages in the History and he postponed publication of the Dialogues for twenty-six years out of deference to the offence they might cause, despite their being 'artfully written'.[14]

Noxon concludes that "in one way, Hume was all or two of his characters; in another way, he was none or neither--as is the case with any literary artist who invents characters."[15] This I believe is something that few people would dispute. Kemp Smith acknowledges it quite clearly when he says "One fundamental point may be taken as agreed. Hume's own teaching is not presented through any one of the characters; it is developed in and through the argument as a whole, something of his own beliefs being put into the mouths of all three."[16] Kemp Smith however, goes one step further, to the heart of the matter, and that is that

> Each protagonist, though incidently saying much that one or both of the other participants may approve, stands for positions which exclude one another. Such common ground as they may share is certainly Hume's own. But when they differ, and they do so very radically, where does Hume himself come

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[13]Concerning laws in England governing blasphemy around the time Hume wrote, see Ursula Henriques, Religious Toleration in England: 1787-1833, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), pp. 6-8.

[14]Gaskin, Religion, p. 163-64.

[15]Noxon, "Hume's Agnosticism", p. 375.

[16]Kemp Smith, Introduction to Dialogues, p. 58.

in? Does he then agree with Cleanthes against Philo, or with Philo against Cleanthes?[17]

Kemp Smith's answer of course is that it is with Philo that Hume is most in agreement. Noxon's criticisms do not challenge this in any effective way.

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[17]Ibid.