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Hume, Atheism, and the Autonomy of Morals

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...when, in my philosophical disquisitions, I deny a providence and a future state, I undermine not the foundations of society, but advance principles, which they [the religious philosophers] themselves, upon their own topics, if they argue consistently, must allow to be solid and satisfactory. David Hume, (ECHU 13).¹

RESUMEN: El presente artículo trata del concepto de ateísmo presente en la filosofía moderna. Se exponen así los diferentes tipos acudiendo a las teorías de Locke, Pufendorf, Barbeyrac, Bayle. A través de ellas se intenta situar la postura de Hume.

La primera conclusión señala que Hume es claramente ateo en el sentido en que rechaza la existencia de una divinidad que se ocupe de los asuntos humanos. Además Hume considera que la religión hace imposible la moralidad.

La segunda conclusión afirma que la postura humeana se acercaría a la epicúrea al mantener que la moralidad tiene un fundamento radicalmente distinto al de la religión. Hume puede ser considerado un escéptico en materia religiosa pero no en lo que respecta a la moral. Hume es, más bien, un humanista que defiende una moral autónoma. El único fundamento de dicha moralidad hay que buscarlo en la naturaleza humana.

In preparing this paper I have benefited from the use of "Bayle, Barbeyrac and Hume", an unpublished paper by Prof. James Moore, and also from the comments of Profs. James Tully, Knud Haakonssen, Marcus Hester and J. B. Schneewind.

¹ Abbreviations of works cited in the text are as follows:

B: *Miscellaneous Reflections, Occasion'd by the Comet which appear'd in December 1680. Chiefly tending to explode Popular Superstitions*, Pierre Bayle, trans. from the French, 2 vols. (London: J. Morphew, 1708)

According to Descartes, an atheist might in some sense be said to know a simple mathematical proposition (that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, for example), but this *knowledge* of the atheist «cannot constitute true science, because no knowledge that can be rendered doubtful should be called science», while the atheist, by definition, «cannot be sure that he is not deceived in the things that seem most evident to him... doubt... may come up, if he examines the matter, or if another suggests it; he can never be safe from it unless he first recognizes the existence of a God».²

If Descartes was concerned about what the atheist could truly know, many of his contemporaries were deeply concerned with what we could know about the atheist. They were concerned, to be more specific, about the morals of the atheist: could an atheist actually be honest, morally upright, a trustworthy and reliable member of society? Could there be, perhaps, a *society* of atheists?

Opinion was, in general, decidedly negative. To be sure Francis Bacon had suggested that atheists were not so wicked as idolaters, and Hugo Grotius said that the basic principles of natural law, derived as they were from the facts of human nature, were sufficiently clear to have effect even if one should maintain so wicked and disastrous a notion as the nonexistence of God: «*That the Laws of Nature would take Place, should we (as we cannot without the most horrid impiety) deny either the Being of GOD, or his Concern in human Business*».³

Even so carefully framed a concession was, however, repudiated with alarm over and over again. Richard Bentley, the first of the Boyle Lecturers, can be seen as typical. The atheist, he wrote

allows no Natural Morality, nor any other distinction of Good and Evil, Just and Unjust; than as Human Institution and the modes and fashions of various Countries do denominate them. The most Heroical Actions or detestable Villanies are in the nature of things indifferent to his approbation; if by secrecy they are alike conceal'd from Rewards or Punishments, from Ignominy or Applause.⁴

D: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume, ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947)

ECHU: *Hume's Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and*

ECPM: *concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 3d ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975)

NHR: *Natural History of Religion*, in *David Hume: The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964, reprint of edition of 1886)

P: *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, Samuel Pufendorf, trans. by Basil Kennet, et al. with the notes by Jean Barbeyrac (London: J. Walthoe, et al., 1729)

T: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2d ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978)

W: *David Hume: The Philosophical Works* cited above

² *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. and trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1955), 2: 39.

³ For Bacon's views see his essays, "Of Atheism" and "Of Superstition". The remark by Grotius is from his *De jure belli ac pacis*, Prolegomena, as cited by Pufendorf, p. 142.

⁴ Richard Bentley, *The Folly of Atheism... A Sermon Preached in the Church of St. Martin in the Fields...* (London: Tho. Parkhurst, et al., 1692), p. 3, as reprinted in *Eight Boyle Lectures on Atheism 1692* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976).

And he goes on to accuse the atheists of seeking to undo the «Cement of Society» and to reduce man to a state of confusion:

No community ever was or can be begun or maintain'd, but upon the Basis of Religion. What Government can be imagin'd without Judicial Proceedings? and what methods of Judicature without a Religious Oath; which implies an Omniscient Being, as conscious of its falshood or truth, and a revenger of Perjury? So that the very nature of an Oath (and therefore of Society also) is subverted by the Atheist; who professeth to acknowledge nothing superiour to himself, no omnipotent observer of the actions of men. For an Atheist to compose a *System of Politicks* is... absurd and ridiculous...⁵

John Locke had expressed much the same view. In his *Letter concerning Toleration* he argues that «those are not at all to be tolerated to deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all».⁶ In his even more influential *Essay concerning Human Understanding* Locke went on to argue that «what Duty is, cannot be understood without a Law; nor a Law be known, or supposed without a Law-maker, or without Reward and Punishment», and, although our practical principles are not innate, they do nonetheless presuppose the ideas of «God, of Law, of Obligation, of Punishment, of a Life after this...».⁷ In a manuscript work on ethics he wrote:

The originall & foundation of all Law is dependency. A dependent intelligent being is under the power & direction & dominion of him on whom he depends & must be for the ends appointed him by y^e superior being. If man were independent he could have noe law but his own will noe end but himself. He would be a god to himself, & y^e satisfaction of his own will the sole measure & end of all his actions.⁸

Samuel Pufendorf, now too seldom discussed, but perhaps the most influential moralist of this period, repeatedly took the atheists to task.⁹ A concern for one's own

⁵ Bentley, p. 35. At this point Bentley has Hobbes particularly in mind.

⁶ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. J. W. Gough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), p. 156.

⁷ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 74 (1.3.12).

⁸ MS. C28. fol. 141, cited from John Colman, *John Locke's Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), p. 46. Colman says: "The theory which is sketched in the *Two Tracts* and expounded in detail in the *Essays* is essentially theological and legalist. Locke holds that, were there no God or had He not promulgated a law to mankind there would be no such things as moral right and wrong, virtue and vice. He also maintains that... the ultimate reason a person has for living virtuously is that God's law is backed by sanctions, that in the next life virtue will be rewarded and vice punished". (p. 5)

⁹ Pufendorf (1632-1694) held the first chair of natural and international law at a German university (Heidelberg), was later Professor of Natural Law at Lund, Court Historian to, first, the King of Sweden, and then to the Elector of Brandenburg. Thirty years after Pufendorf's death, Francis Hutcheson said that he had become "the grand Instructor in Morals to all who have of late given themselves to that Study", while the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh in the 1730s was, according to Alexander Carlyle, still basing

preservation is, he grants, a fact from which a law of nature of a certain kind, a dictate of reason, may be deduced, but «to give these Dictates of Reason the Force and Authority of Laws, there is a Necessity of supposing that there is a God, and that his wise Providence oversees and governs the whole World, and in a particular Manner the Lives and Affairs of Mankind». The «wicked and absurd Hypothesis» of atheism, should it be accepted, would leave us without moral law, for the «dicts of Reason» cannot «rise so high as to pass into a Condition of Laws; in us much as all Law supposes a superior Power». (P 141-42)

Later in the same work Pufendorf speaks of our «*connate* Obligations», or those that are, «planted, as it were, in our *Being*». The most eminent of these is that

which lies on all Men with respect to Almighty God, the supremam Governor of the World; by Virtue of which we are bound to adore his Majesty, and to obey his Commandments and his Laws. Whoever wholly violates and breaks through this Obligation, stands guilty of the most heinous Charge of Atheism, because he must at the same time deny either the Existence of God, or his Care of human Affairs. Which two Sins, with regard to their moral Consequences and Effects, are equivalent to each other; and either of them overthrows all Religion, representing it as a frightful Mockery, introduced to awe the ignorant Vulgar into some Decency and Duty. (P 254)

Pufendorf goes on to denounce even the seemingly innocuous view of Hobbes, namely, that atheism is the result of ignorance or imprudence.¹⁰ This view is said to be «most foul and scandalous», for, although one cannot say that every illiterate person is able to form or even to comprehend a «philosophical Demonstration of God's Existence», this gives us no grounds for doubting or denying his existence. Those with the effrontery to so doubt are challenged, not only to defend their atheism, but also to show that it will contribute more to mankind than does the contrary view, theism, or the «Acknowledgment of a Deity». (P 254-55)

The task here set for the atheist, that he provide, in effect, an entirely new foundation for the concourse of humankind, is said to be manifestly impossible, if for no other

his lectures on a short version of Pufendorf's *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*. See Hutcheson, *A Collection of Letters and Essays on Several Subjects, lately Publish'd in the Dublin Journal*, (London: J. Darby, et al., 1729), as reprinted in Francis Hutcheson, *Opera Minora* (Georg Olms: Hildesheim, 1971), pp. 102-03; and Carlyle, *Anecdotes and Characters of the Times*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 26. For a stimulating introduction to Pufendorf's ethical views and a brief account of recent work on him, see J. B. Schneewind, "Pufendorf and the History of Ethics", *Synthese*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Although Hobbes was often thought to be an atheist, and was denounced soundly for his views, the explicit teaching of his *Leviathan* is close to that of Bentley, Pufendorf, and the other anti-atheists. He "only is properly said to reign", he writes, "that governs his subjects by his word, and by promise of rewards to those that obey it, and by threatening them with punishment that obey it not. Subjects therefore in the kingdom of God, are not bodies inanimate, nor creatures irrational; because they understand no precepts as his: nor atheists; nor they that believe not that God has any care of the actions of mankind; because they acknowledge no word for his, nor have hope of his rewards or fear of his threatenings. They therefore that believe there is a God that governeth the world, and hath given precepts, and propounded rewards, and punishments to mankind, are God's subjects; all the rest, are to be understood as enemies". (Part II. 31, Oakeshott edition)

reason than that one simply cannot rely on the word of any atheist. Those «who either deny the *Being*, or the *Providence* of God», or those very like to them, «the Maintainers of the Mortality and Impunity of human Souls», are beyond our trust, for nothing can motivate such persons but private interest and advantage. The promises and covenants of an atheist are no better than those of any common criminal, while those who do believe in God have the advantage of motivation that derives from concern about eternal reward or punishment.

For 'tis impossible, but than Men of these Principles should measure all Right and all Justice by their own Profit and Convenience. Into the same Herd we may pack all those who practise some Villany or Vice for their set Trade and Employment; as Pirates, Thieves, Murtherers, Pimps, Courtesans, and other profligate Wretches who take Perjury for a Trifle, and make a Jest of sacred Obligations. (P 276)¹¹

Pufendorf's widespread influence in the Protestant universities of his time was in no small part due to the translations and annotations of another professor of law, Jean Barbeyrac. Not content with translating Pufendorf's attack on the atheists, Barbeyrac, by means of copious notes, amplified this attack, and then turned to the subject again his own *Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality... from the earliest Times down to the Publication of Pufendorf*. Granted, Barbeyrac sometimes appears to soften Pufendorf's strictures, as when he cites those who have argued that atheists are not, really, always so bad as pirates, pimps, and murderers, while on another occasion he goes so far as to consider the possibility «that Religion is neither the only, nor principal Basis of Society». (P 276, 142) In fact, he admits that

there may be amongst these Atheists, Men of Sense and Philosophers, who, reflecting that it is better for Men to subject themselves to certain Rules of Life, than for every Man to follow his Humours only, may observe [these Rules] outwardly, so far as they are exempt from such Circumstances, as some great Interest present, or some violent Passion forces them upon, such Counsels as are reasonable, calm and aware of the Consequences.

At the same time, however, Barbeyrac appears to take back these concessions and simply to second Pufendorf. The «common Sort of ignorant People, and Idiots», he says—those who comprise «the greatest Part of Society»—are quite unable to manage such

¹¹ It was even doubted that there were any atheists on the grounds that no person who claimed to be an atheist could be trusted actually to be one, and especially since belief in God was thought unavoidable, it was clear the atheist was not telling the truth. As late as 1771 it was said that, while "Many people, both ancient and modern, have pretended to atheism... it is justly questioned whether any man seriously adopted such a principle. These pretensions, therefore, must be founded on pride or affectation". See "Atheist", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; or, a *Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, Compiled upon a New Plan*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Bell and Macfarquhar, 1771), 1: 501. For a helpful account of some seventeenth—and eighteenth—century attitudes toward atheism see David Berman, "The Genesis of Avowed Atheism in Britain", *Question*, 11 (1978), 44-45, and "The Repressive Denials of Atheism in Britain in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 82 (1982), 211-45.

careful reflections. Consequently, to curb «the Violence of their Passions, and to outweigh Mens private Interests... some more obvious Principles, which all the world may be sensible of, and which may make the deepest Impressions upon them, must be found out, and that, in a Word, can be no other than the Fear of a Deity». It is, after all, only an outward appearance of morality that the atheist can manage: If the notions of honesty, for example, are cut off from any connection to the «Will of God, the supreme Lawgiver, the Author of our Being, the Protector of Mankind, and of Society», they become «meer Chimera's... barren Principles, pure Speculations, incapable of laying a Foundation for good Morality, or to produce solid Virtue», while, Barbeyrac claims, it will simply never occur to the atheist that he should adhere to the principles of morality at the cost of his own desires and interests. (P 142, 160) When all is said and done atheism can lead only to the destruction of society:

The Notion of a GOD, and of an invisible Judge, who will punish Vice and reward Virtue, are naturally so fast linked together, that the most simple have a Sense of it, notwithstanding their other false superstitious Idea's, as appears from the Example of the Pagans. But, as much as Atheism pleases some Men, as the more pure State, nothing but pernicious Consequences can be drawn from it, tending directly to the greatest Looseness and Debauchery; Consequences which are clear to the Sight of all the World, and can't but bring Destruction to a Society, which is composed of Men endowed with such irreligious Principles. (P 142)

The voice of one person in particular was raised against these seventeenth-century attacks on atheists and atheism: that of Pierre Bayle, the author of *Le Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, the work later viewed as the arsenal of the Enlightenment. Ironically, although he defended the morality of atheists, Bayle himself was very likely a believing Christian whose fideistic Calvinism was no hindrance to a plainspeaking criticism of cant and hypocrisy.¹²

The event that turned Bayle's attention to the issue of atheism and morality was the comet of 1680. In a world not far in time from pure Ptolemaicism, such a celestial event was thought by many to have special significance, to presage some great terrestrial event or events. Such opinions, Bayle argued, were little more than crude superstitions, and he buttressed his position with an analysis of causal relations that Hume must surely have appreciated. Here, however, we are concerned with the fact that Bayle's effort to overturn the view that comets are omens led him, as he says, to draw «a parallel between Atheism and Paganism» and to enlist «whatever Logic and History» could provide in

¹² On Bayle in general see Elisabeth Labrousee, *Pierre Bayle. Tome 1, du pays de foix à la cité d'Erasmus*, and *Pierre Bayle, Tome 2, Heterodoxie et rigorisme* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963, 1964). On Bayle and the atheist controversy, see Walter F. Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), pp. 30-74, and especially 33-35, 51. J.-P. Pittion, "Hume's Reading of Bayle: An Inquiry into the Source and Role of [Hume's] Memoranda", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, XV (1977), 373-86, is also of interest here.

order to defend his objections to, as it were, astrology. In the sequel this parallel all but eclipsed the original concern.¹³

Bayle's discussion proceeds diffusely, not unlike one of Montaigne's essays. Nevertheless, out of this diffusion there clearly emerges an argument. That argument attempts first to falsify, by an appeal to facts, the claims of the anti-atheists, and then to offer an alternative explanation of human behavior, an explanation that can account for the newly set-out facts. The result is a defense, but not a vindication, of atheism, in so far as it is shown that individual atheists have been (and thus can be) morally upright, and that there could be a society of atheists.

There have been comets, Bayle notes, from time immemorial, and comets that displayed themselves to pagan Europe before the Christian era began. It cannot be, then, that comets are always and necessarily a means by which God seeks to convert atheists to believers. For if comets were always intended to convert atheists to believers, then the pre-Christian comets must have been intended to convert atheists to idolatry, to a pagan religion. That cannot have been the case. Idolatry is as great an evil as is atheism, perhaps even a greater. Idolaters distort and demean the supernatural, picturing their gods as morally weak, even wicked; they revel in profane and heinous practices which they called *sacred* or *religious*; they enmesh themselves in groundless religious superstitions, thereby closing their hearts and minds to the news of the one true Deity. God, who abhors all evil, would not send signs that could lead a generality of mankind into these profaning, shocking sins. God does not use his powers in that way.¹⁴

For that matter, Bayle goes on, experience of the world shows the fallaciousness of all reasonings intended to show that belief in God corrects the vicious inclinations of mankind. It is widely believed, of course, that man is a reasonable being, determined to desire happiness and avoid misery, and able to control his will by knowledge of what is the best means for achieving these ends. It is this belief, in fact, that underlies the view that atheism is «the most fearful State» in which a man may be found. For supposing that man is a reasonable agent, and supposing further that individual men are «convinc'd there's a Providence ruling the World, from whom nothing is hid» and who «recompenses the Vertuous with endless Felicity, and the Wicked with everlasting Pains,» it seems clearly to follow that the believer acts reasonably and well, while the unbeliever takes «Pleasures as his chief End, and Rule of all his Actions,» makes «Jest of what others call Honor and Vertue.» and «perjures himself for a trifle». On this account the atheist must be «a Monster infinitely more dangerous than the wild Beasts, Lions, and furious Bulls, of which *Hercules* deliver'd *Greece*.» (B sect. 133)

¹³ "Explanation I", *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, trans. by P. Des Maizeaux, et al. 5 vols., 2d English edition (London: D. Midwinter, et al., 1734-1738), 5: 811-14, especially 813. A convenient modern translation which includes this material is *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. by R. H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

¹⁴ *Miscellaneous Reflections* was first published as *Pensées diverses écrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne*; Bayle later published a *Continuation des Pensées diverses*.

This view is «all very fine and right,» says Bayle, «when one considers things in their Ideas and Metaphysical Abstractions.» The difficulty is that the theory bears little resemblance to reality. Visitors from another world having heard about *reasonable* Christians, believing in eternal paradise and torment, would doubtless infer that such a people spend their time in good works, and vie only to see who might excel in charity. The actual facts are immeasurably different, so much so that, were these visitors to «see only one Fortnight's way of the World,» they could not but conclude that the practice of Christians is not guided by the light of conscience. Christians employ «their utmost Skill, and all their Passions, to perfect the Art of War»; their soldiers are no less barbaric than any others, as even the story of the crusades makes clear. Christian women are subject to the same carnal lusts as others; if some are allowed to remain chaste or virtuous, it is only at the expense of those many others who are encouraged in lewdness and prostitution. Christian gentlemen may go to church religiously enough, but out of church they whore and swear, duel and cheat, lie and devise ways «to second their filthy Desires.» There is no one with even a little experience of the world who does not know «a thousand Persons firmly persuaded of all the Miracles of Christianity... [and] who yet live the most disorderly Lives.» If anything at all «be demonstrable in Morality,» Bayle says, «I doubt not I have demonstrated» that Christians can be «firmly persuaded of the Truth of their Religion,» and yet live a sinful, immoral life, and hence «I conclude that Infidelity is not the source of a Corruption of Manners.» That corruption has quite another source. (B sects. 133-48, 159)

Bayle's positive theory, if one may call it that, is a relatively simple one. Christians, he has shown, do not live according to their principles or opinions, nor does any other group act in accordance with its religious beliefs. Generally speaking, human actions are not guided by metaphysical principles, nor even by that most important of all principles, *The Deity exists and concerns himself with human affairs*. How else is one to explain the fact that there is «so prodigious a Diversity of Opinions concerning the manner of serving God, and the Forms of Civil Life,» while there is yet on the other hand a no less remarkable uniformity of human behavior? As Bayle puts it, «one finds the same Passions reign eternally in all Countrys, and in all Ages,» that «Ambition, Avarice, Envy, Lust, Revenge, and all the Crimes consequent on these Passions» are not merely common, but «rife all the World over,» and that «the Jew and Mahometan, Turk and Moor, the Christian and Infidel, Tartar and Indian, the Inhabitants on the Continent and those of the Isles, the Nobleman and the Yeoman, all kinds of Men, who differ in almost all things else, except the general Notion of Humanity... so exactly agree» in their actions that one could easily think that they copied from one another. Such uniformity of behavior must spring from «the true Principle on Man's Actions,» his natural inclination for pleasure and his desires for particular things, or, in a word, from the passions themselves. Of course, Bayle adds, one must be careful in generalizing about man's motivations, for any rule will be subject to exceptions, but there is nonetheless a rule «which is for the most part true, to wit, That Man is not determin'd in his Actions by general Notices, or Views of his Understanding, but by the present reigning Passion of his Heart.» (B sects. 136, 138)

There is, then, no reason to have a special fear of atheists, to suppose either that they must necessarily be more immoral than other men, or that they are less able to participate in society. If it is generally true, «as History and common Life» show, that mankind runs headlong into all kinds of sin, while yet believing this fundamental proposition of religion: «that there's a God who terribly repays the Sinner, and duly rewards the Good,» then those that say that belief in this fundamental proposition is a guarantee that the believer will lead a good life are clearly mistaken. Consequently, it is a mistake to suppose that because a man is a believer (either a Christian or an idolater) he will live «a better moral Life than an Atheist.» Atheists are motivated by the same principles that motivate idolaters, and both are motivated in exactly the same way that Christians are motivated: by the passions. If every «malicious Inclination results from the Ground of Human Nature, and is fortify'd by the Passions; which rising in the very Mass of our Blood, are infinitely diversify'd according to the different Accidents of Life,» then the «Inclination to do ill, belongs no more to a Heart void of the Sense of God, than [to] one possess'd with it. Furthermore, any inclinations we may have to upright behavior — sobriety, good nature, honesty, pity— are owing not to any supposition we may have formed concerning the existence of a Deity, but to our «particular natural Temper and Constitution, fortify'd by Education, by Self-love, Vain-glory, an Instinct of Reason, or such-like Motives, «and these» prevail in Atheists as well as others. There's no ground then to maintain, that an Atheist must necessarily be more inordinate than an Idolater.» (B sect. 145)

One is not surprised, then, when Bayle writes:

I make no scruple to declare, wou'd you know my Thoughts of a Commonwealth of Atheists, That as to Manners and Civil Life 'twou'd exactly resemble a Commonwealth of Pagans; 'twill indeed require very severe Laws, and very executed. But do's not every State require the Same?

That he then goes on to suggest that it is merely because the King of France has given a new force to the «Laws against Bullies and Pickpockets» that there has been a decrease in street crime in Paris makes it clear enough that Bayle thinks a society of atheists would also match a society of Christians, or at least match that of His Most Christian Majesty. There does not happen to be a society of atheists, and perhaps there never has been one. But were there such a society it is probable, Bayle concludes, that it would:

observe all Civil and Moral Dutys, as other Societys do, provided Crimes were severely punish'd, and Honor and Infamy annex'd to certain Points. As the Ignorance of a first Being, the Creator and Preserver of the World, wou'd not bereave the Members of this Society of a sense of Glory and Contempt, Reward and Punishment, or of all the Passions which reign in teh rest of Men, nor wholly extinguish the Light of Reason; one shou'd find Persons among'em of Integrity in common dealing, some who reliev'd the Poor, oppos'd Violence, were faithful to their Friends, despis'd Injurys, renounc'd sensual Pleasures, did no wrong; prompted to these worthy Actions, either by a love of Praise inseparable from'em, or a design of gaining Friends and Welwishers in case of a turn in their own Fortune. The Women wou'd set up for Vertue,

as an infallible Pledg of the mens Love and Esteem. Crimes indeed of all kinds must happen in such a Society; but not frequenter than in a Society of Idolaters, because all the Principles which prompted the Pagans to Good or Evil, Rewards and Punishments, Glory and Disgrace, Complexion and Custom, take place in a Society of Atheists. (B sect. 172)

Hume met head-on the challenge of the anti-atheists, and in doing so carried the defense of atheism to new levels. But before we turn to Hume some terminological clarifications will give us a better appreciation of this challenge and of Hume's atheistic response.

The first thing to note is that early modern usage of the terms *atheism* and *atheist* were somewhat different, and considerably broader, than current usage appears to be. In the earlier time these terms expressed, as often as not, a kind of general opprobrium—they were epithets used to denounce the heterodox as well as the unbeliever, as is made clear by the fact that Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, and several renaissance popes were among those who were said to be atheists and who were denounced for their atheism. Secondly, early modern writers distinguished between *practical* and *speculative* atheists. Practical atheists were generally considered the less dangerous species for they simply, by their profligate behavior, acted as though there were no God ready to judge and to punish their misdeeds. Such callousness was by no mean good, but it was thought to be considerably less insidious, less dangerous, than even the most circumspect theorizing of the speculative atheist.¹⁵ Thirdly, we should bear in mind the position reported by Thomas Stanley in his seventeenth-century history of philosophy: the term *atheist*, he says, may be «taken two ways»: It may refer to «him who is an enemy to the Gods.»¹⁶ It will be seen that on each of these three uses one can be an atheist without making an outright denial of the existence of a god or gods, while on the third use of the term, the class of atheists is seen to include those individuals who are opposed to the gods, or those we might call *a-theists*: individuals who are opposed to the gods or who indicate that they can manage quite well, thank you, without a god or gods.

¹⁵ On these uses of *atheist* and *atheism* see D. C. Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964). Stanley's use of the term comes from his account of Pyrrhonism and is cited here from the entry for *atheist* in the *OED*.

¹⁶ Bentley's first Boyle Lecture (see above, n. 4) characterizes atheism as including "all the various Forms of Impiety; whether of such as excludes the Deity from governing the World by his Providence, or judging it by his Righteousness, or creating it by his Wisdom and Power... [and those] that no only disbelieve the *Christian Religion*; but impugn the assertion of a *Providence*, of the *Immortality* of the Soul, of an *Universal Judgement* to come, and of any *Incorporeal Essence*". All these views terminate, he says, "in downright Atheism. For the Divine Inspection into the affairs of the World doth necessarily follow from the Nature and Being of God. And he that denies this, doth implicitly deny his Existence... the Existence of God and his Government of the World do mutually suppose and imply one another". (pp. 5-6) The Boyle Lecturer of 1697, Francis Gastrell, gives much the same analysis: The atheist is one who "says there is no God that governs the world, and judgeth the earth; there is no God that has appointed laws and rules for men to act by; there is no God to whom men are accountable for their actions". *The Certainty and Necessity of Religion in general...* (London, 1697). Cited from John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 30. Redwood's work is a useful compendium of materials on the atheist controversy.

This third and philosophically significant understanding of atheism is fundamental to the controversy reviewed above. We have seen, of course, that atheist and atheism were used in highly charged ways, and that it was mainly speculative atheism that concerned Bentley, Pufendorf, Barbeyrac and their contemporaries. Even more importantly, however, we find speculative atheism being given, by our own standards, a broad but reasonably clear definition. A (speculative) atheist is a person who maintains, in one form or another, the truth (or perhaps merely the likelihood) of any one of the following propositions:

1. There is no God, no intelligent first cause of the universe.

2. There is or may be a God, but he takes no interest in the affairs of the universe; there is or may be a Deity, but there is no Divine Providence that guides the affairs of man.

3. Humans have no immortal soul, and hence there are no eternal and divine rewards or punishments; the human soul has, in effect, impunity.

It is to the man who fits this description of the atheist that the anti-atheists, here most fully represented by Pufendorf and Barbeyrac, make their challenge. That challenge in a general form is unambiguously articulated by Pufendorf, while a more specific and rather different sounding challenge (but one that comes to much the same thing) is enunciated by Barbeyrac.

For in as much as the whole Race of Men in all Ages have constantly held this Persuasion [of God's existence], whoever would attempt to assert the contrary, must of Necessity, not only solidly confute all the Arguments produced on the other side, but also alledge better and more plausible Reasons for his own particular Opinion. And farther, since the Safety and Happiness of Mankind have been hitherto thought to depend chiefly on this Belief, it is requisite, that he likewise prove *Atheism* to contribute more to the Interest and the Good of all Men, than the Acknowledgement of a Deity. (P254)

It is certain, that *Morality is the Daughter of Religion, that they go hand in hand together; and that the Perfection of the latter, is the Standard of Perfection in the former...* In Fact, the fundamental Principles of Natural Religion, which must be the Basis of all other Religion; are also the most firm, or rather only, Foundation of this Science of Morality.

Without a Deity, *Duty, Obligation, Right*, are no more, to say the Truth, than fine Ideas; which may please the Mind, but can scarce touch the Heart; and which of themselves, cannot impose an indispensable Necessity to act or not to act, in such or such a certain manner... But to give these Ideas their full Force and due measure of Efficacy; to make 'em strong enough to maintain their Ground against Passion and Self-interest; they will require a superiour Being; a Being superiour to us in Power and Might, who has subjected us to a strict Conformity therewith in our Conduct; who has bound us thereto... who has put us under an Obligation, properly so call'd... This Fear of a Deity, who punishes Vice and rewards Virtue, has so great an Efficacy; that, altho' the fundamental Principles of Religion be much darken'd, by the Intermixture of 'Error and Superstition; yet if they are not entirely corrupted and destroy'd, it will still continue to actuate, and have a considerable influence...

But shou'd you make the finest System in the World, if Religion has not its part in it, it will be little more than (as I may say) a speculative Morality; and you will be found to build on a sandy Foundation. (*P Hist. Account* 14-15)

More than one Hume scholar has argued that Hume's religious position was misunderstood by his contemporary critics and their nineteenth-century successors, a great majority of whom thought Hume a religious sceptic *par excellence*, an atheist.¹⁷ If *atheist* is used in only a strict present-day sense, to refer to a person who explicitly denies the existence of a god or gods, one could conclude that Hume was not an atheist, for we have, so far as I know, no record of such an outright denial. I suggest, however, that such a conclusion is anachronistic and seriously misleading; by the standards of his contemporaries Hume was indeed an atheist. As we have already seen, explicitly denying the existence of the deity was not a necessary qualification of the early modern atheist, while on the other tests of atheism set by the anti-atheists of his time, Hume scores impressively:

1. Hume clearly, explicitly attacked the notion that there is a deity who takes an interest in human affairs, the notion, that is, that there is some significant form of divine providence. He argues that the very concept of a miracle is incoherent and, even if that were not so, the evidence in favor of any purported miracle is inadequate to establish that a divine intervention has taken place. Such evidence is not only suspect, but congenitally so. In addition, the world or the universe itself, commonly alleged to bespeak an intelligent, concerned creator, presents us with a mixed bag of evidence, with evil as well as good, so that the argument from design fails for lack of a compelling major premise. If the minor premise is not equally suspect, the very form of this so-called argument is, for it purports to carry us beyond the suggestion that the effects we experience have some cause, to a very different conclusion, namely, that these effects are the consequences of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent Creator.¹⁸

2. Hume allowed to the idea of god only the absolute minimum of content. Assuming that Philo of the *Dialogues* speaks for him, Hume can be so expansive as to say that we should give a "plain, philosophical assent" to "one simple, thought somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence". (D 227) In a less expansive mood, and clearly speaking for himself, Hume argued that the origin of the idea of god lies in the ignorance and fear of primitive man and that from this natural beginning we

¹⁷ Among those who appear to believe that Hume's religious position was correctly assessed by his contemporaries are David Berman and John Gaskin. See Berman's "David Hume and the Suppression of 'Atheism'", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (1983), 375-87; and Gaskin's *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, (London: Macmillan, 1978). Professor Gaskin's study is the most complete account of Hume's philosophy of religion, and one to which I am indebted. I have also learned from his "Hume, Atheism, and the Interested Obligation' of Morality", in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. D.F. Norton, N. Capaldi and W. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1978), 147-60)

¹⁸ See Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sections X and XI, and his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, *passim*.

have added and subtracted characteristics extracted from one human source or another, and augmented these by the addition of that most incomprehensible of all philosophical concepts, the infinite.¹⁹ Given the lack of irreducible religious content in even the most sublime form of the idea of the deity, one might suppose that Hume had no real reason to make an outright denial of the existence of a deity or deities.²⁰

3. Hume explicitly attacked what he took to be the strongest arguments favoring belief in the immortality of the soul, and he gave a clear and unequivocal testimony of his belief in his own mortality. After reviewing the kinds of arguments available to prove the immortality of the soul, Hume concludes that the matter is quite beyond the range of effective argumentation: "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? Who will repose such trust in any pretended philosophy, as to admit upon its testimony the reality of so marvellous a scene? Some new species of logic is requisite for that purpose; and some new faculties of the mind, that they may enable us to comprehend that logic".²¹ This remark does leave open the possibility that, as an act of faith, Hume nonetheless believed in personal immortality. We can thank James Boswell, however, for closing out that issue by asking Hume, when the latter was obviously on his deathbed, "if it was not possible that there might be a future state". To this question Hume responded by saying that "it was a most unreasonable fancy that he should exist for ever".²²

There is more. Hume was not content with a quiet, even affable, criticism of theism. He was also an active, aggressive enemy of the gods, an enemy who met the anti-atheistical challenge head-on by arguing that the theists have it precisely backward: Religion does not make morality possible; *religion makes morality impossible*. Wherever it exists—and it defies extermination—religion corrupts morality. There is not space here to review even briefly the lifetime of works on which Hume made this point, but it can be safely said that from the publication of *Essays Moral and Political* in 1741 to the posthumous publication of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* in 1779, no major work by Hume failed to probe critically some aspect of religious belief or religious practice, and more often than not, his attention was drawn to the morally corrupting effects of religion.²³

¹⁹ NHR 3: 309-63. This work is discussed below.

²⁰ Hume does grant that the belief in a deity cannot be eradicated entirely from the human race, and not even from most individuals. But given his views about the corrigibility of human belief, even of those beliefs that

²¹ "Of the Immortality of the Soul", W 4: 405-06.

²² For Boswell's account of his July 7, 1776 interview with Hume, see D 76-80.

²³ It has often been noted that Hume reported to Henry Home (later Lord Kames) that he was "castrating" the *Treatise* of its nobler parts, or those dealing with religious issues, and likely to offend. Not so often noticed are his remarks to Francis Hutcheson, two years later, indicating that Book III of the *Treatise* was subjected to a similar round of revisions so as not to give offense to the religious. See *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), I, 34, 36 (letters 13 and 15). Had not Hume so carefully altered the *Treatise*, it too, it seems safe to say, would be more explicitly critical of religious beliefs and practices.

Man, Hume goes on, is perpetually suspended between “life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want”, conditions that are “distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes”. In this condition we focus on these unknown causes, and while they are the object of our hopes and fears, while our passions keep us in a state of constant alarm, our imagination forms for us ideas of those powers on which we seem to depend. Were we able at this point to dissect each part of nature as the best natural philosophy can now do, we would no doubt find that these unknown and awesome causes are merely the “particular fabric and structure” of ourselves or nature. Lacking that hard-won skill, the ignorant multitude muddles on, and consistent with a “universal tendency” of our nature, they personify these causes. It is not only in the moon or clouds that mankind find faces or other human shapes. The secret and unknown causes that we fear come in for the same treatment; they are given “thought and reason and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men”. (NHR III; W 4: 316-17)²⁵

From fear, polytheism; from fear and polytheism, theism. It was the disorder of their circumstances that led primitive men to a belief in deities, and it is disorder that leads the current multitude to believe in a supreme and particular providence. Not even the masses of modern Europe are brought to their religious opinions by any process of rational argument. They, like their ancestors, base these opinions upon “irrational and superstitious principles”, and it is precisely these principles that transform polytheism into theism. (NHR VI; W 4: 328-30)

An idolatrous people, although they recognize several deities, will often, nonetheless, see one of these as superior to the rest. When this happens, the worship of this apparently superior deity will take exaggerated and flattering forms, and

as men’s fears or distresses become more urgent, they still invent new strains of adulation, and even he who outdoes his predecessor in swelling up the titles of his divinity, is sure to be outdone by his successor in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus they proceed; till at last they arrive at infinity itself...

Of course it is unlikely that the masses understand the increasingly sublime attributes that are ascribed to the supreme deity, but “thinking it safest to comply with the higher encomiums, they endeavour, by an affected ravishment and devotion, to ingratiate themselves with him”. By this entirely natural and unmysterious process, then, does the fundamental belief of the theist arise. (NHR VI, VII; W 4: 330-33)

²⁵ “They suppose their deities, however potent and invisible, to be nothing but a species of human creatures, perhaps raised from among mankind, and retaining all human passions and appetites, together with corporeal limbs and organs. Such limited beings, though masters of human fate, being, each of them, incapable of extending his influence every where, must be vastly multiplied, in order to answer that variety of events, which happen over the whole face of nature. Thus every place is stored with a crowd of local deities; and thus polytheism has prevailed, and still prevails, among the greatest part of uninstructed mankind... every disastrous accident alarms us, and sets us on enquiries concerning the principles whence it arose: Apprehensions spring up with regard to futurity: And the mind, sunk into diffidence, terror, and melancholy, has recourse to every method of appeasing those secret intelligent powers, on whom our future is supposed entirely to depend”. (NHR III; W 4: 318-19)

But, although the origin of theism can be traced to polytheism, and though either of these two forms of religion may gradually be transformed into the other, it does not follow that there are no genuinely important differences between theism and polytheism. Sections IX-XII of the *Natural History* offer a comparison of polytheism and monotheism with regard to persecution and toleration, courage and abasement, reason or absurdity, and doubt or conviction.

Polytheism, Hume argues, has the disadvantage of appearing so flexible in its tenets that there is no practice or opinion that it could not support; on the other hand it has the advantage that it is, by its very nature, highly tolerant of diversity. Theism has the contrary advantages and disadvantages, but appears to come off a poor second just because of its natural tendency toward intolerance. It should set before mankind “the most illustrious example, as well as the most commanding motives, of justice and benevolence. “It is more likely to set a bad example as its sects” fall naturally into animosity, and mutually discharge on each other that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and impacable of all human passions”.²⁶ Theism, because it represents the deity as infinitely superior to mankind and is at the same time joined with “superstitious terrors”, is likely “to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only qualities which are acceptable” to the Deity. The deities of polytheism, in contrast, are so little different from ourselves that we are offered the prospect of emulating, even rivalling, them, and consequently “activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and, all the virtues” that make a people greater are encouraged. (NHR IX; W 4:336-39)

A fair examination of ancient polytheism, Hume goes on, will reveal that this religion is not so absurd as one might at first suppose. It is only the view that, whatever powers or principles formed the world that we inhabit, these powers also produced “a species of intelligent creatures of more refined substance and greater authority than the rest”. Indeed, “the whole mythological system is so natural” that it seems more than likely to have been instantiated somewhere in the universe. Theism, in contrast, seems at first so reasonable that philosophy itself is joined with theology —with disastrous consequences. For philosophy finds herself

very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition ... one may safely affirm, that all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction. If that theology went not beyond reason and common sense, her doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must of necessity be raised: Mystery affected: Darkness and obscurity sought after:

²⁶ “The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of the polytheists... I may venture to affirm, that few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are more pernicious to society than this corruption of theism, when carried to the utmost height”. (NHR IX; W 4: 337-38)

And a foundation of merit afforded to the devout votaries, who desire an opportunity of suadding their rebellious reason, by the belief of the most unintelligible sophisms. (NHR XI; W 4:341-42)²⁷

On each point of comparison, then, Hume finds polytheism superior to monotheism. In view of this finding, it is all the more significant that he has already argued that polytheism is, when all is said and done, a *form of atheism*. There is, Hume had argued, only a relatively small and insignificant difference between the atheist who says there is no “invisible, intelligent power in the world”, and the polytheist who posits a bevy of deities practically indistinguishable from such quasi-material beings as elves and fairies. In contrast, the difference between the polytheist and the genuine theist is enormous, despite the fact that our language leads us to treat the two positions as similar. It is “as fallacy”, Hume writes, “merely from the casual resemblance of names, without and conformity of meaning, to rank such opposite opinions under the same denomination”. And he goes on to conclude that

These pretended religionists [the polytheists] are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: NO supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world. (NHR IV; W 4:320)²⁸

In short, Hume finds that so far as several crucial social virtues are concerned, polytheism is demonstrably superior to monotheism, while in general the morals of polytheists are necessarily less corrupt than those of the theists.²⁹ But if polytheism is

²⁷ “To oppose the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble maxims as these, that *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be*, that *the whole is greater than a part*, that *two and three make five*; is pretending to stop the ocean with a bull-rush. Will you set up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your impiety. And the same fires, which were kindled for heretics, will also serve for the destruction of philosophers”. (NHR XI; W 4: 342)

²⁸ Hume closes Section IV by remarking: “It is great complaisance, indeed, if we dignify with the name of religion such an imperfect system of theology, and put it on level with later systems, which are founded on principles more just and more sublime. For my part, I can scarcely allow the principles even of Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch and some other *Stoics* and *Academics*, though much more refined than the pagan superstition, to be worthy of the honourable appellation of theism. For if the mythology of the heathens resemble the ancient European system of spiritual beings, excluding God and angels, and leaving only fairies and sprites; the creed of these philosophers may justly be said to exclude a deity; and to leave only angels and fairies”. (NHR IV; W 4: 325)

²⁹ Monotheism leads necessarily to greater corruption just because it achieves the higher and purer theory. While the supposed extent of the deity’s “science and authority” increases, so do our “terrors naturally augment”; the “higher the deity is exalted in power and knowledge, the lower of course is he depressed in goodness and benevolence; whatever epithets of praise may be bestowed on him by his amazed adorers”. It is this conflict, Hume goes on to suggest, which is responsible for the unhealthy mental state of many theists: their opinion itself, he says, “contracts a kind of falsehood, and belies the inward sentiment. The heart secretly detests such measures of cruel and implacable vengeance; but the judgement dares not but pronounce them perfect and adorable. And the additional misery of this inward struggle aggravates all the other terrors, by which these unhappy victims to superstition are for ever haunted”. (NHR XII; W 4: 354-55)

morally superior to monotheism, and yet polytheism and atheism are essentially one and the same, then one can equally well conclude that atheism is morally superior to monotheism. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Hume's conclusion, one must grant that he has challenged head-on the claim that religion, and specially theism, provides the foundation of morality and the cement of society.³⁰

As represented by Pufendorf and Barbeyrac, the anti-atheists can be seen to have presented four principal challenges to the atheist:

1. Given the nearly perfect universality of belief in a providential deity, the atheist is challenged to confute the arguments that support this belief.

2. The atheist is then challenged to show that his own position is supported by "better and more plausible" arguments than is the theistic position he has confuted.

3. Given the nearly perfect universality of the opinion that religious belief is the cement of society, the atheist is challenged to show that atheism contributes "more to the Interest and Good of all Men, than [does] the acknowledgment of a Deity".

4. The atheist is then challenged to show that there can be an effective, practical morality that is independent of religious belief.

The greater part of Hume's response to this four-part challenge is well-known. None of his philosophical writings is more familiar than those in which he attempted to overturn the arguments purporting to prove the existence of a providential deity. These same arguments gave Hume grounds for claiming that his sceptical position is in fact more plausible than that of the theists, while the *Natural History of Religion* presents his thoroughly naturalistic candidate for the most plausible and compelling account of the origin of religion. And as we have just seen, Hume set out to rebut the theists' claim that religious belief is the cement of society. Religion, Hume argues, is in fact a grave danger to society.

It comes as no surprise, then, to find Hume meeting the fourth of the anti-atheist challenges. He did so by developing a "system of morals"³¹ that derives both moral distinctions and moral motivation from an entirely secular foundation, and that at the same time offers arguments and analyses which, if correct, entirely overturn the fundamental assumptions of those theistic moralists who claim that morality is founded on certain divine commands.

The *divine command theory* of morality presupposes the truth of a number of claims.³² Those who believe that the only satisfactory account of morality is one that

³⁰ Bayle had found it necessary to grant that his argument in support of atheists was hypothetical only, for there was no known society of atheists to hold up as evidence. Hume, by identifying polytheism with atheism, avoids this problem and strengthens the atheistic position.

³¹ T 574; see also p. 618, where Hume speaks of his "system of ethics".

³² The theory I am discussing is perhaps more commonly called *voluntarism*, but, because some versions of voluntarism may not contain precisely the elements found in Pufendorf, Barbeyrac, etc., I have retained the more idiosyncratic term, *divine command theory*. Several of the presuppositions mentioned are espoused explicitly by Barbeyrac in his notes to Book II, chap. IV of Pufendorf's *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, where the latter's popular *Abridgement of the Duties of a Man and Citizen*, giving "us a System of natural Religion; i. e. the Duties of Man to God", is summarized. See pp. 155 ff. Note also Locke's remark in MS. C28, cited in the note 8.

traces its origins to divine commands must also believe that there is a being who, by virtue of (among other things) creating mankind, or controlling the destiny of mankind, is clearly superior to mankind. This superior or supreme being must also be a morally superior being—a being whose every activity is necessarily virtuous.³³ Also, he must be known to take an interest in the affairs and behavior of mankind, and he must demonstrate this interest in human affairs by establishing and promulgating rules or laws (divine commands) that are intended to direct the behavior of rational beings and especially to direct the behavior of individual members of the human race. On the other hand, the creatures whose behavior is to be directed by these commands must be rational beings capable of understanding the commands given them.

In addition, the divine command theory presupposes the truth of at least three other fundamental propositions:

A. Inferior and dependent individuals owe an allegiance to the superior being on whom they depend.

B. Virtue, at least for inferior individuals, consists in conforming one's behavior to rules or laws, while the supreme being rewards those who conform to the divine commands, and punishes those who do not; these rewards and punishments include those administered in an eternal extension of this life.

C. Without the sanctions provided by the fear of eternal punishment or the hope of eternal reward, one can only *understand* a divine command; it is the sanctions, and especially that of fear, that give one the required *desire* to conform one's actions to the command.

Hume's moral theory, especially that of the *Treatise*, is a concerted attack on these fundamental presupposition.³⁴ The anti-atheists challenged the atheist to show that there can be an effective, practical morality independent of religious belief. In the most general terms, Hume's response to this challenge may be understood as a modified *tu quoque* argument: Pufendorf and Barbeyrac claim that the atheistic moralist can at best account for no more than the occurrence of barren, merely speculative moral concepts. Hume in response argues that the anti-atheists' theory of morals is a patchwork of superstition and authority that fails of even so meagre an accomplishment as the one mentioned. The anti-atheists themselves fail to account for even the bare attainment of such basic moral concepts as *duty*, *obligation*, *allegiance*, *justice*, or *property*, nor, on their principles, could they ever give such an account. Furthermore, they have completely misunderstood both the nature and foundations of morality, and they have

³³ It has been suggested to me that this puts the matter too strongly, for to say that every activity of the deity is necessarily virtuous is to suggest a limitation on his activity not in accord with the views of the voluntarists. It appears, however, that the deity of even the most radical voluntarist is necessarily virtuous in every action, for, according to the voluntarist, the actions or commands of the deity define virtue: actions are good or right because the deity orders them or performs them.

³⁴ A further such presupposition which Hume can be seen to oppose is the view that understanding the law of the superior being on which one is dependent imposes on one the obligation to obey that law (in virtue, apparently, of the allegiance owed the superior being). Hume's objections to attempts to found morality on understanding alone are well known, and hence I shall here omit any discussion of his reasons for rejecting this particular presupposition, but my views on the subject are set out in chapter 3 of my *David Hume*.

mistakenly conflated acting virtuously, or the acquisition of moral merit, with devotional acts, or the acquisition of religious merit.

Let me begin with the last of these suggestions. Here again we can draw on the *Natural History of Religion* and Hume's suggestions about the foundation of religious practice in human nature.

Suppose, Hume says, someone founded a popular religion³⁵ in which it were "expressly declared" that nothing but virtuous behaviour could gain the approbation of the deity, and even that this religion were served by an order of priests or clerics themselves entirely satisfied to do nothing more than to teach this opinion through daily sermons. So "inveterate are the people's prejudices", he continues, "that, for want of some other superstition, they would make the very attendance on these sermons the essentials of religion", thus substituting certain ritualistic acts for those of genuine virtue. The difficulty is, it seems, that men simply cannot bring themselves to accept that the best means of serving the deity is "by promoting the happiness of his creatures". On the contrary, because of the terrors with which they are haunted, men "seek the divine favor, not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions". That is, religion leads mankind to eschew the practice of virtue, and in its stead take up one or another practice "which either serves to no purpose in life, or offers the strongest violence to [man's] natural inclinations". Just because the practice is useless it is thought to be the "more purely religious". What, after all, could be a surer proof of devotion than to perform austere and bizarre acts that can have no purpose other than the expression of this very devotion.

Two features of Hume's view emerge from these remarks. First, the practice of religion and the practice of virtue run along paths not merely separate but entirely divergent. Religious acts are motivated out of self-interest, and for that very reason cannot be acts of virtue. Virtuous acts are those done out of regard for the interests of others. But a man who courts divine favor in order to secure "protection and safety in this world, and eternal happiness in the next", is not virtuous, but selfish. In this regard, the divine command theory, as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson had already noticed, is no significant improvement on the selfish theory Hume attributes to Thomas Hobbes.³⁶ The practice of religion does itself lead men to neglect, even to repudiate, the practice of virtue. Furthermore, in his concern to distinguish himself before his deity, in his

³⁵ By popular religion Hume simply means a religion of the people, in contrast to one limited to only a few philosophers.

³⁶ For a brief account of Shaftesbury's objections to Locke and other Christian moralists, see *David Hume*, pp. 33-43. For Hutcheson's views of Pufendorf, see the remarks referred to above, note 8; for a discussion of his objections to Locke's ethics, see my "Hutcheson's Moral Realism", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 22 (July, 1985), 397-418. Bayle appears to have influenced both Shaftesbury (with whom he was personally well acquainted) and Hutcheson on the matter of the morality of atheists, while Hume, as is well known, acknowledges the influence of these two British moralists. Hume goes further than either Shaftesbury or Hutcheson, however, who are generally content to argue that atheists could be morally upright. See Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*, Book I, Part III, and Hutcheson's *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense*, Section VI, v-vii.

concern to focus the divine attention upon himself, the religious man far too often succumbs to the temptation to commit what are nothing less than immoral acts:

the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, [to be] 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 fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere. (NHR XIV; W 4: 357-59)³⁷

These general considerations can serve as background to a necessarily brief sketch of Hume's responses to each of the three presuppositions, A, B and C.

C. Without the sanctions provided by the fear of eternal punishment or the hope of eternal reward, one can only *understand* a divine command; it is the sanctions, and especially that of fear, that give one the required *desire* to conform one's actions to the command.

Just above I noted that Hume rejects the claim that fear may be the motive to virtue. This can be amplified in at least two ways. First, Hume rejects a further suggestion of the divine command theory, namely, the claim that we are motivated only by self-interest. In this respect, Hume's criticisms of Hobbes, Locke and Mandeville serve a double role, as does his own (so he believed) fuller and more accurate account of human nature.³⁸ The overall effect is to show that fear is far from being the only passion capable of motivating us to action. That is, Hume surveys human nature and human behavior and concludes that we are in fact motivated by a number of passions, including a limited but entirely natural (instinctive, unstructured) generosity. Consequently, there is no reason to suppose that it is only by adding fear to the mixture that men can be motivated to keep rules or (what is *not* the same thing) to act virtuously. Even if, *contrary to fact*, virtue could be motivated by fear, it would not necessarily be motivated by fear. Men are motivated by several passions other than fear, and consequently morality need not be supposed to be dependent upon whatever it is that is said to be attained—motivation or sanction—by positing a divine and threatening lawgiver.³⁹

³⁷ Boswell reports of Hume (on his death bed): "He then said flatly that the Morality of every Religion was bad, and, I really thought, was not jocular when he said, 'that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious'". Boswell then adds, significantly: "This was just an extravagant reverse of the common remark as to Infidels". (D 76)

³⁸ Hobbes and Locke, Hume writes "maintained the selfish system of morals". He then adds: "The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis is, that, as it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions, there is required the highest stretch of philosophy to establish so extraordinary a paradox. To the most careless observer there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity; such affections as love, friendship, compassion, gratitude. These sentiments have their causes, effects, objects and operations, marked by common language and observation, and plainly distinguished from those of the selfish passions... I shall not here enter into any detail on the present subject. Many able philosophers have shown the insufficiency of these systems. And I shall take for granted what, I believe, the smallest reflection will make evident to every impartial enquirer". (ECPM 296, 298) For a somewhat more detailed discussion of Hume's views on the egoism of these writers see *David Hume*, pp. 43-48.

³⁹ Hume says that "there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind... These desires in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment... or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such... The common error of metaphysicians has

Secondly, if Hume's general account of the relationship between virtue and motivation is correct, the presupposition of the theist cannot be true. According to Hume, we assign moral blame to a person for not performing an action because we suppose that an individual in the circumstances this person was in "shoul'd be influenc'd by the proper motive of that action". If, however, we then find that this proper motive was in fact present and operating, but that its influence was prevented "by some circumstances unknown to us", we withdraw our ascription of blame, and may even assign moral praise. This fact indicates, he goes on, that "all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives, and are consider'd merely as signs of those motives". And from this principle he concludes further that the virtuous motive from which an action derives its moral merit "can never be a regard to the virtue of that action". The action does not *become* virtuous (more accurately: the action cannot rightly be *called virtuous*) until it is desired for some reason that itself causes the action to be called virtuous in the first place. This other reason "must be some other natural motive or principle", and this other motive or principle, Hume goes on to argue, is the desire to benefit others. Still other motives may well be reasonable, even natural, but no other motives can give rise to *virtue*. (T 477-78)⁴⁰

This theory of the origin of virtue in motivation will be relevant again below, but for the present it is clear that it runs directly counter to any suggestion that acts motivated by either fear of punishment or hope of reward can ever be virtuous acts; the only acts attaining moral merit are those motivated by a desire to benefit others.

...
 lain in ascribing the direction of the will entirely to one of these principles, and supposing the other to have no influence. Men often act knowingly against their interest". (T 417-418)

There is an element of ambiguity in the concept of fear found in much Christian teaching, such that fear as awe or respect is fundamental to the ethics of this teaching ("The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"), while fear in the more ordinary sense is the motivational complement of self-interested hope, or hope of reward. The anti-atheists seem to trade on this ambiguity; Hume seems perfectly willing to let them do so, and to take rhetorical advantage of this fact by treating the two of fear as one.

⁴⁰ Hume continues: "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... Here is a man, that does many benevolent actions... No character can be more amiable and virtuous. We regard these actions as proofs of the greatest humanity. *This humanity bestows a merit on the actions*. A regard to this merit is, therefore, a secondary consideration, and deriv'd from the antecedent principle of humanity, which is meritorious and laudable". (Emphasis added).

James Tully has pointed out to me that some of those Hume is opposing would likely respond by claiming that, although religious belief or practice may begin in self-interest (fear for his or her eternal state leads the reprobate to act in accordance with the precepts of Christianity), it can go beyond that to the point that the saint loses all concern for self. This is an important claim, and one that Hume would have to take seriously, for his own account of the development of the artificial virtues could be seen as a secularized version of a similar transition: a concern for my property can lead me to an overriding concern for justice, or the good of society. Hume's response, I speculate, would take the form of a reminder: the action of the saint may indeed be selfless, but this does not prove that such virtue originates in the fear of eternal punishment or the hope of eternal reward. On the contrary, it has its origin in a restricted and restrictive concern, that which gives rise to the artificial virtues. For an outline of the line of a further defense Pufendorf might have taken in a response to criticisms of his divine command theory, see the final section of the article by J. B. Schneewind cited in note 9.

B. Virtue, at least for inferior individuals, consists in conforming one's behavior to rules or laws, while the supreme being rewards those who are virtuous (those, that is, who conform their behavior to the divine commands), and punishes those (the wicked) who do not; these rewards and punishments include those administered in an eternal extension of this life.

About this claim Hume is dubious for a number of reasons, not the least being his doubts about the immortality of the soul and the existence of that other world in which such rewards and punishments are meted out. But his objections run beyond a mere freethinker's doubts about eternal life. As we have seen that he finds all attempts to found morality on self-interest to be inadequate, it is obvious that he must consider all talk of eternal rewards and punishments quite beside the point of morality. It is possible that there are such rewards and punishments, but they cannot possibly be incentives to *virtue*, nor, on the other hand, can the performance of virtuous acts be of any religious significance. It is not a matter of virtue being its own reward. Hume appears to reject even so austere a prudentialism. It is, rather, that to fulfill a moral obligation is simply to do what one ought to do: "virtuous conduct is deemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves".⁴¹

Furthermore, we lack entirely the grounds for extending our moral concepts to higher beings. Hume told Hutcheson that he had revised Book III of his *Treatise* in an effort to remove all those passages which might give offense to the religious. But despite this further round of prudential revision and the fact that Hume appears to direct his criticism merely at those now known as moral rationalists, the opening section of Book III is clearly apposite to the point under discussion.

Those who maintain an abstract rational difference between moral good and evil, Hume writes, suppose not only that these relations are eternal and immutable but also that their effects must necessarily be always the same and thus that they "have no less, or rather a greater, influence in directing the will of the deity, than in governing the rational and virtuous of our own species". But, he goes on, it is one thing to know virtue, and quite another to conform the will to it. These are distinct particulars. Consequently, in order to prove "that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, *obligatory* on every rational mind", one would have to prove that the pretended connection between these allegedly eternal relations and the will is an absolutely invariable connection between a particular cause and a particular effect and is "so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence". No such proof is possible:

⁴¹ The context in which this remark is made bears repeating here: "The duties, which a man performs as a friend or parent, seem merely owing to his benefactor or children; nor can he be wanting to these duties, without breaking through all the ties of nature and morality. A strong inclination may prompt him to the performance: A sentiment of order or moral obligation joins its force to these natural ties: And the whole man, if truly virtuous, is drawn to his duty, without any effort or endeavour. Even with regard to the virtues, which are more austere, and more founded on reflection, such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance, or integrity; the moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretension to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is deemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves!" (NHR XIV; W 4:358-59)

I have already prov'd, that even in human nature no relation can ever alone produce any action; besides this, I say, it has been shewn, in treating of the understanding, that there is no connexion of cause and effect, such as this is suppos'd to be, which is discoverable otherwise than by experience, and of which we can pretend to have any security by the simple consideration of the objects. All beings in the universe, consider'd in themselves, appear entirely loose and independent of each other. 'This only by experience we learn their influence and connexion; and this influence we ought never to extend beyond experience... we cannot prove *a priori*, that these relations, if they really existed and were perceiv'd, wou'd be universally forcible and obligatory. (T 465-66)

In less elaborate terms, Hume is arguing that our knowledge in the domain of morals is subject to the very limitations that mark the rest of our knowledge. No matter what our subject, we are unable to go beyond experience. Furthermore, just as our experience in natural philosophy and (as we now might say) philosophy of mind or psychology fails to provide knowledge of a deity whose operations solve metaphysical or epistemological problems, so does it fail in morals. Efforts to found morality and obligation on eternal relations deriving from the deity are bound to fail because, as morality is a practical affair involving matters of fact (agents, actions, situations, assessments), the relations between these components are, like all such factual relations, contingent. It appears, then, that morality must be a purely human affair. It is concerned with human actions in the present sphere, it rests on human nature, and it is dependent upon human experience alone. As Hume expressed his general view in a letter: "Morality... regards only human Nature & human Life".⁴²

A. Inferior and dependent individuals owe an allegiance to the superior being on whom they depend.

Hume's objections to this presupposition rest on fundamental and complex components of his system, and hence are difficult to state briefly. Building on the discussion just completed, one could say that, according to Hume, the theist claims to *trace* moral obligation to the command of the deity, but what he in fact does is to *project* onto a putative deity principles and precepts of purely human derivation and application. These he would then have us suppose to be derived from the deity, but in point of fact, so far as Hume is concerned, the theist has salted an otherwise empty mine.

⁴² *Letters of David Hume*, I, 40. Hume's argument in the *Treatise* is generally supposed to be directed against the rationalists. He there mentions only Wollaston, but the second *Enquiry* indicates that he also had Malebranche, Cudworth, and Clarke in mind. (ECPM 197) The argument bears equally against other ethical theories dependent upon claims that neither have been nor can be confirmed by experience. If it is argued that the divine command theory is the contrary of that of Cudworth and the other rationalists —that it is voluntaristic and based on a revelation that does or may run contrary to reason —then one need only to turn to "Of Miracles" to determine Hume's response to an ethics that in this alternative manner takes us beyond, perhaps further beyond, our experience.

Hume has no interest in doubting or denying that there are obligations such as those we are put in mind of by the term *allegiance*. He even grants that individuals who are specially aided by other individuals owe a debt of gratitude to those who have given the aid, and he suggests that a form of ingratitude, patricide, is the most vicious of all crimes. But allegiance itself, he argues, arises not from the foundation of a dependent relationship. It arises, rather, from private interest controlled by private interest itself, and then turned by purely human interventions into a mundane and secular, but genuine, social virtue. A moralist who concerns himself with a putative allegiance to the deity is pursuing a pointless and potentially dangerous speculation that necessarily carries him quite beyond the moral domain.

In somewhat more detail: Hume objects to certain moral theories because they presuppose precisely those fundamental moral concepts whose presence and significance need to be explained, and he goes on to offer the needed explanation.⁴³ The explanation that he gives, assuming it is correct, reveals that the divine command theory is entirely mistaken in its account of the nature and origin of allegiance, justice, and other such virtues.

Hume distinguishes between *natural* and *artificial* virtues. The former are those qualities (for example: beneficence, generosity, clemency, temperance, frugality, enterprise, greatness of mind) that, like all virtues, “acquire our approbation, because of their tendency to the good of mankind” but are distinguished from other virtues insofar as they are the result of some natural passion or fundamental propensity of human nature itself. In addition, the good that the natural virtues produce “arises from every single act” of this sort. In contrast, although the artificial virtues (for example: justice, promise-keeping, allegiance, chastity), can also be traced, ultimately, to human nature, they are the result of thought, reflection, or contrivance —of human artifice— and are further distinguished by the fact that “a simple act of justice [for example], consider’d in itself, may often be contrary to the public good”. Where the artificial virtues are concerned, it is “only the concurrence of mankind, in a general scheme or system of action”, and the effort to maintain this system at full strength, which in such a case contributes to the good of mankind”. (T 578-79)⁴⁴

⁴³ Hume says that the “ideas” of *property*, *right*, and *obligation* “are altogether unintelligible without first understanding” the idea of justice, one of the most important virtues. He then adds: “Those, therefore, who make use of the word *property*, or *right*, or *obligation*, before they have explained the origin of justice, or even make use of [these words] in that explication, are guilty of a very gross fallacy, and can never reason upon any solid foundation... ’Tis very preposterous, therefore, to imagine that we can have any idea of property, without fully comprehending the nature of justice, and shewing its origin in the artifice and contrivance of men”. (T 490-91) This remark should be compared to that of Barbeyrac, found above, p. 109.

⁴⁴ This distinction between the natural and the artificial virtues is found in several places in Hume’s writings. In his essay “Of the Original Contract” it is put very succinctly: “All *moral* duties may be divided into two kinds. The *first* are those, to which men are impelled by a natural instinct or immediate propensity, which operates on them, independent of all ideas of obligation, and of all views, either to public or private utility. Of this nature are, love of children, gratitude to benefactors, pity to the unfortunate. When we reflect on the advantage, which results to society from such humane instincts, we pay them the just tribute of moral approbation and esteem: But the person, actuated by them, feels their power and influence, antecedent to any such reflection.

Justice is the paradigm artificial virtue on Hume's account. Briefly stated, it is Hume's view that, while justice is in fact a full-fledged virtue—acts of justice are acts done for the good of mankind—justice has its foundation in another natural human propensity, our pronounced tendency to pursue or protect our private interests, and also in the fact that certain desirable goods are in relatively short supply. Treating this theory as a historical claim, we can say that when this situation is first comprehended—at a time before justice has become a virtue—individual humans realize that their private or individual interests will best be served by the kind of cooperation that allows each individual to retain control over those goods which he or she has obtained. Hume traces the beginnings of such cooperation to the natural attraction between the sexes, and the consequent development of the family, and thus to human nature itself, but our principal concern here is not with beginnings but with development and transformation. How does one's private interest in retaining the goods one controls contribute to the development of a virtue that cannot be, on Hume's theory, performed out of private interest? Or how, we might ask, are we able to transform one and the same act from an act of protojustice into a genuine act of justice?

Given that Hume insists that it is a difference of motive that distinguishes acts of proto-virtue from acts of genuine virtue, he must suppose that we are able to change our motivation so that we seek for the good of others that which we previously sought only out of private interests.⁴⁵ But granting this, the question returns in another form: What enables us to uphold, say, a system of rules for the transference of property not merely out of the self-interest that gave rise to this system but out of a concern for the good of others, including the good of remote and even unknown persons?

The answer lies in the operation of sympathy, or in the ability of humans to communicate feelings and sentiments from one to another and thus to share ends or aims. Because of this ability I am able to discover that just as I approve of those acts of others that enable me to retain control of my goods, so do others approve of those acts of mine that enable them to retain control of their goods. It then happens that individuals are sometimes motivated to uphold this system of rules simply because such an action benefits and pleases those other individuals who are aware of it. In short, by the operation of sympathy men sense that an act of proto-justice benefits others, and even mankind in general. Consequently, at some point (very early) in the history of mankind one or more individuals was motivated to perform an act of proto-justice, but for a new and qualitatively different reason: in order to bring about the good of others. At that moment, that individual or set of individuals performed not an act or acts of proto-justice, but a virtuous act or acts, and the virtue of justice came into being.

"The *second* kind of moral duties are such as are not supported by any original instinct of nature, but are performed entirely from a sense of obligation, when we consider the necessities of human society, and the impossibility of supporting it, if these duties were neglected. It is thus *justice* or a regard to the property of others, *fidelity* or the observance of promises, become obligatory, and acquire an authority over mankind". (W 3: 454-55)

⁴⁵ Although one wishes that Hume had said more about the transformation of self-interest into virtue, he is at least clear that the artificial virtues arise in the manner outlined here: "Afterwards a sentiment of morals concurs with interest, and becomes a new obligation upon mankind". (T 523)

Hume offers the same general account of each of the artificial virtues. Allegiance begins as proto-allegiance, or as an acceptance of government for reasons of self-interest. It cannot be traced to a divine command, nor even to the superiority of a supreme being. On the contrary, allegiance, or the moral duty of submission to government, arises first from the recognition that in certain circumstances one's interests require that there be a civil government capable of protecting those interests. In those circumstances, men "naturally assemble together... chuse magistrates, determine their power, and *promise* them obedience", the convention of promise-keeping already having been established as a part of the fundamentals of justice. (T 541) In the course of time, again because of the operation of sympathy, those who are governed begin to see that submission to the government is in the public interest. Because, as Hume puts it, we see that in large societies the execution of justice—the carrying out of certain activities which benefit mankind in general—is "impossible, without submission to government", we first establish a magistrate, and then later give him our allegiance simply because we want to foster this general benefit. (T 546) As soon as that happens the *virtue* of allegiance arises. Allegiance is merely a humanly created, "factitious" duty of obedience, a duty whose "sole foudation", he says, "is the advantage, which it procures to society, by preserving peace and order among mankind". (ECPM 205)⁴⁶

Of central importance in the present context, however, is the fact that for Hume allegiance is limited by self-interest, which is to say that our obligation to the magistrate/monarch is not absolute. Citizens owe the magistrate allegiance, but they are not merely his creatures or his property, over which he has an absolute authority or right. And because our conceptions of allegiance and obligation derive from this secular context and are informed and controlled by it, there can be no ground for supposing that our allegiance to the deity must be of a different, unmitigated sort, especially as there is inadequate evidence for supposing the deity has been significantly concerned with the formation and operation of the universe.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hume's account of the origin of government and allegiance first appeared in the *Treatise*, 3.2.7-10. A shorter version was published as "Of the Origin of Government", in the 1777 edition of the *Essays and Treatises*, and is found at W 4: 113-17. The fact that the essay was one of the last of the works for which Hume arranged publication suggests that he attached great importance to the subject, and also reveals the continuity of his thought on this matter. In both the *Treatise* and the posthumous essay he traces the origin of government to the need to overcome our tendency to overlook our real or distant interests in favour of apparent or present attractions, and both present allegiance as a "factitious duty of obedience" or submission to the magistrate, but this phrase is from the essay of 1777. In the *Treatise* Hume says that "all government is plainly an invention of men". Consequently, allegiance, on his view, is also a human invention. (T 542)

⁴⁷ The anti-atheists may seem to have a ready and valid objection to Hume's account of obligation: it is not in fact an account of *obligation*, but merely one possible description of the manner in which the *sense of duty* arises. And even those who do not share the religious commitments of the anti-atheists may feel that Hume, in an effort to demystify morality by stripping it of its transcendental elements, has not so much explained obligation as he has explained it away, into a (mere) *sense of duty*: *obligation* entails an *obliger*, separate from the individual *obliged*, it may be thought. But, bearing in mind that Hume insists that this sense of duty has a genuine foundation in human nature, his explanation seems entirely consistent with his general philosophical program. It appears to be an analogue, for example, of his explanation of the idea of necessary connection. And the feeling that obligation, to be genuine, necessarily entails more than mere inner compulsion, may be

Hume is known, justifiably, as a skeptic, and especially as a *religious* skeptic. He was not content, however, to establish himself as a mere scoffer, or articulate village atheist, not even to the world at large. But he expressed his dissatisfaction with the role religion had played in human life —with the two hundred years of religious strife that followed upon the Protestant Reformation; with the effects of the more unified Christian church of the pre-Reformation period; with religion wherever he found it in his extensive researches into human history. One of his interlocutors (the Epicurean of the first *Enquiry*) is made to complain about those who use the religious hypothesis as the basis for concluding that this life is “merely a passage to something farther; a porch, which leads to a greater, and vastly different building; a prologue, which serves only to introduce the piece, and give it more grace and propriety”. The same interlocutor then goes on to insist that inferring from the course of nature to a “particular intelligent cause” of order is “both uncertain and useless”. Uncertain because “the subject lies entirely beyond the reach of human experience”; useless because we can never “return back from the cause with any new interference, or... establish any new principles of conduct and behavior”. (ECHU 141-42) Granted, in this particular context Hume continues the conversation by doubting whether or not what *ought* to be the case (that life be free of the influence of “religious doctrines and reasonings”) actually *is or can be* the case, and he even suggests that, while religious views are ill-founded, they do have a beneficial effect on society for they help to restrain men’s passions.

But Hume did not leave it at that. The bulk of his writings suggest that his view of the matter is essentially that of the Epicurean: morality ought to be free of the influence of religion and religious belief and is in fact built on an entirely different foundation. Thus while Hume is a religious sceptic and a sceptic about religiously based moral systems, he is not, and did not conceive himself to be, a moral sceptic. He is, rather, a humanist: he attempts to show that the foundation of a genuine morality lies in human nature itself. He showed what he took to be the failures of religion, but he also tried to show that man himself is responsible for the existence of society, and for its generally beneficial organization. Of course, his optimism was limited. He did not suppose mankind an entirely benevolent species. He did not suppose that a completely enlightened society was imminent, or even a long-range prospect. But he did see evidence of some generosity, of some virtuous motives, and of some significant rationality. It was on this foundation in human nature that he thought man had built. “Tho’ justice be artificial”, he wrote, “the sense of its morality is natural”. To those who might think he was offering a merely relativistic account of these artificial virtues he went on to say:

.....

a mere vestige of transcendently based morality. But even if there is a satisfactory Humean response to this objection, it does appear that Hume’s account of obligation is underdeveloped. Knud Haakonssen has pointed this out and gone on to suggest how on Hume’s view we develop obligations to justice, fidelity, allegiance, and the remaining artificial virtues. See “Hume’s Obligations”, *Hume Studies* 4 (1978), 7-17, reprinted in Haakonssen’s valuable *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume & Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 30-35.

Most of the inventions of men are subject to change. They depend upon humour and caprice. They have a vogue for a time, and then sink into oblivion. It may, perhaps, be apprehended, that if justice were allow'd to be a human invention, it must be plac'd on the same footing. But the cases are widely different. The interest, on which justice is founded, is the greatest imaginable, and extends to all times and places. It cannot possibly be serv'd by any other invention. It is obvious, and discovers itself on the very first formation of society. All these causes render the rules of justice stedfast and immutable; at least, as immutable as human nature. (T 619-20)

Hume saw, correctly, I suggest, that morality is autonomous. It is, or at least it ought to be, free from the putative authority of religion and religious belief. He also thought it genuine, its distinctions in an important sense real, founded on the nature of mankind and the world in which we live.