

# The Deity, Figured and Disfigured: Hume on Philosophical Theism and Vulgar Religion

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*“How is the deity disfigured in our representation of him!”  
David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion**

Typically David Hume is taken to represent the unalloyed forces of secular rational criticism against the traditions and propriety of religious belief. In this essay I intend to challenge this picture of Hume. It represents, in my view, something of a retroactive secularization of the historical record as well as a grave distortion of Hume’s position on religious matters. It should be clear from his *Natural History of Religion* that Hume does not reject religion *en bloc*. He is careful to make a distinction between true and false religion and their respective models of ultimate reality. He attacks the latter, but endorses the former. The beliefs constituent of true religion are rationally justified, in Hume’s view, but easily bypassed, overlaid and perverted by the all-too-human propensities at work in false religion. Thus Hume’s criticism of religion is more akin to the prophetic tradition, in which false religion is denounced in favor of true religion, than to the wholesale rejection of religion we should expect to find in the work of an unreserved atheist. Granted, Hume’s philosophical theism is much thinner than the robust theism associated with the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition; granted, too, that much of the positive content of that prophetic tradition will fall, in Hume’s view, on the side of false religion. But Hume is still in the business of sorting out true religion from false religion. He is not invested in the project of rejecting all religion as false or irrational, as he is often represented in the philosophical dialectics of the present age.

Hume was well aware of his reputation for irreligion and has his own account of why he was taken for an atheist. It is not because he *is* an atheist; rather, it is because his theism does not match the requirements of the often vulgar and self-serving theism of those who wished to persecute him. Here Hume identifies strongly with the

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person of Socrates who, although “the wisest and most religious of the Greek Philosophers” was nonetheless charged with impiety by the citizens of Athens (Hume 1993a, 117; see also Hume 1993b, 186).<sup>1</sup> Hume thought he was experiencing a similar fate, but this time in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, the “Athens of the North.”

## True Theism

Hume begins the *Natural History of Religion* (1757) by distinguishing between two questions one might ask of religion: one concerns its “foundation in reason”; the other its “origin in human nature” (Hume 1993b, 134). One searches out and assesses the justification of religious belief; the other seeks an explanation of religious belief. “Happily,” Hume writes, “the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion” (Hume 1993b, 134). Hume maintains this position consistently and without qualification throughout the work. In the last section he again claims that “A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of the visible system, we must adopt, with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author” (Hume 1993b, 183). Although Hume thinks that we have a natural propensity to believe in an intelligent author of the universe upon the experience of design, here he wishes to emphasize the rationality of the belief according to the rules of evidence and inference. The belief in a deity “infinitely superior of mankind” is, he says, “altogether just” (Hume 1993b, 163). The basic tenet of theism conforms to “sound reason” (Hume 1993b, 165). In “A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh” (1745), Hume, defending himself against the charge of irreligion, underscores the inferential probity of the design argument: “Whenever I see order, I infer from experience that *there*, there has been design and contrivance. And the same principle which leads me into this inference, when I contemplate a building, regular and beautiful in its whole frame and structure; the same principle obliges me to infer an infinitely perfect architect, from the infinite art and contrivance which is displayed in the whole fabric of the universe” (Hume 1993a, 119).

Hume’s commitment to an empirically grounded design argument for God’s existence should be of some assistance in rightly dividing the famous last lines of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (first edition 1748; quotes from the 1777 edition), where he bids us to run through the world’s libraries and commit to the flames those books of divinity and school metaphysics which do not contain either abstract reasoning concerning number or experimental reasoning concerning

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<sup>1</sup> In some of the Hume quotes I have slightly, and silently, modernized the spelling and orthography.

matters of fact (Hume 1993a, 114). Many have taken this statement as a sign of Hume's militant atheism and a general incitement to theological book burning. But just prior to this great commission Hume states that theology, in its endeavor to prove the existence of God on *a posteriori* grounds, is based on reasoning concerning matters of fact, both particular and general. Insofar as this theological project is supported by experience, it has, he says, a foundation in reason (Hume 1993a, 114). So the force of the last lines in the *Enquiry* is not that all books of divinity are but "sophistry and illusion," but rather only those that do not contain any reasoning concerning matters of fact. The argument for the existence of one wise and powerful creator God begins with the experience of a matter of fact: the order and design in the universe. Such reasoning is thus supported by experience. It follows that books containing such reasoning should be spared the flames.

## Vulgar Religion

Although Hume places the entire weight of the well-considered belief in God on the platform of the design argument, he also thinks that we have a general built-in propensity to believe in an intelligent author of nature upon the experience of design. This propensity works at the level of what Hume sometimes calls "instinctual beliefs" (Hume 1993a, 30), beliefs that are directly prompted by experience and not based upon an explicit consideration of evidence and its implications. Hume has Cleanthes, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, give an example of the triggering circumstance and effect of this remarkable feature of the human mind: "Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, for your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation" (Hume 1993b, 56). This propensity, however, is not just a blind fact about human nature; rather, God implanted it in us, Hume claims in the *Natural History*, as a trace or sign of his existence. "The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind, than to be thus selected from all other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator" (Hume 1993b, 184). Perhaps humanity was not created in the image of God as the *Genesis* account has it; even so, Hume insists, it bears the image of God.

However powerful the propensity for belief in the existence of the divine may be, Hume ranks it as a secondary rather than a primary principle of human nature. This is both because it can be overridden by other propensities, giving rise to atheism in some cases, and because it is largely indeterminate with respect to the nature of the divine. Here too, other propensities are at work, producing a marked diversity in religious beliefs, and in most cases perverting the philosophically inclined belief in a wise, infinite, transcendent Creator God, for the first principles of religion are "easily perverted by various accidents and causes..." (Hume 1993b, 134). Hume

takes it that the content of true religion has a foundation in reason as well as our nature. But when he turns to false religion, he seeks an explanation entirely rooted in our nature: “It is chiefly our present business to consider the gross polytheism of the vulgar, and to trace all its various appearances, in the principles of human nature, whence they are derived” (Hume 1993b, 150).

Polytheism is the “original religion” of humankind in both the historical and existential sense. It is the “first and most ancient religion of mankind” (Hume 1993b, 135); but it is also a religious tendency rooted in the practical life of finite beings who are not in control of the forces that determine their welfare, a life that rarely admits the occasion for a calm and disinterested awareness of the grand order of the universe. “We may conclude, therefore, that, in all nations, which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature [which would lead to true religion], but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind” (Hume 1993b, 139). Here humanity is moved by “anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries” (Hume 1993b, 140). Polytheistic deities typically superintend the various passion-filled domains of practical life: marriages, births, agriculture, seafaring, and the like—“and nothing prosperous or adverse can happen in life, which may not be the subject of peculiar prayers or thanksgivings” (Hume 1993b, 140). Thus the vulgar are led to prayers and sacrifices, rites and ceremonies, as ways of finding favor with the gods (Hume 1993b, 139). They look upon life “agitated by hopes and fears” (Hume 1993b, 140). Too little aware of the marvelous order of the universe, “they remain still unacquainted with a first and supreme creator, and with that infinitely perfect spirit, who alone, by his almighty will, bestowed order on the whole frame of nature” (Hume 1993b, 142). Narrow in their concerns, surrounded by unknown powers on which their tenuous grasp on happiness depends, unable or unwilling to conduct a scientific investigation of these powers, the multitudes exercise their imaginations rather than their reason, and, under the guidance of certain propensities in human nature, form a religious system. One of the human propensities at work is to conceive of all beings to be like themselves, to transfer familiar qualities in themselves to unfamiliar things, here, in short, to anthropomorphize the divine (Hume 1993b, 141). As a result, the deity is often represented as “jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial, and, in short, a wicked and foolish man, in every respect but his superior power and authority” (Hume 1993b, 141–142).

Vulgar religion is an instrument developed in the search for control over the objects of desire. It is based on a strong attachment to the goods of fortune, and motivated by the fear of losing them, or failing to attain them (or, conversely, the hope of attaining them or hanging on to them). The gods of vulgar religion, in the form of polytheism, are there to be placated and persuaded through various actions that possess no positive moral value in themselves. This, according to Hume, was the general condition of religion in “barbarous ages” (Hume 1993b, 142). Yet progress toward true religion is to be expected on the basis of improvements in government, making life more secure and less fearful, and the development of science,

which will acquaint us with the intricate order of the universe, prompting belief in a transcendent and wise creator God (Hume 1993b, 142). The full span of this progress would take humanity from “groveling and familiar notions of superior powers” to a “conception of that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature” (Hume 1993b, 134–135); from a divine being who is powerful, but limited, “with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs” to one who is “pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent” (Hume 1993b, 136). At any point in this process an individual may take a shortcut to the end by way of an “obvious and invincible” design argument that appeals to reason and leads to a pure theism (Hume 1993b, 137). But the common run of humankind is neither acquainted with nor moved by such arguments. Exceptions are rare, to be found only among the learned.

The kind of religion one has is largely a function of the kind of person one is. Although the propensity to believe in an intelligent author of the world is universally distributed across humankind, it is activated only in those of a more noble and contemplative bent of mind. The vulgar never put themselves before the intricate order of the universe as a whole, or in its parts, and thus are not moved to believe in a supreme intelligence. The “stupidity of men, barbarous and uninstructed [is] so great that they may not see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature” (Hume 1993b, 183). Their vision is narrowed by practical concerns for their own welfare; their attention is keyed only to the immediate but obscure powers “which bestow happiness or misery” (Hume 1993b, 152). In many ways, the religion of the vulgar is a product of their own vice, their own narrow attachment to the single issue of their worldly weal and woe. On the other hand, there is a “manly, steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these specters of false divinity never make their appearance” (Hume 1993b, 182). But when we “abandon ourselves to the natural undisciplined suggestions of our timid and anxious hearts, every kind of barbarity is ascribed to the supreme Being, for the terrors with which we are agitated; and every kind of caprice, from the methods which we embrace in order to appease him” (Hume 1993b, 182). Only the pure in heart will see God.

Clearly on this point Hume draws from the Stoic tradition, recommending the philosophical life of detachment as a prerequisite for true religion. The Stoics taught that virtue is not only necessary for happiness, but sufficient. A concern with the external goods of fortune over which we have, ultimately, no control—a concern with health, wealth, fame and the like—will only serve to set a person up for a life of disappointment, misery and vice. “The happy life” counsels Seneca, “is to have a mind that is independent, elevated, fearless, and unshakeable, a mind that exists beyond the reach of fear and of desire” (Seneca 2007, 88). The highest good must find its place beyond hope and beyond fear (Seneca 2007, 99). This is the way to the best life; it is also the way to true religious devotion. In the *Encheiridion*, Epictetus states that “piety is impossible unless you detach the good and the bad from what is not up to us and attach it exclusively to what is up to us,” (Epictetus 1983, 21) that is, unless you detach yourself from the goods of fortune and focus exclusively on the cultivation of virtue within the soul. Hume’s sentiments lie in the same direction.

Only with the acquisition of Stoic virtue through the discipline of detachment will a person be delivered from the generation of anxious god-manipulators and enter into the repose of genuine theism. Vulgar religion begins in fear; true religion begins in wonder.

Hume made no secret of his disdain for polytheism. He associated it with barbarous and vulgar cultures; and he refers more than once to its practitioners as “idolaters” (Hume 1993b, 134, 152). His more pointed criticism, however, is that polytheism is in fact a form of atheism. The divine beings of polytheism are but denizens of this world, not the transcendent Creator of it (Hume 1993b, 147). “The gods of all polytheists are not better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world” (Hume 1993b, 145). In words reminiscent of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, Hume identifies the chief defect of polytheism as the worship of the creation rather than the Creator. “Whoever learns by argument, the existence of invisible intelligent power, must reason from the admirable contrivance of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that divine being, the original cause of all things. But the vulgar polytheist, so far from admitting that idea, deifies every part of the universe, and conceives all the conspicuous productions of nature, to be themselves so many real divinities” (Hume 1993b, 150). St. Paul put it this way: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles ... and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:23, 25).

## Vulgar Theism

Hume holds that there are two roads out of polytheism to theism of the monotheistic sort. The high road, which we have already explored, begins with the disinterested experience of design and leads us to the Creator by way of propensity or inference. This road is undergirded by sure and “invincible reasons” (Hume 1993b, 153). The low road, often taken by the vulgar, has its origins in the irrational side of human nature and the passions that attend it. Starting with the threatening experiences of adversity, death, disease, famine, drought, and the like, travelers on this road ascribe such events to the workings of a particular providence. Modeling the god of particular providence on an earthly king, they then seek to flatter and influence this deity to their advantage. Outdoing each other in flattery in a kind of encomium competition, they eventually form the conception of their god as an infinite, perfect being. This is the vulgar route to the God of the philosophers: “While they confine themselves to the notion of a perfect being, the creator of the world, they coincide, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy; though they are guided to that

notion, not by reason, of which they are in a great measure incapable, but by the adulation and fears of the most vulgar superstition” (Hume 1993b, 155).

The impulse toward the perfect being theology of the philosophers makes of the divine, however, something cold, abstract, distant and practically unavailable, a God too distant from human affairs to be of any help in facing the terrors of this life. It therefore spawns within common human nature the opposite impulse: a downward pull by a sentiment that wants to make the divine more familiar, more approachable, more localized, more arbitrary and therefore more persuadable. This contrary impulse tends to backfill the universe with lesser gods and various intermediaries, infecting the antecedent theism with all manner of idolatry (Hume 1993b, 159). “Men have a natural tendency,” Hume observes, “to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry” (Hume 1993b, 158–159). The second idolatry, however, only sets the stage for a renewed theistic impulse. The movement becomes cyclic, giving rise to a constant “flux and reflux” of theism and polytheism, all powered by human anxiety.

## The Persecution of Philosophical Theists

Socrates, Hume writes in the “Letter from a Gentleman,” was “the wisest and most religious of the Greek Philosophers” (Hume 1993a, 117). Yet, in spite of his genuine religious devotion, Socrates was “esteemed impious” because his form of philosophical theism demoted the divine standing of the gods of the ambient polytheism (Hume 1993b, 186). In effect, Socrates’s philosophical theism threatened to deprive the vulgar of those divine beings who, fashioned in their own likeness, could also be persuaded to do their bidding. This was not the only time that philosophical theists have been persecuted by the vulgar. In Hume’s day, however, the persecution came not from the camp of vulgar polytheists, but vulgar theists. Although vulgar theists hold that there is but one God, not many, they drink at the same well as the polytheist: desire and passion more than reason influence their conception of the divine. Their God is much more likely to become an available instrument in the human quest for power and advantage in the domain of earthly goods; and their God is more likely to be in the habit of intervening the course of the world’s affairs in order to honor the requests of those who have learned how to please him. Philosophical theists, on the other hand, believe in a general providence, but not a particular. They hold that God established the general and regular order of the universe, but deny that God intervenes on particular occasions (or on all occasions). The vulgar equate the denial of particular providence with atheism.<sup>2</sup> Here, Hume avers, they are taught by “superstitious prejudices” to look for God within the workings of the world as the direct cause of particular events. They are thus inclined to identify as atheists all

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, the General Assembly of the Scottish Presbyterian Kirk considered deism to be a form of atheism, as evidenced by its 1696 statement against Thomas Aikenhead in an “Act against the Atheistical Opinions of the Deists” (Stewart 2003, 34).

those who limit the explanation of natural events to natural causes. But as science reveals that particular natural events are caused by other natural events within a huge natural system, God disappears from the purview of the vulgar and they are apt to lose their faith, unless upon further reflection they see the overall regular order of the universe itself as evidence of a supreme intelligence, and return to belief on a stronger foundation (Hume 1993b, 154). Here Hume notes, along with Lord Bacon, that a little philosophy makes men atheists, but a great deal reconciles them to religion (Hume 1993b, 154).

An extreme form of vulgar theism has its philosophical representation in the doctrine of the occasionalists. These philosophers, like the vulgar in the presence of the miraculous, “acknowledge mind and intelligence to be, not only the ultimate and original cause of all things, but the immediate and sole cause of every event, which appears in nature” (Hume 1993a, 46). Although the occasionalists seek to make God first in all things by their maximal version of particular providence, they actually diminish the deity in Hume’s view. “It surely argues more power in the Deity to delegate a certain degree of power to inferior creatures, than to produce every thing by his own immediate volition. It argues more wisdom to contrive at first the fabric of the world with such perfect foresight, that, of itself, and by its proper operation, it may serve all the purposes of providence, than if the great Creator were obliged every moment to adjust its parts, and animate by this breath all the wheels of that stupendous machine” (Hume 1993a, 47). Better a God who figured out the plan of the universe in advance.

The philosophical theist (that is, a deist) limits belief in God to only what is licensed by empirical reason—here what can be inferred from the presence and unity of design in the universe. It is skeptical of human reason’s ability to make any further determinations on the basis of *a priori* speculation. In addition, because of their Stoic ethical formation, Humean deists are not overly attached to the desires for earthly goods and the passions that attend them. They are, therefore, under no special motivation to conceive of the divine as an agent of intervention, as a personal assistant in attaining and retaining such goods. This is to say that Hume’s brand of deism *cum* skepticism is not aligned with any “disorderly passion” of the mind. In “renouncing all speculations which lie not within the limits of common human practice,” it goes against “superstitious credulity” (Hume 1993a, 26); it cares only about the truth that can be established on the basis of experience. Yet however innocent, it is the object of much reproach: “By flattering no irregular passion, it gains few partisans: By opposing so many vices and follies, it raises to itself abundance of enemies, who stigmatize it as libertine, profane, and irreligious” (Hume 1993a, 27). Here, in a move of delicious irony, Hume exposes the passion of his religious critics as a function of their worldly attachments and anxieties.

In an earlier statement, “Letter from a Gentlemen” (1745), Hume responds to the charge of atheism by pointing out that in criticizing the notion that reason can prove the existence of God through intuition and demonstration he was not claiming there was no evidence for God’s existence. Rather, he was claiming that there was just not that kind of evidence. There is such a thing as moral certainty as well as a mathematical or “rational” certainty. The certainty that attends the design argument is not



the rational certainty gained through intuition and demonstration; it is, rather, a certainty based on moral evidence, that is, on matters of fact plus a high degree of probability. "It would be no difficult matter to show, that the arguments *a posteriori* from the order and course of nature, these arguments so sensible, so convincing, and so obvious, remain still in full force," since the critique of natural theology he proposed was focused only on the *a priori* arguments which depend on deductive reason alone (Hume 1993a, 118). Here Hume is not denying that there is evidence for the existence of the Deity, but only trying to identify which kind of evidence is relevant (Hume 1993a, 118). Assigning one kind of evidence to a proposition, instead of another, is not the same as denying the proposition in question. Hume is only against one kind of argument for God's existence; not all the arguments (Hume 1993a, 119).

I have portrayed Hume as a supporter and defender of Enlightenment deism, and as a vigorous critic of interventionist theism of either the monotheistic or polytheistic sort. Hume had little that was remarkably new or novel to say about these competing models of the divine. His real contribution, in my estimation, comes with his psychologically probing account of the motivations behind these models, and the ethical profiles of those who subscribe to them.

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