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DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION: THE SYNTHESIS OF
HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY IN HIS PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

A Masters Thesis Presented In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Divinity

By
Bob Managbanag
May 1992

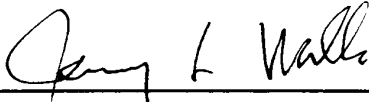
Approved by 
Department Theological Studies
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PREFACE

My acquaintance with the thought of David Hume began five years ago. As a philosophy student, it was inevitable that I would learn of him. Hume's influence on the history of philosophy is of such a significance that philosophical history would be incomplete without him. The challenges that Hume presented excited my intellectual curiosities. I was never the same again. After reading the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding I was convinced that my attitude and manner towards religious beliefs had to change. The result was a critical and deep struggle that almost took me to the "wild cavils and imaginations" of agnosticism and extreme liberalism. But that was the past. By keeping my heart warm as I grappled with my mind, I emerged from the slough, a person renewed by grace. It has become a principle of mine that faith exists in the context of tension. The reality of faith cannot be realized in the soft cushions of fideism nor in the luxuries of indifference. Faith must be continually challenged and questioned that it may attain maturity of belief. This is my debt to the Scottish gentleman. The rigors of graduate study have afforded me the opportunity to study Hume. And so here it is: the product of an attempt to face the man again after so many years. It is my hope that through this paper, the readers might be brought into the tension that revives true belief. And that in the throngs of such challenges, a growing process will take place in the light of deeper grace.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the following persons for their invaluable contribution to this work.

To Rich and Rachel Burlingame thanks for being my computer consultants. Without you this paper could not have been put together (literally).

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To Dr. Jerry Walls thanks for your direction and guidance. The section on the problem of evil is dedicated to you.

To the seminary thank you for the opportunity you have given me to indulge in this project.

And thank you Lord for your faithful presence throughout this ordeal. You have kept my heart warm and my mind true. May this work give glory to your name. Amen.

Chapter One

Introduction

David Hume, the most significant British philosopher of the past three centuries, was born on April 26, 1711 at Edinburgh, Scotland. He belonged to a moderately affluent family of landed gentry and spent most of his early years at the family estate in Ninewells. At twelve, Hume entered Edinburgh University with the intention of studying law. But his passion was for literature and philosophy. Thus it was inevitable that he pursued the career of a prolific writer with strong literary ambitions. After working as a clerk in Bristol, he moved to France in 1734 determined to launch his career. The result was the Treatise on Human Nature completed in 1737 and published in 1739. Hume felt that this work was a failure because it did not receive critical acclaim among the thinkers of that day. Among them were Bishop Berkeley, Bishop Butler, and Francis Hutcheson whose opinions Hume respected.

From 1739 to 1745 Hume resided quietly at Ninewells writing the third volume to his Treatise. This work was a conglomeration of various essays on morals, philosophy, and politics in which he attempted to reach a wider audience.¹ The third volume finally aroused the attention of much of Scotland and Hume began to emerge as a controversial popular figure. The rise of Hume's controversy-laden reputation became evident in 1745 when Edinburgh denied his application for the chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy. As a result Hume accompanied General St.

¹ Hume on Religion (Cleveland: Meridian, 1964), p.7

Clair to Brittany, Vienna, and Turin serving as the general's secretary from 1746 to 1748. By 1748 upon fulfilling his secretarial duties Hume had already finished his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding that was published that same year. Three years later he published the Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals. In 1751 Hume was in Edinburgh having been appointed Librarian to the Faculty of Advocates. By this time his literary endeavors shifted to historical concerns. His History of England was published by installments in 1754, 1756, 1759, and 1762. This work continued to fuel the controversy that became the hallmark of Hume's rising reputation. From 1763 to 1766 Hume was in Paris serving in the Embassy while cavorting with French "philosophes" and hostesses in the "salons".² These years in France made Hume an ardent admirer of French society. In 1766 he returned to England with Rousseau. The two became famous friends but later parted as bitter opponents. After serving as Under Secretary of State in London, Hume retired to Edinburgh in 1769. In 1775 he became fatally afflicted with a cancer of the bowels. He died the next year in August 25, 1776.

During his lifetime Hume's fame was that of a controversial literary figure. But his posterity to the succeeding generations was that of a significant philosopher whose thinking has stimulated philosophical thought to this day. The study of Hume's influence on philosophy requires a separate work. His influence extends to thinkers and schools of thought representative of great intellectual movements from the 18th to the 20th centuries. Immanuel Kant

² Ibid.

from the critical-rational standpoint admits it was Hume who awakened his critical spirit. Thomas Reid and W. Hamilton represented the Scottish empiricists who were indebted to Hume.³ J.S. Mill and A. Bain as epistemological associationalists and moral utilitarians take their cues from Hume.⁴ Even T.H. Green's idealism cannot rid itself of Hume's influence.⁵ And finally the more recent physiological psychology of Wundt and W. James rests upon assumptions that are recognizably the fruition of Hume's implications.⁶

Hume's main contribution to philosophy is without any doubt in the fields of epistemology and moral philosophy.⁷ Much of past and recent works on Hume's thought have concentrated on his theories of knowledge and his discussions of morals. Unfortunately there is less recognition of the fact that Hume has very significant points to make about religion as subject to philosophical thought. Hume's two full pieces on religion appeared late in his life and after his death. The Natural History of Religion was published in 1757 and his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion appeared posthumously in 1779. It is encouraging to note that recent philosophical studies have concentrated upon Hume's views on religion. The maturing field of

³ James Orr, David Hume and his Influence on Philosophy and Theology (New York: Scribner, 1903), p.viii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hume, p.9.

philosophy of religion now admits to the fact that Hume's philosophy of religion is as significant as his epistemology and moral philosophy. Articles are now being published involving extensive discussions of Hume's essay On Miracles, or his criticisms of the design argument, as well as his views on evil and theodicy. It is now becoming increasingly clear that Hume has written a great deal about religion. The evidence from his personal and apologetic correspondence shows that Hume's interest in religion preceded the Treatise, his first published work. Writing a letter in 1751, he remarks:

Tis not long ago that I burn'd an old manuscript book, wrote before I was twenty.... it begun with an anxious search after arguments to confirm the common opinion. Doubts stole in, dissipated, return'd, were again dissipated, return'd again; and it was a perpetual struggle of a restless imagination against inclination perhaps against reason. ⁸

It is quite interesting to note that his "Early Memoranda" notes and paraphrases reveal a deep interest in religion. ⁹ It is now known that his Treatise, though not directly concerned with religion, originally had sections on miracles and other religious subjects. ¹⁰ Hume deliberately edited them out of the book to avoid hostility from the Scottish ecclesiastics. This is such an irony since it was this sort of hostility that later catapulted his literary reputation. But

⁸ J.C.A. Gaskin, Hume's Philosophy of Religion (London: Macmillan, 1978), p.1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

modern philosophy can no longer deny Hume's equally influential contributions to the field of philosophy of religion.

Problem

The approach then to the study of Hume's philosophy in this work has certain functioning assumptions. An assumption is that Hume's philosophy, whether it be dealing with his theory of knowledge or his political philosophy, is all interconnected and interrelated. What Hume believed and reasoned in epistemology has underlying repercussions in his thoughts on morals or economy. And his moral philosophy relates deeply to his political philosophy. Thus the corollary assumption follows that the study of Hume's thoughts in one field sheds light upon his views on another. So that in exploring Hume's philosophy of religion one may be able to apprehend the workings of Hume's epistemology. (Although this is not the only implication of interconnectedness.) With these sort of assumptions, this work presupposes that Hume's philosophy of religion reflects features of Hume's theory of knowledge. The Dialogues is by far Hume's masterpiece in the field of philosophy of religion. This work will attempt to trace his epistemology in his thoughts on religion as they are presented in this book. The fundamental problem of this thesis is expressed in the question:

How does the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion show the synthesis of David Hume's theory of knowledge?

The crux of the issue is explorative. The attempt is to discover the synthesis of Hume's epistemology in his philosophy of religion. The locus of the entire operation will center upon the Dialogues. The importance of the study lies in the fact that the appreciation of Hume

as a philosopher is multi-dimensional. The coherence in which human thought operates in various areas of concentration promotes security from anomie and confusion. Appreciating Hume as a theorist of knowledge must involve putting this theory into action. The exploration of his philosophy of religion can reveal the intricate operation of Hume's epistemology when it deals with subjects such as deity and the supernatural. Immersion into Hume's world of religious thinking provides unique insights into his conception of knowledge and understanding. The limits of this study will be generally within the confines of philosophy. More specifically, since this work will concentrate on the synthesis of Hume's theory of knowledge in his philosophy of religion, it will deliberately steer away from other aspects of Hume's thought. The demonstration of the synthesis of Hume's epistemology in his philosophy of religion will be strategically presented within the parameters of his Dialogues.

Perspective and Terms

Attitudes and intuitions are never absent in the engagement of explorative research. Somehow anyone who attempts to explore certain issues brings into the activity certain scenarios and affections concerning the manner and outcome of the task. Although these are based on functioning assumptions yet they are distinct from them. There is already a preset network of expectations and notions at the outset that will either be enhanced or discarded at the end of the explorative study. It also from these perspectives that the terms used in the research get their definition and meaning. This thesis approaches the exploration of Hume's Dialogues with the perspective

that the book faithfully presents Hume's philosophy of religion. Hume's religious thought is of a mature and refined quality in his Dialogues. This work treats Hume's book as a sufficient specimen of Hume's religious convictions. Consequently, based upon the previously stated assumptions in the problem section, this explorative study also hypothesizes that Hume's epistemology will be demonstrated in the Dialogues. As sufficient specimen of Hume's philosophy of religion, this book is likely reveals the synthesis of his theory of knowledge. The word synthesis means the wholistic nature in which Hume's theory of knowledge operates in his inquiries on religion. The Dialogues are therefore perceived as the splendid environment wherein Hume's epistemology as explicated in his Treatise and his Enquiry can be synthetically pointed out.

Method of Approach

In the following chapters this study will methodically approach the problem previously stated. The first chapter will concentrate on Hume's theory of knowledge as it is interpreted from his Treatise and his Enquiry. The purpose of course is to be adequately acquainted with Hume's epistemology. The second chapter will involve a comprehensive focus on Hume's philosophy of religion in the light of the previous chapter on his epistemology. His views on religion will be laid out for the purpose of exploring their relation to his theory of knowledge. The third chapter will deal completely with Hume's Dialogues. The book will be subjected to explorative study as a literary work that has vital insights into Hume's epistemology. The aim is to demonstrate the synthesis of Hume's theory of knowledge in his philosophy of religion as apparent in his book. The last

chapter will be the postscript in which the conclusions of this study will be laid out for closure.

Review of Related Literature

In 1903 James Orr published David Hume and his Influence on Philosophy and Theology. In this book Orr explores the life and thinking of Hume as the outcome of an analysis of his life and writings. He starts with the biography of Hume using Hume's published works as anchorpoints. He then proceeds to an exposition of Hume's views on knowledge, causation, and substance. He relates these themes to Hume's views on morals and theology as well as to Hume's opinions on politics, economy, and history. Orr's point is that Hume sought to explain the intellectual and moral outfit of humanity without the assumption of a rational nature in human persons. This was Hume's mistake which became evident in his views on theology and other subjects.

Twelve years later a book entitled Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume was released from Princeton by Charles W. Hendel Jr. In this extensive book Hendel goes through in detail the life and times of Hume from his ambitions to his youthful discoveries and to his intellectual disputes. He presents Hume's epistemology in dialogue with Hume's contemporaries. The sections range from Hume's theory of relations, to his views on causation, on the external world, on personal identity, and on philosophical scepticism. Hendel focuses on the Dialogues as a gateway into Hume's metaphysical convictions on theism, naturalism, and scepticism. Hendel is convinced that a concentrated study of Hume's reflections on the problems of religion leads to a formation of Humean epistemology and metaphysics.

J.C.A. Gaskin published his Hume's Philosophy of Religion in 1978. The book deals primarily with Hume's philosophy of religion in three major sections. The first is on natural religion, the second is on revealed religion and natural belief, and the third is on historical and personal religion. Gaskin pores over Hume's various arguments and reasonings on design, theodicy, immortality, theology, miracles, revelation, and religion itself. In this process he consistently returns to Hume's epistemological and metaphysical doctrines as the basis for mutual interpretation between Hume's theory of knowledge and Hume's philosophy of religion. Gaskin shows how Hume's discussions on religion form a coherent picture despite their diversity.

Chapter Two

Hume's Theory of Knowledge

The seventeenth and eighteenth century was an active period of intellectual activity. Rationalism was at its heyday. Spawned primarily in the continent, reason was considered the norm of every academic and scholastic endeavor. Philosophical circles were buzzing with Descartes' rational dualism. Descartes never accepted anything except clear and distinct ideas as the content of knowledge.¹ He supposed that the essence of being was thinking. "I think therefore I am." Thus the mind was eventually distinguished from the body and all knowledge of external things existed in the mind. In Descartes the starting point of philosophy is doubt. Thus all claims and propositions about facts and knowledge were rejected until they were demonstrated as valid. The method of demonstration was to be found in rational principles that could secure a system of knowledge. The result was the primacy of mathematical operations in the elevation of reason as the sure ground for certainty. It was inevitable then that Spinoza later pursued Descartes' intimations by constructing a geometry of philosophy. Spinoza surmised that it was the nature of the mind to perceive things from a timeless point of view.² The order and connections of ideas is the same as the order and connections of things. Thus by using mathematics, Spinoza was able to demonstrate the unity of all divergences of subjects (metaphysics, morals, etc.) into one substantial reality. Another

¹ Richard Osborn, Philosophy for Beginners (New York: Writers, 1991), pp.70-73.

² Op.cit. p.76

major figure who followed the tenets of rationalism was Leibniz. Taking his cue from Spinoza, Leibniz proposed that the one-substance reality is actually an infinity of infinitesimal simple substances called "monads".³ Each monad is different and is not spatio-temporally accessible. But they are immaterial souls that mirror the entire universe. Spinoza's monism and Leibniz's monads surged that great stream of metaphysical speculation that idolized reason. This movement did not stay in the European continent. From France, Spain, and Germany rationalism invaded the British isles and bred its particular kind of thought. Reason was not only the master of metaphysical speculation but also the sole basis for genuine knowledge and understanding. Thus Deism came to the fore.⁴ According to it, there is a religion natural to all human beings and this religion is discoverable a priori through reason alone. The discussion of the nature of morals and religion was defined by the calculations of human reason. The foundations of religion are the purely natural demonstrations of God's existence and the moral law.⁵

It was on the British isles however that a significant rebellion against rationalism was instigated. This protest was primarily inspired because of the rationalists' bold criticism and ridicule of morals and religion that did not subscribe to reason. This subscription to rationalism is evident in Samuel Clarke's Boyle

3 Op.cit. p.79

4 Hume Selections (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1966), p.v.

5 James Collins, The British Empiricists (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1967), p.42.

lectures of 1704 and 1705. Clarke posited a series of mathematically precise demonstrations brilliantly deduced, that validated certainty about God and his attributes.⁶ The result of this sort of rationalist theology was a fully attenuated Deism that went against a lot of Orthodox convictions. It is no surprise then that the personalities who attacked the absolutism of reason were persons of strong religious convictions. Among these famous and powerful protesters were Bishop Butler, Bishop Berkeley, and John Locke. Locke was probably the first influential figure to deliver a major reaction against rationalism. He insisted that the basis for human knowledge is not reason but experience alone. Locke defied the rationalists when he asserted that the ideas that constitute our knowledge of the world, and of things all stem from our experience of the world and of things. Berkeley pursued this empiricism further by declaring that empiricism proves the existence of God. If our ideas rise from experience through our perceptions then the world and things exist only in our perceptions. Our conviction that the world and things exist beyond our experience of them can rest only upon the premise that they exist in the perception and experience of God. "To exist is to be perceived." It is in this milieu of empirical philosophy that Hume was intensely involved and influenced. Hume was also well acquainted with anti-rationalism in the European continent through the influence of Father Malebranche and Rousseau. But it was in this

6 Paul Russel, "Skepticism and natural religion - from footnote 16 in Hume's Treatise", Journal of the History of Ideas (v.49, April-June 1988), p.250.

empiricism that Hume conceived his philosophy which left its mark in the ages to come.

The TREATISE and the ENQUIRY

Hume's epistemology within the context of the philosophical streams of the eighteenth century reveals the strategic importance of his two books. The Humean theory of knowledge is unreservedly explicated in the Treatise on Human Nature and the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. As significant books on epistemology written in a highly active intellectual period, the Treatise and the Enquiry reflect the interaction of the various philosophical streams. The rebellion against rationalism is quite evident in the pages of both books. In the Treatise and the Enquiry, Hume joins Locke and Berkeley in objecting to the primacy of the rational a priori operation in knowledge and speculation. In fact he actually completes this empirical onslaught to the hilt. Hume also joins Rousseau and Voltaire in defying the lofty metaphysical propositions that have been spurred by Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz. But at the same time, in the very pages of Hume's books on epistemology it becomes clear that Hume disagrees with the romanticist protest. In the Treatise and the Enquiry, Hume objects to Rousseau's thesis that the heart is superior to reason. (Although his stand on morals in its dominant affective theme, is not too far from the romanticist's musings.) Hume does not refute Rousseau. But it is clear that he does not agree with him.

Moreover, the Treatise and the Enquiry also reflect Hume's attitude towards his empiricist colleagues. His basic concordance with Locke and his close affinity with Berkeley (especially in

nominalism) is traceable. The sections of Hume's Treatise has patterns of presentation similar to Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Hume's treatment of ideas, perceptions, and other empirical subjects can be paralleled in Locke and Berkeley. But in the Treatise and the Enquiry Hume's epistemological stance quickly turns into a basic analysis of the empiricism that he inherits. His sections on sceptical philosophy as well as his conclusions on externality, deity, and substance are clear disagreements with the empiricism of Locke and Berkeley. Hume's empiricism in the Treatise and the Enquiry intimates a discussion between Hume and his philosophical environment.

Interestingly enough, Hume's empiricism has its internal distinctions in his own intellectual development. This becomes evident in the comparison and contrast between the Treatise (earlier) and the Enquiry (later). In the Treatise, Hume attempts to cover a wider spectrum of discussion. In fact the subtitle of the book is "an attempt to introduce the experimental method into moral subjects". The work comprises three volumes: on understanding, on passions, and on morals. The volume on understanding (Book one) is the section where Hume lays out explicitly, his epistemological thesis. The Enquiry on the other hand is devoted solely to the understanding. Hume's philosophy of morals is discussed in a separate book: the Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals. Apparently, much of the discussions on the theory of knowledge in the Treatise appears in the Enquiry. But in the Enquiry, much of the epistemology which appears in numerous sections of the Treatise is condensed, edited, and excised. Flew observes that the early

epistemological investigations in the Treatise become a mature philosophy in the Enquiry.⁷ The revolutionary principles scattered throughout the former, appear in simple, shorter, and more orderly form in the latter.⁸ It is definitely a more mature and daring Hume that writes the later Enquiry. The sections and subjects that Hume avoided in the earlier Treatise (such as miracles, etc.) appear explicitly in the Enquiry. Hume's maturity is evident in the nature of his empiricism detectable in the two books.

In the Treatise, Hume's empiricism is extremely psychological.⁹ Ideas which comprise knowledge come from the stronger perceptions in impressions. The weaker perceptions in ideas are strictly images of impressions. Such a rigid representationalism led Hume to implicate the extreme: no impression, no idea. Hume brashly challenges the notion that an idea can be produced which is not derived from experience (in impressions).¹⁰ He was quite sure that evidence from experience and from those defective experientially (i.e. blind, etc.) supported his view. In the Enquiry however, the mature Hume edges away from this extreme psychological empiricism to a logical empiricism.¹¹ He makes a more distinct boundary between thinking and experience. The limits of the ranges

7 A Critical History of Western Philosophy, ed. D.J. 'O Connor (London: Free, 1964), p.255.

8 Constance Mound, Hume's Theory of Knowledge (New York: Russel, 1972), p.28.

9 Critical History, p.257.

10 Ibid.

11 Op.cit. p.258.

of experience of both the experientially sufficient and deficient are explored. Such a logical stance made Hume assert that the terms (language) signifying the content of human knowledge are based on a dual foundation. One is personal meaning with reference to a private world of experience. And the other is public meaning in reference to a public world of shared experience. With these in mind, Hume's epistemology can now be laid out as expounded in both the Treatise and the Enquiry.

Elements of Cognition

Hume's subscription to the empirical tradition of Locke and Berkeley is made clear in his agreement with them concerning the primacy of experience in human understanding. Experience is the starting point of all the facets and operations of human knowledge. It is the whole range and plethora of perceptions upon which human knowledge is rooted. Hume's uniqueness however lies in his conception of distinctives in which perceptions are experienced in the operation of cognition. Hume asserts that perceptions come to us in impressions and ideas. These impressions and ideas may either be simple or complex. Their simplicity and complexity depends largely upon the degree of distinctions and separations in the impressions and ideas themselves.¹² Operationally, it is in the impressions that perceptions are experienced as sensations, passions, and feelings.¹³ And it is in the ideas that these sensations, passions, and feelings are

¹² Hume Selections, p.9-12.

¹³ Gaskin, p.74.

imaged in thinking and reasoning.¹⁴ There has always been a tendency to assume that Hume meant images as copies of impressions when he refers to ideas. McNabb is an avid proponent of this in his book on Hume. This view can be supported in the earlier Hume of the Treatise when he espoused a rigid psychological empiricism. But it is clear that the mature Hume did not hold on tenaciously to the definition of ideas as imaged copies of impressions. In fact Hume uses "idea" for a number of ideas that cannot be regarded as images or copies.¹⁵ Nevertheless he fails to make the distinction between ideas and images. But as Gaskin points out, Hume's use of ideas as images does not necessarily imply ideas as copies of impressions (which is McNabb's position). Rather Hume's meaning for ideas should be interpreted as thoughts of impressions.¹⁶ As thoughts of impressions, ideas therefore function as images of impressions without necessarily being copies of them.

The impression-idea distinction is the cornerstone of Humean epistemology. It is the modal operation in which perceptions are experienced as the basis for cognition. Perceptions as the content of all operations of understanding are impressions and ideas to the knowing subject. From simple and complex impressions come simple and complex ideas. Perceptions are experienced primarily as impressions of sensation and secondarily as impressions of

14 Ibid.

15 Mound, p.67.

16 Gaskin, p.75-79.

reflection.¹⁷ As perceptions are experienced in impressions of sense, the ideas of these impressions arise as sense ideas.¹⁸ The vividness and feeling of these impressions of sensation are imprinted in ideas of sensation that such ideas trigger other impressions. These other impressions are impressions of reflection on the sense ideas. The point here is that Hume seeks to account for the way in which certain perceptions after being experienced vividly at a certain point can be experienced again in the mind after its initial occurrence. So that impressions of sensation can be experienced again as impressions of reflection. The former stems from the actual experience of the perceptions. The latter stems from the ideas that come from the impressions of that actual experience. Without impressions we have no ideas. And without ideas we have no knowledge of anything.

This sort of principle enables Hume to introduce the function of memory and imagination. The distinctions of sensation and reflection in impressions are paralleled by the operations of memory and imagination in ideas. The assumption in Hume's theory is that ideas involved in conceptions, propositions, and judgments are grounded in memory and imagination. Both rest heavily upon the operation of sense impressions and reflective impressions. The ideas of sense (which are based on sense impressions) conjure reflective impressions that give rise to further ideas. In memory, the ideas that arise out of reflective impressions have very little variation, if

17 Francis Snore, Morals, Motivation, and Convention (Cambridge: UP, 1991), p.13.

18 Pabitra K. Roy, David Hume (Calcutta: Sanskrit, 1970), p.19.

any, from the actual sense impressions. Thus ideas of memory are sort of secondary sense ideas replicated from reflective impressions as if they arose out of the actual sense impressions themselves. In this way, Hume was able to account for recollection as a function of the human mind. Imagination however can be differentiated from memory.¹⁹ Like memory, ideas of imagination stem from reflective impressions. But such ideas have a high degree of variation and are intentionally variable from the actual sense impressions. Based upon the operation of sense impressions and reflective impressions, ideas of imagination lay out concepts, precepts, and propositions, as well as (sort of) secondary sense ideas. But ideas of imagination vary greatly if not totally from actual sense impressions and are not necessarily recollections nor replicas of them. Thus the difference between memory and imagination is not operational but relational. It is in their relation to the actual sense impressions and not in their actual operation that they are distinct.

Hume's emphasis on imagination is of such a nature that he traces the gamut of human understanding to it as a source.²⁰ This is understandable because unlike memory, imagination is not bound to the experience of actual perceptions. Thus the ideas that comprise our knowledge outside our sensations are rooted in imagination. Our ideas concerning experience, custom, habit, and even memory as precepts and principles find their source in imagination. Hume's definition of faith and belief in certain propositions are grounded

19 Op.cit. p.24.

20 Op.cit. p.30

cognitively upon the operation in imagination. Most of the contents of belief are ideas that are not replications of sense ideas. If they are then belief is based upon memory. And if so, then faith becomes a recollection of actual perceptions. But belief requires assent to that which is for the most part, beyond actual perceptions. Therefore ideas of belief involve imagination and not memory. And Hume declares that much of human understanding rests upon ideas that find their source in imagination.

Natural Relations

Hume's unique appreciation for imagination as the grounds for human knowledge is elucidated in his theory of the association of ideas. Perceptions are experienced as impressions. When thoughts on impressions arise as ideas, the simplicity and complexity of these ideas are associated and related. This process of association and relation is the operational locus of cognition where the content of knowledge is understood. As mentioned in the preceding section, this sort of activity is far removed from the actual sense impressions though they are grounded on them. Hence, such ideas involved in association and relation are ideas of imagination. It is in the imagination that the association and relation of ideas from impressions pave the way for the formulation of conclusions about the perceptions experienced. Such conclusions are the essence of our knowledge about the world, about God, and about the self.

As more perceptions are experienced, the formulation of conclusions about the perceptions expand. So that a pattern and system of ideas is developed concerning the perceptions. This system operates by habit and custom based upon the perceptions

experienced. It becomes habitual because the ideas related in the pattern are based upon impressions of repeated perceptions. Hume's account of abstract and universal ideas is an excellent illustration of this. A universal idea arises out of particular ideas that are annexed and conjoined by custom because of repeated impressions.²¹ The universal idea itself is an individual idea. But it arises out of the various ideas from impressions associated by custom or habit.²² And this idea represents the conglomeration of particular ideas so related. Therefore abstractions are actually general ideas of various individual ideas joined together habitually due to the consistent experience of repeated perceptions. The bottom line of these ideas that arise out of association is two-fold. In one aspect the association of ideas rest upon experience. The basis of ideas being related lies in the manner in which perceptions are experienced as impressions. On another aspect, the association of ideas rest upon custom and habit. The manner in which perceptions are experienced as impressions creates the compulsion to associate certain ideas. For Hume it is the consecution and regularity of impressions as experienced perceptions in one aspect that powers habit and custom in another aspect. This force of association is such an inherent operation of human understanding that its results are aptly termed as natural relations.

Natural relations are relations among ideas that find support in the regularity of experienced perceptions and in the compelling influence of custom. Such natural relations are the products of the

21 Mounds, p.168.

22 Ibid.

force of association. Smith describes this relation as "a kind of attraction ... due to the instincts or propensities that constitute our human nature... it is natural, inevitable, and indispensable".²³

It is the secret tie or union among particular ideas that causes the mind to conjoin them more frequently together, and makes one upon its appearance, introduce the other.²⁴

This description of natural relations is another peculiar feature of Hume's doctrine of ideas. Hume makes the point that these ideas involved in association are separate and distinct from each other as they are based upon impressions of loose and independent perceptions.²⁵ But the association of these ideas is in the fact that they are related like bricks pieced together to form a structured whole.²⁶ Our ideas of resemblance (likeness), contiguity (continuity) in time and space, and causation (cause-effect) are the full expressions of natural relations. As ideas are connected this way, certain ideas cannot be considered without expecting other ideas related to them as previously experienced and as habitually expected. With this inherent operation in the mind we thus form connections between our perceptions and consider them as necessary connections. This necessary connection is not inherently evident in

23 N.K. Smith, The Credibility of Divine Existence, ed. A.J.D. Porteous, et. al. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp.97-99.

24 Paul Kuntz, "Hume's Metaphysics: A New Theory of Order", Religious Studies (v.12, Dec. 1976), p.405.

25 Op.cit. p.406.

26 Ibid.

the perceptions themselves. What is evident are the individual perceptions experienced as distinct impressions which give rise to ideas. The ideas out of these experienced perceptions are necessarily connected by custom and habit. But it is in these necessary connections that the perceptions are understood.

The depths of natural relations in the necessary connection of ideas are exemplified in Hume's theory of causation. Hume was totally convinced that causation is an inherently human associational operation. This is expressed in his prevailing attitude and maxim that nothing arises without a cause.²⁷ As perceptions are experienced consecutively, they are primally related. This relation is strengthened in the repeated experience of the consecution of the perceptions. The relation then is established in the mind that the initial perception causes the following perception. So that the idea of one necessitates the expectation of the other by habit. Russell observes that Hume's causation has an objective and a subjective dimension. Objectively (by experience) it is perceived that A is always followed by B in a sequence.²⁸ Subjectively (by habit) the impression (and its idea) of A causes the idea of B (necessary relation).²⁹ Hume posits that the relation of two perceptions A and B as cause and effect is not observable. What is observed is the conjunction of A and B. The causative relation of A and B is natural

27 Roy, p.93.

28 Bertrand Russel, History of Western Philosophy (London: Allen, 1946), pp.691-692.

29 Ibid.

in the sense that it is driven by habit in the innate operation of human understanding. This operation is instinctively real only in the mind and not in actuality.

All our reasonings concerning cause and effects are derived from nothing but custom.³⁰

The nature of necessary connections are of this kind. So Hume draws the implication that causation is the cornerstone of natural relations.

Closely allied with Hume's theory of natural relations is his understanding of natural beliefs. By "natural belief" he means the innate conviction and set of assumptions that make up the framework and mindset for everyday life. It is interesting to note that the propositions that fall under this set of beliefs are those which seem to be the conclusions resulting from natural relations. Such conclusions are those that guide our ontological assertions regarding the continuous and independent existence of bodies and also of those regarding causal connection between objects.³¹ The foundation of this set of beliefs is not rational but rather the instinctive and habitual compulsions of human nature based upon repeated perceptions. There is no capacity to prove these beliefs beyond the perceptions nor through reason. Yet one cannot exist without assuming them.³² Thus like natural relations, natural beliefs are also due to those propensities that constitute our human nature. Moreover, without this innate operation of association that results in

30 Op.cit. p.697.

31 Roy, p.54.

32 Ibid.

natural relations, these beliefs would have no content nor foundation. Therefore it is quite logical to assume that it is out of natural relations that natural beliefs are formed and understood.

Philosophical Relations

In this theory of cognition Hume was able to reassess rationalism and put it in its place. This intellectual achievement can be elaborated in the exposition of Hume's theory of philosophical relations. Collins interprets these relations as follows:

Philosophical relation is simply any matter of comparison among objects, without implying any connecting principle or associating bond. Certain qualities of objects make them fit for mental comparison, so that we may make an arbitrary union of such objects or ideas (i.e. a union where there is no natural force subjectively compelling the mind to refer from one term to the other).³³

Compared to natural relations, philosophical relations are not inherent in that they are not compelled by habit or custom. It is the association and relation of ideas and impressions as deliberate objects of human reasoning powered by imagination. In terms of epistemological operation both natural and philosophical relations stand on common ground. Both relations involve ideas of imagination that find their roots ultimately from perceptions. The distinction lies in the fact that natural relations are compelled by habit and not reason. Philosophical relations on the other hand are established not by habit but by the intentional operation of human reason. In this model Hume shows how experience plays a role in

33 Collins, p.111-112.

the point and potency of rationality. All ideas involved in this kind of relations are grounded on perceptions. The ideas are associated into seven types of relations: resemblance, identity, space-time, quantity-number, degrees of quality, contrariety, and cause-effect.³⁴ All relations are founded upon some common quality distributed among the ideas to be related.³⁵ Without this common quality there is no resemblance. And without resemblance there is no ground for comparison or relation.³⁶ Thus just as causation is intimated as the cornerstone of natural relations, resemblance is referred to as the basis for philosophical relations. But there is no doubt that these relations are ultimately grounded on experience.

So once again Hume makes another strategic distinction. There are philosophical relations established among certain ideas, that are invariable. The invariable relations depend exclusively on the ideas under comparison. As long as the ideas remain the same, the relations also remain the same.³⁷ Hume aptly terms these types of relations the relations of ideas. Invariable relations involve resemblance, degrees of quality, contrariety, and quantity-number. These types revolve around questions of logic in the process of demonstrative reasoning.³⁸ Such propositions are analytic and a

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Roy, p.52.

priori and are thus possible to know by appealing to reason alone. Much of mathematical and scientific certainty rest on these relations of ideas. Conclusions concerning invariable relations are invariable in the special sense that their contraries and contradictions are inconceivable.³⁹ And maxims on relations of ideas can be considered without resorting to experience.

There are also philosophical relations established among certain ideas, that are variable. The variable relations depend exclusively upon perceptions.⁴⁰ Hence the relations between the ideas may change because of the perceptions experienced. Although the ideas might remain the same, the relations may vary because of impressions that arise out of the changing perceptions. Such relations have closer affinity to the objects in the perceptions themselves rather than to the ideas of such objects. Hume again appropriately terms this type of relations as matters of fact. Variable relations involve identity, space-time, and cause-effect. These types involve questions of fact and questions of value ascertained in perceptions through inductive reasoning. Such propositions are empirical and synthetic and are thus possible only by appealing to experience.⁴¹ Collins points out that the variable types of identity and space-time are relations whose nature are more like immediate perceptions rather than reasoned relations.⁴² The

39 D.G.C. McNabb, David Hume (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1966), p.46.

40 Collins, p.113.

41 McNabb, p.46.

impressions and relations themselves are presented to the senses for comparison.⁴³ The cause-effect relation however deals with a given impression of an experienced perception from which a cause or effect is reasoned that is not in the immediate perception. It is a reasoning from what is given in experience to what is not given in it.

Nevertheless, conclusions concerning variable relations pertain directly to perceptions whether they are reasoned or not. And maxims on matters of fact cannot be considered without resorting to experience. Since perceptions are the concentration of these relations, conclusions concerning variable relations are variable in the special sense that their contraries and contradictions are conceivable.⁴⁴ These relations rest exclusively on perceptions. Thus various possibilities of such relations when projected beyond the immediate perceptions are conceivable. The name of the game is probability. Variable relations of matters of fact can afford speculations of what is outside immediate experience based upon previously experienced perceptions. The degree of probability is therefore based upon close conformity to the variable relations previously established of perceptions already experienced. Natural causation however must be distinguished from philosophical causation. The former is a necessary connection compelled by habit. The latter is a variable relation reasonably and arbitrarily approximated from perceptions.

42 Collins. p.113.

43 Ibid.

44 McNabb, p.46.

Hume's invariable and variable distinction in philosophical relations has clearly put rationalism in its place. Reason alone can deal with invariable relations of ideas. But it is totally out of place when it deals with variable relations of matters of fact without experience.

Conclusion

These features of Hume's theory of knowledge have become the hallmark of Hume's philosophy. As shown previously, Hume's account of human nature and understanding has provided the demolition of rationalism. This is evident in Hume's exposition of the limits and weakness of reason when it deals with certain areas of knowledge. Yet in this conquest of rationalism, Hume bred a particular philosophy that took empiricism to its ultimate end. So that in Humean epistemology, the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Locke found their embarrassing consequences. This is Hume's place in the history of philosophy. He put an end to the high hopes of continental rationalism.⁴⁵ The notion that the foundation of knowledge are necessary conclusions deducible from self-evident truths, is convincingly refuted in Hume. In the preceding section it has been shown that reason in its analytic and a priori operation is only valid when applied to philosophical relations of resemblance, degrees of quality, contrariety, and quantity-number. As invariable in nature they deal strictly with relations of ideas. The self-evidence of conclusions from this rationalistic operation is strictly in the realm

45 Jerry Gill, The Possibility of Religious Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p.73.

of ideas and are terribly deficient in accounting for the actual reality of experience. In fact, without experience even the self-evidence of deducible truths as ideas in invariable relations are empty. Hume's basic assumption is that from impressions of experienced perceptions, ideas are formed as contents of knowledge. Furthermore, when it comes to matters of fact in actual perceptions, analytic and a priori reasoning is out of place. The invariability of rationalistic maxims as deductive cannot deal with the variability of the relations involving experienced perceptions. Logical operations are purely oblivious to the realities of experience. The rationalistic method cannot deal with variable relations of matters of fact because it is applicable only to the invariable relations of ideas. The eventual direction of this thought leads to the conclusion that rationalism has no ultimacy in human understanding. Reason takes a backseat to the power of imagination.⁴⁶ It is in the imagination that human understanding operates as a cognitive process grounded in experience. It is out of imagination that custom and habit compels natural relations and that reasoning deals with philosophical relations.

Hume does not only frustrate rationalistic ambitions but he also puts an end to the high hopes of British empiricism.⁴⁷ The notion that the foundation of knowledge are probable conclusions inducible from sense impressions, bred a sceptical philosophy in Hume. If the sole

46 Charles Hendel, Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume (Princeton: UP, 1925), pp.72-73.

47 Gill, p.73.

basis for knowledge is experience, then scepticism is a legitimate philosophy. Since perceptions are the only pure realities of human knowledge, whatever is not inherent and evident in the perceptions are legitimate objects of doubt and uncertainty. Russel suggests that Hume's scepticism rests entirely upon his rejection of induction (applied to causation).⁴⁸ This however would be misleading unless it is qualified. Hume rejects induction only when it is used as an infallible basis for metaphysical speculation. Norton perceives that Hume's philosophy developed as a response to two crises: a speculative crisis and a moral crisis.⁴⁹ Hume's response to both crises differs in method and substance. Hume's philosophy is sceptical when it comes to metaphysical speculation. But his philosophy is practical when it comes to moral theory.⁵⁰ Hume accepted a practical common sense dogmatism as working beliefs needed to support practical decisions.⁵¹ But he vigorously attacked speculative dogmatism, finding it useful for scepticism.⁵²

Hume's sceptical empiricism is seen at its best in his views on the metaphysical doctrines of externality, deity, and personality. (His thoughts on deity will be discussed in the next chapter.) The

48 Russel, p.697.

49 David Norton, *David Hume: Common Sense Moralism, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: UP, 1982), p.9.

50 Ibid.

51 Collins, p.98.

52 Ibid.

existence of a world external to our experience is suspect. This conviction is based upon precepts of substance and relations of continuity reasoned from our perceptions of objects and are not inherent in them. From such perceptions come impressions of size, shape, color (etc.) from which ideas of substance are inductively developed.⁵³ From the consecutiveness and regularity of perceptions come impressions and ideas that induces a conviction that there is a relation of continuity of substance from one perception to the next. In this train of thought Hume completed Berkeley's philosophy of external bodies which the good bishop posited in deference to Locke. But Hume goes beyond and pursues Berkeley's views to the end. For Hume even the conviction of the self as a metaphysical existence is suspect. In his section on "Personal Identity" he posits that the notion of the self stems from inferences based upon experience.⁵⁴ Certain perceptions are experienced as impressions that give occasion for ideas that become the basis for inductively forming precepts of consciousness and freedom. These precepts form a certain sort of a "republic or commonwealth" of perceptions that are causally connected so that they compel the conviction of a substance called the "self".⁵⁵

Such were the daring conclusions of Hume's epistemology. In his empirical philosophy, rationalism is humbled to a lowly place. In his

53 McNabb, p.139-140.

54 Hume Selections, p.83-91.

55 Op.cit., p.90.

thinking, empiricism when pursued to its ultimate end results in a philosophy of academic scepticism.

Chapter Three

Hume's Philosophy of Religion

Hume's sceptical empiricism in his theory of knowledge has repercussions of some magnitude in his philosophy of religion. The connection is inevitable because Hume's analysis of the validity of religious claims assumes the framework of his epistemology. It is quite clear that his views on religion cannot be studied without the backdrop of the empiricism that is the hallmark of his theory of knowledge. Hume's fundamental position in his philosophy of religion is elaborated in section ten of the Enquiry. The bottom line standard of our judgments on matters of religion is experience.¹ This assumption entails the whole spectrum of Humean epistemology. If the validity of religious propositions rest only upon the support of experience, then Hume's sceptical empiricism finds entrance into the world of religious discussion. It is worthy of note that there is nothing in Hume of that profound piety that one finds in Kant.² In fact his attitude and posture towards religion is characteristically that of an irony that borders on levity.³ Kant's criticism of accepted beliefs points to new directions for theology.⁴ This is evident in Barth's dialectical theology and Bultmann's

¹ David Hume, Hume on Religion, ed. R. Wolfheim (New York: Meridian, 1964), p.17.

² George Hendry, "David Hume's Bicentennial", Theology Today (v.33, Jan.1977), p.405.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Op.Cit., p.406.

existential theology.⁵ But there has never been a Humean theology and there could never be so. Hume's sceptical empiricism is of such a nature that it excludes the ultimate significance of theological thinking. Hume had no evident hang-ups with religion.⁶ There is no evidence in his biography of traumatic experiences that can be explained as the underlying force beneath his attitude towards religion. His approach to religion seems to spring from the emancipated view of a detached observer. His emancipation is expressed in the development of his critical faculties that enabled him to persistently penetrate the issues of religion from one that is outside of it.

The Humean assumption that experience should be the grounds for understanding religion is quite significant. Hume's empiricism is ultimate in that it is consistent to the end. Scepticism is the norm when empiricist thinking is carried to its metaphysical conclusions. The demonstration of this maxim in Hume's epistemology must be considered in the light of its historical context. Hume's sceptical empiricism did not come out of nowhere. It had a significant history in the philosophical environment of the British isles during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. In these centuries British philosophy gave rise to two philosophical outlooks.⁷ One was the golden period of English theology when reason became

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Paul Russel, "Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's Treatise", Journal of the History of Ideas (v.49, April-June 1988), p.248.

unequivocally yoked to Christian theology. Theology was considered as a body of necessary truths. This was of course a carry over of the rationalism that rose from the European continent. The other outlook was the sceptical tradition that was fueled by the rise of science and the scientific method. This tradition found its major proponent in Hobbes. Hobbes took the inherent naturalism of the scientific method and applied it to humanity. The result was a highly materialistic outlook that rejected all religious claims. At this point Hobbes drew first blood and incited a barrage of apologetic responses from the religious community. Locke joined the attempt to refute Hobbes' conclusion about religion. In his Essay Locke put forward a demonstration of God's existence from the ideas of God that rise from experience.⁸ In the his Boyle lectures Clarke followed Locke by showing how pure theology rested on an immovable basis of intuitive truths connected and logicalized by astute rational demonstration.⁹ Clarke's attack on the atheism of Hobbes was the raging issue of the day when Hume wrote his Treatise.¹⁰ The whole debate involved the clash of arguments and apologetics that depended on two intellectual movements: rationalism and empiricism. The philosophical contenders were drawing from both these standpoints of reason and experience to show the faults of their opponent. In this context it can be determined with a certain

8 Op.Cit., p.250.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

degree of clarity, the motivations behind Hume's interest in religion. There are three positions as to why Hume was interested in religion.¹¹ Hendel posits that Hume's religious interest was spurred by inner conflicts within his own mind. N.K. Smith proposes that Hume was interested in the prominence religion plays in the lives of people. He disagrees with the thesis that Hume was powered by a strong desire to free mankind from error and superstition because Hume's passive temperament did not show this zeal.¹² The most reasonable position on Hume's motivations concerning religion is that he was concerned with the limits of human understanding.¹³ In the height of the great debate between Hobbes and Clarke, Hume's Treatise was being born. It is clear from this work that Hume assesses human nature and its capabilities for knowledge and morality. The fact is that Hume's epistemology has the explicit aim of stabilizing the area of human knowledge by exploring its proper limits.¹⁴ The result of this epistemological concern and exploration is evident in Hume's conclusions about religion. But such conclusions cannot be considered without keeping in mind Hume's conclusions about the debate itself as based upon two philosophical movements. In Hume's theory of knowledge, rationalism is castigated and empiricism is forced to be consistent to the end. The result is

11 David Hume: Many-Sided Genius, eds. K. Merrill and R. Shahan (Oklahoma:UP, 1976), pp.60-62.

12 Ibid.

13 Op.Cit., p.63.

14 Hume, p.16.

traceable in Hume's assessment that religious claims exceed the limits of human understanding. Rationalist theology which Christian orthodoxy had unreservedly allied itself with seeks to extend the limits. Sceptical materialism in its empirical attitude seeks to contract it. Hume was convinced that both bodies of thinkers ultimately have the same effect. They "... disturbed the ordinary unreflecting animal bodies by which life is ordinarily lived."¹⁵ The rationalist hopes for more and the sceptic distrusts what they have.¹⁶

Hume's philosophy of religion therefore is a fitting conclusion of his epistemology. The sceptical empiricism of his theory of knowledge when applied to religion also seeks to put reason in its place and to follow the consequences of experience. His philosophy of religion is an evaluation of the religious debate of his time in which both sides end up losers. The materialist is rebuffed in the Humean conclusion about matter and substance (the world). The religionist is ridiculed in the Humean conclusion about the existence of God. It is the latter that shall be the focus of this chapter.

Hume's Religious Writings

Hume's literary works on religious subjects make interesting reading. As Wolfheim puts it, "they are systematically irreverent, witty, and clever, and full of unexpectedly deep insights into the pathology of religious belief".¹⁷ Hume, as previously noted, has

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Op.Cit., p.9

surmised that religious claims exceed the limits of human understanding. Thus Hume's philosophy of religion attempts to demonstrate certain conclusions.¹⁸ One is that there are no rational grounds for theism. Here Hume defies Clarke's rational arguments for the existence of God. Another conclusion is that appeals to revelation can convince no reasonable person of theism. At this point Hume derided most of the Orthodox theologians of his time. The last three conclusions are the creative results of Hume's own thinking. One is that belief in God has its origins in human nature. The other is that this belief has adverse moral effects. And the last is that theistic arguments from design are misreadings of our natural propensity to perceive order in nature. These conclusions deducible from Hume's philosophy of religion, are all the outworkings of his theory of knowledge expounded in the last chapter.

Hume's work on religion comprises essays in his Enquiry, and two major works. The two major writings that deal explicitly with religion are the Natural History of Religion and the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. In his introduction to the Natural History, editor H.E. Root states that these two works marked the beginning of what is now generally known (if loosely) as the field of philosophy of religion.¹⁹ Hume's other writings are: the essays Of Miracles, and Of A Particular Providence And A Future State in the

18 W.D. Hudson, "Review of Hume's Philosophy of Religion", by J.C.A. Gaskin, The Expository Times (v.100, Dec.1988), p.15.

19 David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, ed. H.E. Root (Stanford, CA: UP, 1957), p.7

Enquiry. In these writings Hume wrestles with three basic religious issues. First, whether theism as a rational possibility is based on valid grounds of argument and reasoning. It is this issue that is the crux of the design argument. Here Hume deals with natural religion as religious claims based on demonstrative reasoning and empirical argument. Second, whether theism is an empirical possibility based on valid grounds of inductive reasoning. It is this issue that is central to his discussion on miracles. Here Hume deals with revealed religion as religious claims based on inductive reasoning and empirical argument. And third, whether religion itself is a phenomenon based upon history and experience. The focus of this issue is the nature of religion itself and its reality in human life. In the Dialogues Hume tackles the first issue of natural religion. He explores the foundation of religion in reason.²⁰ In the essay on Miracles Hume deals with the second issue of revealed religion. Mossner suggests that Hume's essay on Providence must be read together with his essay on Miracles.²¹ In the Providence essay Hume confronts the idea of a provident God who bestows general providence on all creation.²² In the essay on Miracles Hume confronts the idea of a provident God who bestows special providence on certain creatures through miracles.²³ In the Natural

20 Op.Cit., p.10.

21 James Force, "Hume and the Relation of Science to Religion Among Certain Members of the Royal Society", Journal of the History of Ideas (v.45, no.4, Oct.-Dec. 1984), p.528.

22 Ibid.

History Hume faces the third issue of religion as an empirical and historical phenomenon. He explores the origins of religion in human nature.²⁴

These three issues shall be dealt with systematically in this chapter. The section on natural religion will deal with the first. The section on revealed religion will deal with the second. And the section on the nature of religion will deal with the last. The section on natural religion however will be anticipatory of the next chapter which concentrates entirely on the Dialogues. Thus that subject will be discussed at full length in that chapter rather than this one.

Natural Religion

Hume's main contention against the religious establishment of his day concerned the question of whether theism could be based on sound argument and reasoning. Since the church had accepted the tenets of rationalism, it was assumed that the existence of God was a demonstrable and necessary maxim which could be clearly proven by argument. It was the prevailing notion that religion is naturally inherent to humanity since it is inherent to reason. There are two basic strands of theistic argument that were pervasive in Hume's day. These arguments have been articulated in various forms and versions. The arguments in their primal form however, stem from two medieval philosophers. One is Anselm's ontological argument and the other is Aquinas' five proofs. Anselm's argument propounded that a necessarily being exists by virtue of the

23 Ibid.

24 Natural, p.10.

conception of its idea alone. This became much more sophisticated in Descartes. And Aquinas' proposal of a necessarily existent being as the logical end of causal reasoning was much in vogue in British circles. It invoked fresh insights that made it possible for British intellectuals to formulate both rational and empirical arguments. The rationalist dimension of Aquinas' argument was posited by Clarke's a priori maxims. The empirical dimension was eloquently articulated by Butler's argument from design. Hume was intensely critical and suspicious of both reasonings and subjected them to penetrating analysis. The point has to be made that a great deal of Hume's criticisms have been directed at those arguments that stem from Aquinas rather than those that take their cue from Anselm. The reason for this might be found in the nature of Hume's philosophical bias. As an empiricist he probably considered the arguments from design a much more serious problem. Since Aquinas' reasonings are much closer to the empirical tradition, it had much more appeal to the empiricist than Anselm's argument, which was more attractive to the rationalist. Whatever the case may be it is clear that it was the empirical arguments for theism in the tradition of Aquinas that Hume dealt with extensively as crucial to natural religion.

Hume's response to Anselm's ontological argument and its refinement in Descartes can be deduced from his epistemological writings in the Treatise. Anselm posited that to conceive the idea of a most perfect being would be contradictory if such a being did not exist in actuality. Descartes elaborated this argument by proposing

that existence is implied by the idea of a most perfect being.²⁵ Hence, the existence of God as a most perfect being is as certain as a geometrical demonstration.²⁶ Hume charged that the issue really involves the epistemological relation between existence and the conception of a thing. The idea of a most perfect being is not different from conceiving that this being exists. In other words, ideas of being and ideas of existence are the same ideas. The idea of a thing or object is not separate or distinct from the idea of it as existent. The idea of being and the idea of existence of an object can involve the same simple idea or the same complex idea.

Thus when we affirm that God is existent we simply form the idea of such a being as he is represented to us; nor is the existence, which we attribute to him, conceived by a particular idea, which we join to the idea of his other qualities, and can again separate and distinguish from them (Treatise).²⁷

Thus it is clear that existence and the conception of a thing involve the same idea or set of ideas. And conjoining the two together does not add nor change the ideas involved. This clarification is crucial because Hume insists that even if Descartes surmises that the existence of God is deducible from the ideas of God as a most perfect being, it does not entail that this God exists in actuality. Hume's point is that when we declare that a certain object exists, we mean

25 Gaskin, p.72.

26 Ibid.

27 Op.Cit., p.71.

epistemologically that our idea or ideas of this object as being (or existing) is exemplified in the real or actual world. Hume believed that the explication of the ontological argument is faulty. He understands the argument as a matter of ideas being exemplified in actuality. This move makes the ontological argument prey to Hume's strategic distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. The ontological reasoning operates entirely in the realm of a priori relations of ideas. Since this category of ideas are invariable in their relations, it is possible to conceive ideas of being and existence as such that their contraries are inconceivable. Therefore in the realm of relations of ideas Anselm's contention is valid. The idea of a most perfect being can be considered to exist necessarily so that its negation is inconceivable. But when this necessary existence in relations of ideas is brought to bear in actuality where relations are variable, then Anselm's argument loses its potency. In Hume's framework, when the existence of a most perfect being becomes a relation of matters of fact, then its contrary is conceivable in the world of experience and actuality. It is no surprise then that when Clark sought an a priori argument for theism, he resorted to Aquinas rather than Anselm. Clark argues that a being can be conceived such that to suppose that being not to exist is inconceivable. He supports this position by demonstrating analytically, the cosmic need to postulate a first cause which in itself contains sufficient reason for its own existence.²⁸ Hume countered this by reiterating that any argument that proclaims necessary existence based upon the

28 Op.Cit.,p.73.

operation of cause and effect must base it entirely on experience not reason.²⁹ (This issue is elaborated in Hume's Dialogues and will therefore be discussed at length in the next chapter.)

The second strand of theistic arguments were however, in Hume's view, more serious than a priori and ontological arguments. As mentioned previously, Hume recognized the potency of these arguments because they appear to be based upon empirical grounds. The religious motivation behind this empirically-based reasoning was attempting to secure a firm foundation for religious propositions acceptable to a sound mind and common sense.³⁰ The grand achievement of this attempt was the argument from design.³¹ This theistic argument as already noted, was defended by Aquinas. But after its baptism into British empiricism, the argument acquired empirical dimensions to its rationality that Hume considered it a serious challenge. The canonical formulation of this argument is found in Butler's Analogy of Religion.³² Simply put, the design argument declares that the universe when experienced and perceived, exhibits a certain order and design that conveys the impression that its cause is an intelligent mind. The intelligent and mental nature of this cause is understood to be similar to that of human intelligence and mind. The underlying principle of the design

29 Ibid.

30 Hume, p.16.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

argument therefore rests on two factors. There is the operation of cause and effect wherein the cause is inferred from perceptions of the universe. Then there is the reasoning from analogy wherein the cause is likened to human intelligence and mind. It is quite evident why Hume would consider this reasoning seriously. The design argument follows Hume's dictum of grounding causation in experience. Furthermore, the analogical reasoning that the argument follows also claims evidence in human experience. It is with intensive care then that Hume responds to this argument in his Dialogues (which shall be treated in the next chapter).

In Hume's epistemological writings, he intimates a lot of the analysis which he applies to the design argument in the Dialogues. Here Hume discusses the theistic claims within the explicit terms of his theory of knowledge. For instance, Hume charges that theological issues about the existence of God do not stem from our experience of deity but from our experience of the world. We experience perceptions of mobility in matter. From these perceptions we get impressions that enable us to form ideas of power and motion.³³ Hume claims that we do not perceive power nor motion but rather mobility in matter.³⁴ The ideas of power and motion stem from our impressions of mobility in matter which are derived from experienced perceptions. Since power and motion are not found in

33 David Hume, A Treatise on Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888), pp.159-160.

34 Ibid.

the perceptions, then the cause of power and motion is not found in the same perceptions.³⁵ The cause of every perceived movement and alteration in matter is not inherent nor available to the perceptions of matter. The Cartesian solution is that the cause is deduced as immaterial: the supreme spirit or deity.³⁶ This deity is the prime mover and immediate cause of every movement and alteration in matter.³⁷ Hume then concludes that the idea of deity is no different from the idea of force and motion. There are no impressions of deity evident in the perceptions. What is inherent in the perceptions is that of mobility in matter from which the idea of deity is postulated as ultimate cause.³⁸ The empiricist dependence on causation is thus faced with a delimma in Hume. On the one hand Hume poses a sceptical attitude towards a metaphysical view of empirical causation. In the actuality of our perceptions there is no inherent causal relation. Causation is a natural relation that the mind epistemologically makes as a necessary connection between ideas of objects.³⁹ If this is so, then the idea of deity as cause for perceptions of mobility (or any perception) is not supported by any impression or perception because as a cause it is not perceived. Therefore the idea of infinitely powerful beings are inseparable from connections

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Op.Cit., pp.248-250.

of power.⁴⁰ No insight is available into this power or connection.⁴¹ Therefore there is no insight available in the assumption of deity as a postulated cause. On the other hand, the flipside to Hume's denial of causation as actual is his assertion that objects constantly conjoined are regarded as causes and effects.⁴² In the actuality of our perceptions we make connections between objects directly from experience. When we postulate causes we are only making connections in the mind which are thus not inherent in our perceptions. In the event that we infer a cause for objects in our perceptions that is not inherent in them, we are making a variable relation. This type of causation is a philosophical relation involving matters of fact. If this sort of relation is behind the idea of deity, then contrary ideas and postulates are also possible causes for objects in our perceptions. Hume concludes that one can propose anything to be the cause of anything.⁴³ The ultimate end to this delimita is clear. The idea of deity is unacceptable as a cause in both natural and philosophical relations. Therefore, based upon Humean epistemology, there is no room for an exclusive appeal to theism as a necessary and sufficient cause of anything metaphysical (nor physical) in natural religion. This implication is expressed in the

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

intensive drama of the Dialogues where the design argument is taken to task.

Revealed Religion

Hume was not content with denying the rational integrity of religious claims. He also proceeded even further by criticizing the most sacred ground of religious belief. Hume not only attempted to show that religion cannot hold onto reason as its ground, but he also challenged the notion that theism is an empirical possibility. This possibility was based upon inductive reasoning from actual events, experiences, and perceptions. The matter centered around the belief that religious claims are supported by experience itself. Theism as a valid belief is grounded upon perceptions directly indicative of the workings of deity. These claims for theism are much harder to dismiss than those of natural religion.⁴⁴ Their nature is historical in that they present the events that occur which provide direct evidence for their truth.⁴⁵ Unlike claims in natural religion, these theistic propositions are the heart and soul of religion itself. And these propositions are assumed and argued to be true in experience and perceptions. Thus they are considered historical. The wisdom of Mossner's suggestion about Hume's religious writings on revealed religion is appropriate. The essay on Providence as well as the essay on Miracles in the Enquiry are two sides of Hume's explorations on this aspect of religion. The belief in a provident God who bestows general and special providence, finds its basis on empirical and

44 David, p.73.

45 Ibid.

historical events and experiences. It must be emphasized at this point that Hume varies in his treatment of the two beliefs. With regards to general providence, Hume uses arguments that are similar to his objections against natural religion. He resorts to the epistemological operation of causation. But with regards to special providence, Hume resorts to the epistemological operation of probability. Although causation and probability are related operations in Hume's theory of knowledge, their emphasis in his arguments on general and special providence are different. With respect to the issue of general providence, Hume concentrates more on the cause-effect dimension. In the matter of special providence, he stresses the dimension of probability rather than explicit causation.

The conviction of a deity that bestows general providence is a causal conclusion from certain perceptions. The claim is that there is a deity that supervises and cares for the existence of the world and its creatures, foreseeing their wants and needs and caring for them. Hume argues that this conviction is an inference based upon observed effects.⁴⁶ From our perceptions we get impressions and ideas of satisfaction, safety, security, and so on, which are observable in events and experiences. From such impressions and thoughts we infer the cause to be that of a deity that cares and supervises. As with the causal argument in natural religion, Hume points out that this provident deity is not inherent in the observed events and experiences. Rather it is an inference that explains the perceptions

46 Force, p.528.

as the effects of a divine cause. Hume once again comes back to his theory of knowledge by insisting that inferred causes must be proportional to the evidence of observed effects.⁴⁷ He admits that the inference of a provident creator does account for the empirical effects, i.e. the moral and physical phenomena.⁴⁸ But Hume insists that this inference should only be proportionally sufficient for the empirical effects. If the inference of a provident creator is proportional cause then it is only one of many possibilities that can sufficiently account for the empirical effects. Since this is the case then the idea of a provident creator cannot have exclusive claim as proportional cause for such effects. If the possible inference of a cause must be suited precisely to the effects, then there are multiple possibilities of equal validity. Hume surmised that this recognition will lead to confusion or doubt.⁴⁹ So why torture yourself with believing in what cannot be exclusively claimed as true? Corollary to the notion of general providence is the belief in a future state. The provident God will determine after this life, ultimate rewards and judgments for virtues and sins. Providential justice which at present is perceived only in part, will finally be experienced in its full extent in a future state of the afterlife.⁵⁰ Hume again reiterates the same causal argument within the context of his epistemological framework.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Anders Jeffner, Butler and Hume on Religion (Stockholm: Bokforlag, 1966), p.96.

He allows that one can assume deity as the originator of a certain order in nature that is perceived. The experienced perceptions of rewards for virtue and punishment for wrongdoing in the present life can lead to the inference of Divine providence as cause. But Hume again repeats the epistemological maxim that inferred causes must be suited precisely to the effects. Therefore properties ascribed to the cause must be only the qualities that are strictly required to bring about the experienced effect. Nothing more and nothing less.⁵¹ Hume insistently declares that there is no reason to give any particular extent to any cause but only as far as it accounts for the present perceptions. Thus it is doubly ridiculous to infer other effects (from an already inferred cause), that goes beyond the perceptions of this present life. Hume concluded that the notion of God as one who rewards virtue to any greater extent in a future life is sheer fantasy.⁵²

The whole and intention of man's creation so far as we can judge by natural reason is limited to the present life.⁵³

Hume's response to the notion of a God who bestows special providence does not insist upon causal argument. The historical claims of providence statements are intensified when they pertain to specific instances and events where an exceptional and special

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Op.Cit., p.101.

perception is experienced. The cause is of course strictly applied to deity and at that particular point does not exceed its limits. The difficulty of dismissing this notion is the problem that Hume faces in his essay on Miracles. It must be clarified however that Hume's contention is not to deny the possibility of miracles. He argues against the belief that miracles authenticate divine revelation so as to establish the theistic claims of a religion.⁵⁴ Hume rejected the acceptance of special providence in miracles as a foundation for religion. He is not able to refute this claim by virtue of causal argument because they fit his causal prescription. The cause is strictly applied to the effect. His contention therefore is to block any attempts at inferring and ascribing other effects to the same cause. Thus Hume can allow a miracle but he cannot allow the gamut of religious claims to be based on it. Since Hume is unable to refute miracles by causation, he approaches the issue from another epistemological angle: the operation of probability. The possibility of the inferred cause cannot be denied in its specificity and sufficiency. Consequently, Hume considers the issue in a wider and more general context of cause and effects. He does this by ensuring that a miracle is considered in the wider scope of general causes and effects. And such causes and effects are demonstrated to be pervasively descriptive of specific cases of causation. This is where Hume appeals to general public experience and its distinction from private experience. It is in this light that he brings in the argument from the laws of nature as public knowledge. Hume made the issue not a

54 Gaskin, p.125.

matter of causal argument but a matter of probability. The possibility of a miracle and its causal explanation is not discounted as a matter of fact. But its probability is pitted against the probability that the event was caused by natural laws as known in general public experience. In his notes to "Miracles", Hume defined a miracle as a transgression of a law of nature by particular volition of deity or interposition of some invisible agent.⁵⁵ It is clear that Hume maneuvers the issue of miracles into his epistemological distinctions of general public experience and specific private experience. As a matter of fact, the inexplicable instances of violations of natural laws in miracles are allowed as conceivable. But Hume attempts to circumvent the plausibility of this by appealing to the argument from probability. To accept miracles as evidence for divine revelation, two criteria must be considered.⁵⁶ The evidence of a miracle must be stronger than the evidence from the laws of nature. And the veracity of human testimony concerning a miracle must be established without question. Hume has two factors going for him. For the most part, our access to miracles, particularly when it pertains to religion, comes through the testimony of witnesses. Also, there are alleged miracles that are simply instances of ignorance of certain laws of nature that are now public knowledge and experience. Therefore the second criteria is really what is at stake in Hume's onslaught. The evidence for miracles must be strong enough

55 E.J. Lowe, "Miracles and Laws of Nature", Religious Studies (v.23, June 1987), p.263.

56 Gaskin, p.113.

to dispel the strength of the probability that stems from the never-failing regularity of certain facts.⁵⁷ That Jesus was resurrected must be a stronger probability than the probability of our habitual pattern of perceptions that no one is resurrected. But based upon experience, it is more probable that Jesus was not risen rather than that he was risen. The strength of a miracle's probability therefore depends heavily on the credibility of the witnesses. But Hume observes that the reliability of the witnesses is seriously impaired: when there is no total agreement of the witnesses, when they are few, and when they have a bias towards what they affirm.⁵⁸ Hume concludes that the instances of special providence fail to meet the two criteria of evidence. The probability of the experienced regularities is always greater than the probability of a witness being right when he or she claims what is contrary to the established regularities.⁵⁹ And the veracity of the testimonies cannot be established without question. It is no surprise then when Hume declares that "there is no testimony sufficient to establish a miracle, unless such a testimony is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous".⁶⁰ He also argues that if miracles give authenticity to divine revelation of a religion, then many religions are credible because of the wealth of purported miracles that these religions

57 R.E. Huswit, "On Hume's Definition of a Miracle: Backtracking a Confusion", Journal of Religious Studies (v.12, no.1, 1985), p.1.

58 Gaskin, p.113.

59 Jeffner, p.120.

60 Gaskin, pp.113-114.

proclaim.⁶¹ Thus Hume is convinced that miracles can never be proven so as to be the foundation of religion.⁶² Flew observes that Hume's intention was to show that miracles cannot be used as evidence for theism.⁶³ Hume included prophecies in his criticism of miracles. As evidence of a provident deity, the ability of the prophet to transcend the limits of human nature in foretelling and proclaiming divine oracles is a miraculous process in itself.⁶⁴

In his deliberations concerning natural and revealed religion, Hume has shut down two claims to authentic religion that the church in his time faithfully proclaimed. One is that of a naturally inherent religion and the other is that of divine revelation. Both have no monopoly on the evidence from experience.

The Nature of Religion

The Natural History is a concrete testimony to Hume's creativity and ingenuity as an explorative thinker. In this work, he becomes less of a reactionary and more of a daring pioneer. His arguments and criticisms on the subjects of natural and revealed religion are for the most part, answers to what has already been posited and claimed. Hume sets up to challenge such dogmatic notions and thus becomes explicitly reactionary. In the Natural History he is still in a sense reacting to the religious debate of his time. But the difference

61 Empiricists, pp. 397-398.

62 Jeffner, p.120.

63 Ibid.

64 Force, p.531.

is that Hume comes out proposing an account of religion not to explicitly refute other accounts but rather to present his proposal as more appropriate. In other words, Hume's Natural History was less of a reaction and more of an initiated program. This achievement demonstrates Hume's acute intellectual abilities. The Natural History is Hume's exploration of the origins of religion in human nature.⁶⁵ He seeks to determine the origin of religious beliefs and practices in an effort to answer the question why people entertain religious beliefs and indulge in religious practices.⁶⁶ It is noticeable that Hume very seldom (if at all) in this endeavor resorts explicitly to his epistemological framework. His theory of knowledge is more intimated than explicated in the Natural History. It is probably due to the fact that Hume is less reactionary in these discussions that he largely assumes his epistemological bias rather than bringing it to the fore. But in exploring the origins of religion in human nature, Hume uses a method that reflects his epistemology. Price notes that Hume utilized the historical-anthropological method in accounting for religion in human nature.⁶⁷ This method already assumes that religion is a purely natural phenomena. There are two features to this method that are implicated in Hume's study. The first feature is the primacy of experience. The facts that Hume claims as evidence are based strictly on perceptions from history and experience. The

65 Natural History, p.10.

66 Ibid.

67 John Price, David Hume (New York: Twayne, 1968), p.125.

second feature is corollary to the first. Since perceptions are the basis for Hume's analysis, then all factors not inherent in the perceptions of history and experience are excluded as evidence. The result is a method that discounts the supernatural since such matters are beyond experience. This is the crux of Hume's natural bias as he approaches the study of religion. He therefore implicitly argues that premises for religious argument are faulty when they are a priori assumptions of traditional theology.⁶⁸ His theory of knowledge has dictated that the alleged logic and rightness of the traditional approach should be ignored.⁶⁹

Hume's conclusions concerning the nature of religion are inevitable. The origins of religion are found in human nature and not necessarily in any divinity.⁷⁰ Hume claims that in the final analysis, religion has its origin not in the contemplation of the world nor in the acceptance of divine revelation. The origin of religion lies in human nature's inner fear of the unknown realities of life and existence.⁷¹ During Hume's era this was a revolutionary conclusion. From the experience of perceptions come awareness of the fear and anxiety of the unknown. Religion is the outcome of human nature's dealings with this fear and anxiety. As humans confront and experience the unknown, the tendency is to resort to what is already known in

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Gaskin, p.144.

order to comprehend it. The known facets of experience are allegorized to understand the unknown. The unknown is defined as those unexplainable phenomena of human existence. Humanity is epistemologically incapable of comprehending the unseen and the non-sensible. Such matters are beyond the world of experience and perceptions. Thus human nature is prompted by an inner drive to assign manifestations to the unknown and unseen qualities from certain events and items in the world that humanity experiences.⁷² Hume expounds this proposal in his account of the rise and evolution of religion.

The origin of deity comes from the experience of various and contrary events of life and the works of nature. Primal humanity did not have the cognitive sophistication to contemplate the pattern and order of the world as a whole. Particular happenings in human life stirred up humanity's deepest emotions.⁷³ There are also certain phenomena that early humans did not understand.⁷⁴ Such deep emotions led the early humans to project imaginary beings as the unknown causes of the events and the phenomena.⁷⁵ Ideas of perfection were causally inferred from the experience and perception of imperfections and limitations. Such ideas were transferred to the idea of deity which was postulated as the cause.

72 Price, p.126.

73 Hume, p.20.

74 Price, p.126.

75 Hume, p.20.

The regularity and order of the universe did not excite primal humanity's curiosity. For each phenomenon that was unexplainable, a god was inferred as the causal explanation. The result was polytheism. Hume insisted that primal humanity was polytheistic. The early humans were not cognitively and intellectually sophisticated. Polytheistic religion was their method of understanding and dealing with the fear and anxiety of the unknown. This primitive nature was inherent in the fact that the early humans also ascribed human qualities to their deities. Hume argues that all known primitive peoples who had any form of religion are polytheistic.⁷⁶ He insists that had they been monotheistic they would have been sophisticated enough to understand the design argument.⁷⁷ They would have had a sense to appreciate the universe as a whole. But instead there was the ancient preoccupation with particular happenings and events that inevitably lead to polytheism.⁷⁸ If primal humanity had grasped the design argument, then they would have been able to see the force of monotheism. Hume considered it inconceivable that having grasped monotheism the early humans would abandon it for their particularistic conception of the universe.⁷⁹ Therefore the key to Hume's thesis is

76 Op.Cit., pp.19-20.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

that monotheism is nurtured by an advanced and sophisticated view of the world (i.e. evident in the design argument).

But since it is shown that early humanity was neither advanced nor sophisticated, then the monotheistic conception was at that point unattainable. And polytheism was dominant in religion. In Hume's view therefore, the rise of monotheism was characteristic of the increasing advancement and sophistication of humanity. But this was not a great leap. It was rather a gradual evolutionary process. In this context Hume contended that monotheism arose not because of reason but because of humanity's spirit of adulation and flattery.⁸⁰ This was manifested in the adoration and exaltation of one god over the rest, so that a strong sense of allegiance and submission was established in the experience of adulation to that one god. It is the struggle of faithfulness and fidelity to this one god in the face of other gods that accounts for the instability of monotheism.⁸¹ There was always a constant possibility of regression from theism to idolatry.⁸² The gradual achievement of cognitive advancement and intellectual speculation gave strength to monotheism. As humanity increased in rational abilities the unknown became more and more orderly and whole. Thus the belief in one god evolved into the highest level of monotheism. There are no other gods but that one god. This is evident in Hume's comparison and contrast between

80 Hume, p.20.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

polytheism and monotheism. He favored polytheism because it was more easy-going and tolerant.⁸³ Monotheism on the other hand was exclusive and intolerant much to the distaste of Hume's temperate personality. But monotheism has one sole advantage. It is more conformable to sound reason.⁸⁴ Other than that its rationality is buried beneath a mass of irrationality, absurdity, superstition, and controversy.⁸⁵ Much more, Hume reasoned that monotheism's reasonable edge paid a heavy price in that it became habitually fused with philosophy.⁸⁶ The result was in Hume's terms, "the absurd convolutions of scholasticism".⁸⁷

The bottom line is that whether it be polytheistic or monotheistic, the nature of religion can be stated in two maxims. (1) Religious sentiment is only one of the many passions of humanity.⁸⁸ As such it arises out of an inner human fear and anxiety of the unknown. As a passion it is only secondary and not a primary passion like self-love, affection, love of progeny, gratitude, resentment, etc.⁸⁹

83 Ibid.

84 Op.Cit., p.21.

85 Hendry, p.403.

86 Hume, p.21.

87 Ibid.

88 Price, p.26.

89 Natural Religion, p.21.

(2) There is no logical relation between a priori principles of religion and their origins in human nature (i.e. passions).⁹⁰ What appears to be rational is the attempt to use reason to logicalize the passions of human nature. Religion has no more authority than any other sentiment of human nature. Its affective appeal to the unexplainable and the supernatural draws an authority missing in the other passions.⁹¹ Religion as a sentiment exalts what cannot be comprehended and assumes its origins to be divine.⁹² Hume's central claim is that the nature of religion rests in our humanity. It is also human nature to attempt the understanding of deity, to make it concrete.⁹³ It is the effort to make the incomprehensible familiar to the human intellect.⁹⁴ As such religion seeks to base itself in what is epistemologically impossible.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to see the relationship of Hume's epistemology to his philosophy of religion. Hume's theory of knowledge is clearly the foundation for his religious views. Behind his insistent claims concerning natural and revealed religion, and the nature of religion itself, lies that sceptical empiricism that holds his philosophy

90 Price, p.126.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Donald Siebert, "Hume on Idolatry and Incarnation", Journal of the History of Ideas (v.45, no.3, July-Sept. 1984), p.379.

94 Ibid.

together. Hume's concern with religion stems from his epistemological concerns. In his view, religious claims for theism have gone beyond the limits of human nature. In this respect Hume is one with the sceptical tradition of Hobbes and his criticism of religious thought. But Hume clearly does not subscribe to the natural materialism of Hobbes. Hume's empiricism entails a metaphysical scepticism that Hobbes is not willing to concede. Hobbes' scepticism was directed towards the metaphysical speculations of religion and not his own speculations. Hume in his theory of knowledge is determined to be sceptical of all metaphysical dogma even that of the empiricist and naturalist tradition itself. His rejection of metaphysical thinking is probably the main feature of his philosophy of religion. Hume's real objection against religion is that it is essentially based upon faith.⁹⁵ In his criticisms of natural and revealed religion, Hume demonstrates why religion cannot be based on reason or experience. Appeals to rational argument are faulty because they have no ultimacy in human experience. Appeals to empirical arguments are inconclusive because they should be ultimately limited to experience and should not go beyond it. Hume claims that religion essentially comes from within human nature itself. It arises from human passions and sentiments. The primacy of experience shows: the weakness of rational argument, the limitations of empirical propositions, and the perception of human nature. These results of empirical analysis are the features of Hume's philosophy of religion.

95 Ibid.

Hume's final verdict about religion encapsulates the repercussions of his theory of knowledge. The fact that faith is the only essential ground for religion communicates the total meaning of Hume's philosophy of religion. There is no reasonable argument for theism that is valid without experience. Thus a priori arguments and arguments from design cannot succeed. Empirical arguments have no conclusive evidence in experience. Thus such arguments are based on a faith that goes beyond perceptions. And arguments from history and experience itself show that religion springs from human nature. Faith is an innate feature of humanness. It is a passion and sentiment that is bred in the depths of the human soul. Hume's epistemological account of faith and belief illumines this religious conclusion. Judgments and propositions of belief involve a simple or a complex idea.⁹⁶ The idea or ideas rise from impressions of experienced perceptions and are thus no different from any other idea of imagination (pp.19-20). The feature that distinguishes ideas of belief from other ideas of imagination is not the ideas themselves but rather the force, feeling, and vivacity that accompanies the ideas.⁹⁷ The firmness and steadiness of the feeling and force that come with the ideas defines the nature of faith and belief.⁹⁸ Faith therefore is a powerful affection that is evoked by a particular idea or ideas associated with impressions.⁹⁹ As such, faith and belief is a

96 McNabb, p.70.

97 Op.Cit., p.72.

98 Op.Cit., p.81.

human passion and sentiment. The implication is clear. Since religion is a matter of faith, then it is an issue of human passion embedded deep in human nature.

Chapter Four

Dialogues: The Epistemological Synthesis

The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion is the finest display of Hume's philosophy of religion. It can easily be noticed that Hume dealt more seriously with natural religion because it was the more popular religious issue of his day. The spread of Deism which was energized by continental rationalism contended that religion is inherent to the rational mind. It is discovered and understood through reason alone. This movement was also paralleled by the increasing voices of British thinkers who disagreed with the rationalist position in favor of empiricism. The empirical version of natural religion argued that religion can only be reasonable when it is grounded in experience. It is validated by the experimental method. The dialectic between the two polar positions defined the climate of religious discussion in Hume's day. The standpoints of the two lines of reasoning clearly marks the fundamental clash between rationalistic and empiricist epistemologies. Hume was inevitably drawn to this debate not only because of his interest in religion, but also because of his epistemological commitments. As mentioned previously, Hume's main contention with religion is its flagrant disregard of the limits of human understanding. Hume then engages in the subject of natural religion primarily from this epistemological compulsion. Hume's dealings with natural religion exemplifies his philosophy of religion because it is in that subject that Hume's era was at a religious crisis point. And since Hume's approach to religion is fundamentally epistemological, it would come as no surprise if his theory of knowledge is synthesized in his philosophy of religion. The

crux of natural religion is expressed in the conviction that theism is accessible to reason. The disagreement was whether reason is of a rationalistic or an empirical nature.

As previously noted, Hume considered the empirical nature of reason more serious than the rationalistic one. His empirical bias compelled him to consider the experimental arguments for theism over the a priori arguments. Nevertheless it would be misleading to conclude that Hume came down supporting the empiricist side of the debate. Hume's sceptical empiricism spelled out the anemic nature of both rationalism and empiricism. This fundamental stance in his epistemology synthetically undergirds his philosophy of religion. These features are inevitably traceable in the Dialogues. In this literary masterpiece one will discover the raging issues in natural theology during Hume's day. In the same work one will also perceive how Hume was more intrigued by the empirical reasoning in theistic arguments. Most of the dialogues concentrate on the empirical argument from order and design. And the synthesis of Hume's sceptical empiricism becomes apparent as he deals with reason in natural religion. The Dialogues will demonstrate in its philosophy of religion, the full consequences of Hume's epistemology for both rationalism and empiricism.

Synopsis

The Dialogues have always been enigmatic for Hume scholars primarily because efforts have been made to decide which character personifies Hume. There are five characters in the Dialogues: Cleanthes the religious empiricist, Pamphilus the pupil of Cleanthes, Hermippus the friend of Pamphilus, Demea the pious Orthodox, and

Philo the sceptic.¹ The dialogues revolve around Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo. The problem as to which character is representative of Hume will not be dealt with in this paper. The widely accepted view is that of N.K. Smith.² Philo is primarily the Humean spokesperson though the other main characters also speak for Hume. Another prominent view is that espoused by Hendel.³ Pamphilus is Hume and the main characters are various conflicts within Hume that seek to inform him. The most productive approach to this problem can be avoided if all of the characters are understood to represent Hume's thoughts. All arguments must be ascribed to Hume as a literary and philosophical production. As a literary work there is no particular character that solely represents Hume. It is only in this sense that Bricke is acceptable in his espousal of Hume's literary objectives.⁴ But it is not true that the philosophical content takes a backseat to Hume's literary interests. The Dialogues as a whole represents the intricacies of Hume's philosophy of religion. Therefore all the characters working together are Hume. But if the Dialogues was written in sensitivity to the religious and intellectual environment of its time, then it is not inappropriate to relate certain historical figures to some of Hume's characters.⁵ But these ascriptions should

1 James Rurak, "Hume's Dialogues as a Drama: Some Implications for the for the argument from Design", Perkins Journal (v.34, Summer 1981), p.17.

2 John Bricke, "On the Interpretation of Hume's Dialogues", Religious Studies (v.11, March 1975), p.2.

3 Op. Cit., p.3.

4 Ibid.

not be taken to be strict and total but rather arbitrary and discriminate. There are points when Hume makes some of his characters speak for certain personalities of his period. With these in mind we can now approach a certain synopsis of the Dialogues.

Hume modelled this masterpiece upon Cicero's The Nature of the Gods. He follows the format of Cicero's dialogues so that his work reflects parallel features with Cicero.⁶ Like Cicero, Hume restricts the arguments to the nature of God.⁷ Hume also uses the device of a narrator who introduces the dialogues and concludes them with a summary evaluation of what he takes to be the upshot of the discussion.⁸ Pamphilus is the narrator of the dialogues. As a pupil of Cleanthes he witnesses the discussions of Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo. He recounts the dialogues to his friend Hermippus who seems to have a critical interest in the content and views of the discussions between Cleanthes and company.⁹ It is appropriate in this respect to see the point of Hendel's representation of Hume in Pamphilus. Pamphilus speaks for Hume as he explains the choice of the dialogue format to present the various issues of natural religion.¹⁰ Hermippus

5 R.J.S. Manning, "David Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion: Otherness in History and Text", Religious Studies (v.26, Sept. 1990), p.426.

6 Henry Aiken, ed. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (New York: Hofner, 1948), pp.xii-xiii.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Richard Popkin, ed. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp.1-2.

can be seen to represent Hume's readers: the common people who "favor philosophical theology over playful skepticism."¹¹

The Dialogues begins with Pamphilus expounding how the dialogue format is well suited for the subject of the existence and the nature of God.¹² Rurak's synopsis of the rest of the Dialogues proceeds as follows:

After the scene is set by Pamphilus, Cleanthes and Philo dispute the nature of theology. Cleanthes succeeds in establishing that natural theology is a science firmly rooted in common sense. He is then tempted by his own ambition to extend his victory in an effort to refute Demea's claim that the nature of God cannot be known by reason. Cleanthes falls a victim to Philo, and loses his case, yet he is saved by adopting a modified form of skepticism. The hero, though vanquished, is triumphant because as a reasoner he has yielded to the force of reason even when painful to do so.¹³

Pamphilus closes the dialogues by concluding that Philo's views were more probable than Demea's but Cleanthes was closer to the truth.¹⁴ In Part I of the Dialogues Cleanthes establishes the experimental validity of religion as empirical and equal to science. From Parts II to IV Cleanthes attempts to show that the nature of God can be ascertained by empirical argument and reasoning. He is then refuted

10 Jeffrey Wieland, "Pamphilus in Hume's Dialogues", The Journal of Religion (v.65, no.1, Jan.1985), p.35.

11 Op.Cit., p.36.

12 Rurak, p.18.

13 Op.Cit., p.17.

14 Popkin, p.89.

convincingly by Philo in Parts V to XI. And in the final Part XII Cleanthes, in his noble acquiescence to Philo's reasoning, is declared the hero. The various facets and features of these dialogues induce certain observations about Hume's philosophy of religion. They show the operation and relation of proper and valid argument as it is used to establish theism. For the most part, the dialogues explore the theistic claims that purport to be based upon empirical and experimental methods of reasoning. This is the essence of the discussions concerning the design argument. Then there is quite a marginal portion relegated to the relevance of a priori arguments based on rationalistic principles. A more significant section delves extensively into the experimental arguments concerning theistic claims in the face of the empirical realities of evil. The conclusion of the dialogues expresses Hume's final word about the whole process of reasoning as it is used to justify religious claims. Ironically, this finality also demonstrates synthetically the ends of Hume's sceptical empiricism as epistemological philosophy.

The Design Argument

It can be definitely pointed out that as a whole, the Dialogues deal with the argument from design. In Hume's thought this argument is the essence of natural religion. The attempt to reason for the existence of God has an eventual recourse to the design argument. In the eighteenth century this argument was ultimately expressed in both rational and empirical terms. But in Hume's philosophy of religion both reasonings are dealt with in full force. The Humean approach to natural religion is presented in the intensive analysis of the design argument in both its rationalistic and empiricist

foundations. In the Dialogues, Hume's basic contention is evident. The argument from design provides no basis for any claim to religious knowledge.¹⁵ In a general sense Hume assumes that the heart of the design argument is the epistemological relation of causation. The majority of the dialogues attend extensively to the empiricist view of causation that causes can be inferred from experienced effects. This is the basis on which Philo attacks the design argument and its expressions in the theodicy issue. The rationalistic view of the causal relation claims that certain effects by virtue of their existence necessitate a rational cause. Both lines of reasoning are rejected in the final analysis. But this is the first indication of Hume's epistemological synthesis in the Dialogues. The reasoning behind the depositions of natural religion have no potency when probed by Hume's theory of knowledge.

The Dialogues does not immediately begin with the design argument but rather builds up towards it. The basic subject first laid out pertains to the nature of God: his attributes, decrees, and his plan of providence. "These have always been subjected to the disputations of men: concerning these, human reason has not reached any certain determination."¹⁶ Pamphilus has set the parameters of natural religion as the determination of the nature of Deity (not its existence). It is interesting that the actual dialogues begin with the essential character of religious claims. From the discussions concerning the education of Pamphilus, the issue emerges as to

15 Op.Cit., p.4

16 Ibid.

whether religion should be the fortress of certainty or the extension of ideas and principles implicit in everyday knowledge.¹⁷ Demea opts for the first because he is convinced that Divine nature is far beyond humans. Thus religious claims are powered by a certainty that is beyond everyday knowledge. Demea is supported by Philo. The sceptic at once brings in the potency of sceptical thought as the most reasonable assumption. Cleanthes however is the religious empiricist and he insists that religious claims are of such a nature that they are essentially implicit in common sense. He potently demonstrates that religious claims must be equal to those of science. They must be firmly rooted in the experimental method. His convincing contention is that religious claims cannot be grounded in scepticism because a sceptical philosophy is impossible to live by even for the sceptic himself. To this Philo relents but he emphasizes that scepticism leads to a reflective consciousness that fosters proper care and caution in making religious claims based on experience. In these deliberations Hume has laid out the ground rules for the design argument. As a religious claim it must be grounded on experience so that the argument's strength is contained in the empirical. Philo's attempt to engage the empirical nature of religious claims as based upon empirical reasoning is refuted by Cleanthes. If religious claims for theism are grounded in experience and made accessible to experimental analysis, then scepticism is diminished to the role of facilitating honest inquiry.¹⁸ The epistemological undercurrent is

17 Rurak, p.18.

18 Op.Cit., p.19.

clear. Hume's sceptical empiricism allows that natural religion has an empirical foundation. This means that any theistic claim must be strictly true and evident in the empirical world. With this the stage is set. Now it remains to be seen whether the design argument can meet the empiricist challenge.

Demea stubbornly refuses to accept Cleanthes' assertion about the empirical essence of religious claims. He contends that no amount of empirical reasoning can establish the nature of Deity because divinity is beyond experience. Here Cleanthes attempts a daring move. He will try to show the pious Orthodox believer that empirical reasoning can demonstrate the nature of God without being vulnerable to Philo's sceptical claws. The result is the much celebrated argument from design.

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

do we prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.¹⁹

In these words Hume has put in the mouth of Cleanthes the empirical argument for theism expounded by British empiricism. In Cleanthes' argument we hear Butler and Berkeley pushing for the legitimacy of this reasoning from design. It is no wonder then that Demea, who stands for the Orthodox position steeped in rationalism, is incensed.

What! No demonstration of the Being of God! No abstract arguments! No proofs a priori!²⁰

Philo then tries his hand and objects to the argument on three counts.²¹ (1) Reasoning about relations between certain parts is no guarantee that the relation of the parts to the whole is of the same kind. (2) What can be observed as a rule for one part of nature cannot be taken as a rule for other parts. (3) And the constant conjunction among events may serve as a just means of reasoning about observed sequences but it cannot be applied to the universe as a whole. We cannot observe, or experience the origin of the worlds.²² Philo's challenge is pointed to the fact that Cleanthes' argument does not rest totally on experience. Cleanthes once again delivers an effective rebuttal. If Philo's objections are valid then the Copernican theory of distinctions between terrestrial and celestial

19 Popkin, p.15.

20 Ibid.

21 Rurak, p.20.

22 Ibid.

matter is unacceptable.²³ In fact the gamut of astronomy might as well be discarded. Philo is stunned. The backlash implies a stunning defense for religious claims. Cleanthes has shown that the design argument is faithful to its empirical parameters. Hume's epistemology again surfaces. Arguments of strength must be founded upon experience and the experimental method. Cleanthes is at his finest moment. He has eluded Philo and has shown Demea that divine qualities as intelligence and mind can be empirically established. Cleanthes has demonstrated the similar nature of religious claims with scientific claims. Philo is silenced because he does not realize the full strength of Cleanthes' argument. This reflects Hume's seriousness with regards to the design argument. As a theistic claim, this empirical argument purports to be faithful to Hume's epistemological prescriptions. The causal relation the argument bases itself on is experimentally accessible. The fact that the design argument also had its supporters in scientists like Newton himself was no insignificant thing.²⁴ From this point Philo takes a more defensive posture in that he engages Cleanthes in a battle for lost ground. After that stunning moment he gradually seeks to recover from the unexpected blow that Cleanthes has dealt him.

But once again it is Demea who covers Philo's retreat. Demea challenges Cleanthes to show why the design argument is not mere anthropomorphism.²⁵ The claim that Deity has an intelligent and

23 Ibid.

24 Popkin, pp.x-xi.

mental quality springs from comparisons with human nature. His criticism is that the argument imposes the depths of humanness in its intelligence and mind to the inference of a divine cause.

Cleanthes is charged with reasoning from human nature to the beyond. Demea reasserts that God's nature is beyond any human quality and action. Here is the instance when Hume's epistemology comes out of Demea's mouth. Hume begins the dismantling of the design argument not in its causal features but in its analogical dimension. The issue now is not that of cause and effect but that of the analogical feature of the argument. Can an analogy be applied between humanity and deity? Cleanthes' response marks the beginning of the onslaught that culminates in the destruction of the design argument.

A mind, whose acts and sentiments are not distinct and successive, one that is wholly simple and totally immutable, is a mind which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or in a word, is no mind at all.²⁶

Cleanthes dilemma is evident. He will have to demonstrate how observations from nature can be extended by analogy to the conclusion that nature itself is the work of a divine mind. He is dared to show from experience alone the attributes of Deity. Cleanthes extended the empirically evident attributes of human nature to the very nature of God. It is this epistemological analogy

25 Rurak, p.21.

26 Popkin, p.29.

that gives Philo the opportunity for a comeback. Philo poses three questions that coaxes Cleanthes out of his empirical parameters.²⁷ (1) How can God's infinite perfections be supported by evidences from a finite universe? (2) Even if the universe did display qualities of order and design, how does it support the inference of an adroit designer? The universe may also be the final product of one among many abortive attempts at creation. (3) Even if the universe is conceived as a unity, what is the evidence that it has come from a single cause? It could be the result of a collaboration of many creators. Cleanthes' assertions that the nature of God can be established through experimental reasoning is now taken to task. The design argument is made to justify its analogy through empirical argument. Philo chides Cleanthes by claiming that experience is insufficient basis for establishing an analogy between the Divine and the human. This analogical relation is an extension that violates the supposed ground rules that had been laid out for religion in the outset. By insisting that religious claims about the nature of God can be empirically established, Cleanthes has lured himself out of the experimental world that he had earlier grounded religion on. In order to justify the analogical dimension of the design argument he went beyond the parameters of empirical reasoning. Thus he falls prey to Philo's sceptical charges. He is unable to refute the alternative arguments to his position because like the analogy of the design argument, the alternatives are also extensions beyond the domain of experience. Without the strength of the experimental

27 Rurak, pp.21-22.

method Cleanthes' empirical argument cannot stem the penetrating advances of Philo's scepticism. The implication is striking. Hume's epistemology has laid a trap for the theistic claims. Hume has given the condition that religion is reasonable when its theistic claims are grounded on experimental reasoning. The more theistic claims depart from this empirical foundation, the deeper they enter into the world of scepticism. This is evident in Philo's cutting statements.

... a man who follows your (Cleanthes) hypothesis is able perhaps to assert or conjecture that the universe sometime arose from something like design. But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis.²⁸

Cleanthes refuses to accept Philo's intimations of his position. But he is able only to respond in steadfast adherence to his argument. The "hypothesis of design in the universe" is a "sufficient foundation for religion".²⁹

It is at this point that Philo comes back with more confidence. Cleanthes has been lured out of the security of experience and common sense. His religious claims are now vulnerable to intensive sceptical analysis. Philo now attempts to undermine the "hypothesis of design" that Cleanthes has devotedly maintained. Philo presents an alternative to the analogical feature of the design argument: the animal analogy. He proposes that the universe is closer by analogy

28 Popkin, p.37.

29 Op.Cit., p.38.

to an animal than a machine. By using the same line of argument presented by Cleanthes for design, Philo reasons for the equal plausibility of the universe as an animal. Now Cleanthes is in serious difficulty. He is unable to use the design argument in refuting the animal analogy. After a few thoughtful moments he opts for responding to Philo by showing that the universe is rather more like a vegetable than an animal. Here Cleanthes has spelled out his demise. He has already been coaxed out of the empirical parameters that he has claimed for religion. He now engages in the sceptic's game matching hypothesis to hypothesis and theory to theory. Cleanthes gets so carried away in the heat of the discussion that he presents a revised view of the universe in his responses to Demea and Philo.³⁰ Philo challenges Cleanthes to produce evidence for this view that makes it more valid than other views. It is clear that Cleanthes is caught in the Sceptic's trap. Now Philo is prepared to deliver the blow to the design argument. Hume's epistemology has again ingeniously fielded a major point against natural religion. The epistemological undercurrent of Cleanthes' dilemma makes a statement about religion. As Rurak puts it: "religion here begins to appear as one of those subjects that run wide of common life".³¹ Religious claims when unravelled are bold speculations that have no reasonable justification in experience. Thus as purely metaphysical,

30 Op.Cit., p.42.

31 Rurak, p.22.

such theistic maxims are beyond reason and are therefore rightfully prone to scepticism's searing attack.

It is evident that Philo has called the analogical dimension of the design argument into serious question. Now he proceeds to dismantle the other dimension of the argument: causation. Philo contends that the machine analogy pales in comparison to the vegetable or animal analogy. Thus if a cause should be inferred, it would be that of generation or vegetation. He draws certain conclusions based on this inference and is interrupted by Demea. The pious Orthodox believer apparently unsettled by Philo's contentions, challenges the sceptic to support his case with hard evidence. Philo's point hits home. Such inferences are virtually impossible to prove empirically and are therefore of no real substance. Philo triumphantly illustrates the difficulties that the design argument is faced with. The effort to establish that there is a cosmic order in the universe is forced to deal with two points.³² (1) Even if there is enough data to infer a cause of the universe it is not enough to support the conclusion that the cause is an intelligent mind. The conclusion of a generative or vegetable principle as causal explanation is just as plausible as that of a cosmic mind. One judgment of sufficiency is initially as good as any other.³³ (2) The conclusion of seeing nature as a vegetable or an animal does not lead empirically to the inference of a rational and purposive mind as ultimate cause. Here Philo comes close to expounding the theory of

32 Op.Cit., pp.23-24.

33 Ibid.

natural selection as an ultimate cause. Cleanthes then criticizes Philo's alternative causal explanation of the vegetable and animal nature of the universe. He points out the various difficulties of the naturalistic theory and challenges Philo to respond to these difficulties. Philo cannot and he at once turns the tables on Cleanthes. He accepts the difficulties and claims that they demonstrate the futility of any cosmic theory including the design argument. Philo does not make the mistake of claiming a particular argument as the correct one.³⁴ His point is that there can always be an alternative argument.³⁵ He thus declares the resounding strength of scepticism. "A total suspense of judgment is here our only resource."³⁶ It is not difficult here to perceive reverberations of Hume's theory of knowledge. A postulated cause, be it by analogy or any means, of an empirically accessible effect must also subscribe to that same empirical accessibility. The fact that the theistic postulate of a divine cause is not empirically accessible demonstrates a serious flaw in the argument from design. Whatever is not inherent and evident in experience is legitimately accorded doubt and uncertainty. Empirical reasoning cannot establish theism on the grounds of the experience of the universe. The nature of God is therefore inaccessible by any empirical argument. Thus there is no empirical

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Popkin, p.53.

content to natural religion. This conclusion is evidently the working of Humean epistemology in the mouth of Philo.

The A Priori Argument

With the design argument's potency reduced to a metaphysically meaningless issue, the Dialogues then turns to the rationalistic argument for religious claims. After the major challenge of the empirical argument for theism has been waylaid, Hume then makes a quick detour to consider the a priori argument. It is of great significance that Hume only devotes a few pages of the Dialogues to this attempt at establishing theism on rational grounds. It can never be overemphasized that Hume's more serious concern with religion was its claims to experience. But now in the Dialogues Hume has diminished the empirical argument from design. It is quite inevitable then that the minor challenge of the a priori argument is quickly taken care of. For Hume the seriousness of rational arguments for religious claims is minimal compared to the empirical arguments. As explicated in the previous chapter, Hume's sceptical empiricism in its epistemological tenets enables the clear demonstration of the ineffectiveness of rational argument. But in the subject of natural religion a specific form of the a priori argument takes shape. It is the same argument that was used in eighteenth century Britain to combat the rising naturalistic materialism of early science. Since the Dialogues does reflect the religious dialectic of its time, it is appropriate that Hume afforded attention to the rational argument in natural religion. It is quite interesting that Demea is the character that brings up the issue. He is the Orthodox representative and it is incumbent upon him to strike a blow for the a priori

argument. Christian Orthodoxy in Britain had been thoroughly steeped in rationalism. Thus it is quite natural that its Orthodox exponent in the Dialogues finds occasion to proclaim it. Philo and Demea have allied themselves against Cleanthes. Both the Orthodox and the sceptic denied the empirical accessibility of Deity through human reasoning. Now that the empiricist Cleanthes is refuted, Demea seizes the chance to present the rationalistic alternative: the a priori argument. This is the only major argument that Demea ever proposes in the Dialogues. And it is the rationalistic argument for theism. When it becomes clear that the empirical dimension of reason is unable to establish religious claims, Demea speaks.

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason for its existence; it being absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must go on tracing an infinite succession without any cause at all, or must have recourse to some ultimate cause that is, necessarily existent... We must therefore have recourse to a necessarily existent Being who carries the reason of its existence in himself, who cannot be supposed not to exist... There is consequently such a Being- that is, there is Deity.³⁷

This argument is a paraphrase of Clarke's lengthy argument in the first of his Boyle Lectures in 1704.³⁸ It begins with the operation of cause and effect which is absorbed into the ontological argument.³⁹

37 Op.Cit., pp.54-55.

38 Gaskin, p.59.

39 Ibid.

The inference of a cause is of such a rational principle that its non-existence would be self contradictory.⁴⁰ It is of great interest here that it is Cleanthes and not Philo who actually refutes the argument. Once again Hume's epistemology is sighted. The empirical Cleanthes has Hume's blessing to speak against Orthodoxy's entrenched rationalism. As an empiricist Hume joins Berkeley and Butler in denying the sting of the ontological argument. Only in Cleanthes, Hume speaks for the empirical tradition. Hume is an empiricist first and a sceptic second when it comes to the tension between rationalism and empiricism.

In Humean fashion Cleanthes picks apart the a priori argument. Demea's reasoning involves two basic premises. (1) A necessary being's existence is demonstrable. (2) That being's existence is sufficient cause for the universe. Cleanthes objects that it is "absurd to demonstrate a matter of fact by a priori argument".⁴¹ Such facts are empirical and their contraries can be conceived. Therefore any being in actuality can be conceived to exist and not to exist without contradiction. "Consequently there is no Being whose existence is demonstrable" a priori.⁴² And if the non-existence of a first cause does not necessitate a logical contradiction then a sufficient cause is not necessarily demonstrated.⁴³ And Philo caps it off by declaring

40 Ibid.

41 Op.Cit., p.60.

42 Ibid.

43 Rurak, p.25.

the a priori argument as non-convincing and thus it has no appeal to any reasoning for theistic claims in natural religion. In such quick moves the a priori argument is put to rest. The interesting part is that Demea does not argue the point. The matter ends. Moreover, after being refuted Demea transfers the argument for religious claims from logic to feelings.⁴⁴ The implications of this short episode is tremendous. In the eyes of Hume's sceptical empiricism, Christian Orthodoxy's alliance with rationalism is unarguably a fatal one and is in all common sense, void of practicality.

The Problem of Evil

Theodicy is the final issue of the Dialogues. Discussion of the problem of evil in the dialogues between Hume's characters cannot be considered apart from the issues already discussed. There is no separate area wherein theodicy is considered without involving the whole of natural religion. The problem of evil is the climactic scene where the design argument is dealt its fatal blow. By appealing to the primacy of experience in religious claims, Cleanthes forced Philo to contain his scepticism. And again he kept the sceptic at bay when he reiterated the equal strength of the design argument with scientific statements. But Cleanthes overreached in his assertions. He ventured out of the realm of the experimental into the speculative. There he falls prey to Philo's resurgence and the design argument receives a series of critical assaults. It is in the subject of theodicy however that Cleanthes is finally silenced. The design argument is completely put to rest. With the problem of evil Philo

44 Ibid.

turns to the offensive. In his arguments on evil, the earlier embarrassment and its resulting caution now turns into a daring advance. The design argument has been shown to be wide of its purported empirical grounds. Now scepticism is in full steam. Interestingly, it is also on the problem of evil that Demea is eliminated. The pious Orthodox believer walks out in the end of the discussion on theodicy. The subterranean movement of Hume's epistemology surfaces at this point in its fulness. In the subject of evil Hume believes that he has demonstrated the ultimate triumph of sceptical empiricism over rationalism and empiricism in natural religion. When natural religion involves the question of misery and suffering, the pious Orthodox and the religious empiricist are trampled beneath the sceptic. The nature and limitation of human knowledge is made evident in a way that only the sceptic's point of view is sensible. This is the heart of Hume's brilliance as a philosopher of religion. The sceptical empiricist has shown that the religious rationalist and the religious empiricist have no claims to reason.

With the a priori argument convincingly discounted, the rationalist is compelled to appeal to the affective dimensions of religion. Demea thus does not insist upon logic but indulges in an exposition of human pain and misery as the gateway to religion.

Each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast; and from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery rather than any reasoning, is led

to seek protection from the Being; on whom he and all nature is dependent.⁴⁵

The scenario is set. Both Cleanthes and Demea are refuted. In one stroke of genius, Hume is now ready to engage in the dismantling of natural religion itself. Again it is Demea who opens up the discussion which soon enough turns into an issue of theodicy. He is joined by Philo in the gloomy litany of human woe.⁴⁶ It appears that both characters are still in one accord. Both have agreed upon the absolute incomprehensibility of the Divine nature. Now they agree on the reality of pain and suffering. The discussion begins to gravitate towards an explicit issue of evil when Cleanthes joins in. He disagrees with Philo and Demea in that there is no such misery. Their litany is a blatant exaggeration. Philo then takes the occasion to once more pick on Cleanthes' conviction about order, design, and theism. He challenges Cleanthes to demonstrate from experience, his view on God's benevolent nature and on the purpose and intent of the universe. Here Cleanthes realizes that Philo's alliance with Demea was for the express purpose of refuting him. But Demea does not perceive this. He urges Cleanthes to see that Philo's challenge has already been answered by church tradition. The reality of evil and suffering will be "rectified in other regions and in some future period of existence (i.e. eternity)".⁴⁷ Cleanthes objects to this and argues that resorting to some future state or to other unknown regions are

45 Popkin, p.58.

46 Rurak, p.25.

47 Popkin, p.64.

arbitrary suppositions. They are not evident nor supportable in matters of fact. Thus the empiricist echoes Hume's essay on providence and a future state in the Enquiry. Cleanthes concludes that the nature of God can and must be determined on the basis of empirical reasoning. God's benevolent nature can be demonstrated empirically in nature and that good is more the character of the universe. In one smart move Hume has set up both Cleanthes and Demea for the kill. Demea's approach to evil is to vindicate God's benevolent nature in a future state beyond present realities. This is handily quelled by the empirical Cleanthes who reminds the religious rationalist that there is no basis for such a supposition in experience. But Cleanthes does not realize that by advocating Divine goodness and by denying the potency of evil in experience, he has set himself up for Philo's fatal criticism. Philo allows that the reality of evil can be "compatible with infinite power and goodness in the Deity".⁴⁸ But given this compatibility, Cleanthes is now challenged to prove it in the only valid grounds for reasoning: experience. Cleanthes has clearly become a victim of the sceptic. He cannot deny that evil and suffering are as real in the empirical world as good and happiness. He has to show from these empirical realities that God is infinitely good and powerful. Cleanthes gambles by bringing the discussion into a purely theoretical level.⁴⁹ He is forced to be consistent with his empiricism. His difficulty is manifest when he resorts to a speculative theory. The existence of moral and natural

48 Op.Cit., p.66.

49 Rurak, p.26.

evil is the work of a finitely perfect being whose level of finite perfection is far beyond humanity. The universe is the work of this being and its imperfections are the marks of this being's finiteness. Philo has the upper hand. Cleanthes has indulged in speculation and is consequently at his mercy. Philo posits that nature as it is experimentally observed does not come up to one's expectation of a wise and powerful creator. One's limited knowledge and intelligence might be able to reconcile belief in God with the gravity of evil.⁵⁰ But this is not a valid procedure of thinking. One must reason from what is known to what is unknown. Philo is asking Cleanthes to be faithful to his empirical parameters. Hume in this manner has set the problem of evil in an epistemological context. Knowledge of God's nature must be argued from the empirical world. Theodicy must proceed by inductive argument from experience.⁵¹ By "experience" Hume meant the observation and perception of nature as a whole. The empirical argument for God's nature should be inductively based on the empirical realities of the universe: its good and evil, its ecstasy and agony, its happiness and misery. This is crucial because the argument for God's moral nature that criticizes Hume's inconsistency in his own principles fails to note this significance. It is not that God's goodness is inferred from human moral goodness.⁵² Rather, if the universe as a whole is assumed to be God's creation,

50 Ibid.

51 Jerry Walls, "Hume on Divine Amoralism", Religious Studies (v.26, 1990), p.258.

52 Op.Cit., p.259.

then Divine goodness must be inferred from the good and evil realities of the universe in all its facets: human nature and otherwise. This is evident when Philo observes that one cannot find in nature conclusive evidence that supports the argument for an infinitely perfect and powerful being nor even of a finitely perfect and powerful one. By using the analogy of the "house of horrors" he explains that if nature has inherent in it this evil and misery, then one might suppose that this gloomy reality is essential for the benefit of nature itself. But the objection still stands that if nature's creator was wise and powerful, then the universe would have been created in such a way that evil and suffering is avoided. As Philo himself asserts in his analogy:

... If the architect had had skill and good intentions, he might have formed such a plan of the whole, and might have adjusted the points in such a manner, as would have remedied all or most of these inconveniences. His ignorance, or even your ignorance of such a plan, will never convince you of the impossibility of it.⁵³

The sceptic continues his penetrating analysis. In Philo's eyes, an impartial look at nature provides good evidence for drawing a different conclusion.⁵⁴ There are four circumstances that justify the inherent quality of evil and suffering in the nature of the universe.⁵⁵

(1) Evil is part of the empirical world in which pains as well as

53 Popkin, pp.68-69.

54 Rurak, p.26.

55 Popkin, pp.69-73.

pleasures excite creatures to action and makes them vigilant in self-preservation. (2) Evil as a necessity in nature's self-preservation is an inherent feature of the general laws that define the character of the universe. This might be good reason to suppose why God would not alter such a feature of general laws. But Philo contends that the alterations would not be more than minimum. As such they could not upset the entire structure of the universe. (3) Evil is a necessary element in the distribution of abilities and faculties to every creature. A creature enjoys the advantage of its inherent ability in certain areas of life. But the same creature suffers crippling disadvantages in its lack of ability in other areas of life. (4) And finally, evil is an essential quality of the workmanship and design of the universe. Although the universe can be observed to be like a great machine, it is evident that certain parts of this cosmic machine produce misery and illness. Such parts though well fitted in nature are sources of catastrophe and tragedy. Certain aspects of nature have a special purpose; like the wind and the rain. But they affect other aspects of nature in malignant ways ; as in floods and hurricanes. Philo has come full circle. He follows the Humean dictates of experimental reasoning as emphasized zealously by Cleanthes. The evidence from the empirical world has pronounced the verdict concerning the design argument. Philo follows the manner of Cleanthes' formulation of the design argument and comes to a crushing conclusion.

Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But

inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible and odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and aborted children!⁵⁶

The demolition of Cleanthes' empirical argument is complete. Philo uses the empiricist's own analogical procedure. He surmises that the universe as empirically experienced is not only a great and magnificent machine. It also a cruel and terrifying one. The sceptic now turns to the causal consequences of this analogy. If the nature of the universe as a whole is analogous to its cause then the problem of evil has dark consequences for religious claims. The inference that the cause of the universe is infinitely intelligent, powerful, and moral is called into serious question. By intentionally making the problem an epistemological issue, Hume is able to undermine the subject of natural religion itself. All claims to knowledge even when they involve analogy and causation must have empirical grounds. Any claim that is wide of experience will never be convincing despite its causal and analogical arguments because it is without confirmation. Conversely if any claim of cosmic proportions should be based empirically, it must be analogically and causally reflective of experience itself. The argument for God's goodness based upon human moral nature needs to be reminded of this Humean maxim if

56 Op.Cit., p.74.

it seeks legitimacy in Humean principles. Hume cannot be proven implausible in his conclusions about God's nature if his basic premise is not shown to be so. Hume's conclusion is based upon the totality of experience and its reflection in analogical and causal inferences. God's nature by analogy must be inherent in the nature of the universe as a whole. Conversely the nature of the universe must be the grounds for postulating the moral nature of God as cause. If this is accepted then Hume's conclusion is the more plausible one given his stipulations. Even if God were all powerful and wise and it is assumed that his purposes are worked out in nature, Hume's position would still be the better one (again given his stipulations). Once God's moral nature is analogically and causally inferred from human moral nature, certain consequences are inevitable (provided Hume's premise is a given). (1) Morality (i.e. human morality) must be essentially indicative of the nature of the entire universe. (2) All features of human moral action and affection must be definitive of God's moral intentions. If (1) is true then two inevitably conflicting observations pose a problem. The beautiful and sublime aspects of nature give credence to the inference that its cause is good. And such natural aspects were intended by its cause to be so. But also, the horrid and cruel aspects of nature can give credence to the inference that its cause is evil. And such naturally insufferable aspects were intended by its cause to be so. The same tension is also inevitable if (2) is true. When we feel approval for God's work in creating this world as he did that we declare him benevolent, then this is God's desire. But also, when we feel disapproval for God's work in creating this world as he did that we even judge him vicious,

then this is also God's desire. The polarity of the conflict and its common claim on experience makes the support of either side ridiculous. A case can be empirically supported that God created the universe to promote creaturely happiness and that he himself desires such happiness. But a case can also be empirically supported that God created the universe not for creaturely happiness but creaturely misery and that he himself desires such misery. The argument that our moral nature at its best reflects God's own nature is faulty in Hume's epistemological context for two reasons. (1) There is no reason why our moral nature at its worst does not also reflect God's nature since both are empirical realities of human nature. And (2) it is quite obvious that human moral nature does not define the character of the universe as a whole. There are other aspects of the universe that do not lend themselves to a moral nature. And if human nature reflects the nature of its creator then the non-moral nature of other aspects of the universe reflect the nature of their maker. This argument for God's moral nature if it subscribes to empirical reasoning falls prey to the same analogical and causal dangers that brought the downfall of the design argument. Any argument for God's nature that bases itself on experience becomes victim to the chokehold of the problem of evil. This is the final point of Philo's criticism of a natural religion that bases itself upon proper reasoning (that being empirical). Certain questions underlie Philo's final formulation of the problem of evil for natural religion.⁵⁷ If God does exist then in what cases does his

57 Rurak, p.27.

nature [author's change] make a difference to the universe as we experience it? And in those cases where it might make a difference, why hasn't it? Philo thus sums up the issue of theodicy in "four hypotheses about about the first causes of the universe".⁵⁸ (1) That the causes are endowed with perfect goodness. (2) That the causes have perfect malice. (3) That the causes have both goodness and malice. And (4) that the cause have neither goodness and malice. The fact that the universe as a whole exhibits both good and malicious phenomena eliminates the first two. The general and scientific laws of nature seem to discredit the third. (There might be a possible weakness in Hume's third hypothesis. His elimination of the third might mean that the natural laws are amoral in which it is really a subtle form of the fourth. Or that the natural laws are either not malicious in which case it is a subtle form of the first, or that such laws are not good in which it is subtle form of the second.) Philo opted for the fourth hypothesis as the most probable given the empirical realities of the universe.

The true conclusion is that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill, than to heat above cold; or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy.⁵⁹

Philo then declares the theological and moral implications of his amoral conclusion. Human rectitude cannot be analogous to Divine

58 Popkin, p.75.

59 Ibid.

benevolence. There is no reason to apply such an analogy to the Supreme Being as the inferred cause of the entire universe. Rather it is much more reasonable to exclude any moral ascription to such a being because of the potent implications of the problem of evil. Hume's analysis of natural religion is complete. The surges of his theory of knowledge has demonstrated the fact that there is no foundation for religious claims in reason. Both the a priori and a posteriori arguments for the nature of God have no validity in the reasoning process of human knowledge. Therefore the Divine attributes that are the focus of religious devotion and piety are meaningless. Phillips observes that Hume's epistemology is evident in three levels of arguments in the Dialogues.⁶⁰ (1) There is no direct knowledge of God in nature. (2) Nature cannot be regarded as an artifact because it assumes an epistemological look outside of nature. (3) There is no intelligibility of postulating God as explanation for the world's existence. The world is not an object for which it makes sense to seek a cause. Since there are no grounds for speaking of the world as an artifact then there is no basis for speaking of a maker of the world. Cleanthes (and to an extent Demea) was not able to see the distinction between the rational and the non-rational in the subject of religion. Religious claims are really irrational in that they are based upon innate human sentiments. If this is the nature of religion then it is a confusion to ascribe a foundation for it in reason. Phillips coins it as a conceptual confusion.⁶¹ Philo has attempted to

60 Dewi Phillips, "The Friends of Cleanthes", Modern Theology (v.1, no.2, Jan. 1985), pp.92-93.

show that Cleanthes' arguments are results of this conceptual confusion.⁶² The bankruptcy of reasoning in religion is manifest in the problem of evil. The sceptic's conclusion therefore entails nerve-racking consequences for religion. Since it is impossible to infer the attributes of God through human reasoning, then there is no point and meaning in contemplating and considering God's nature. If this is so, then the very existence of God himself has no significant meaning. Natural religion is a meaningless subject and is of no essential significance to religion. It is at this climactic point that Demea realizes Philo's true colors. He has all the while relied on Philo in the attempt to refute Cleanthes. The pious Orthodox believer did not perceive that the sceptic was against him as well. If religious reasonings have no rational or empirical basis then there is no point in discussing and legitimizing religious devotion and fervor. Demea's realization is too late. His hope for affirming the reasonable position of his claims rested on the a priori argument, the incomprehensibility of Divine nature, and the strategic reality of finitude and misery. Having been stripped of all these, the meaningless state of Orthodoxy became apparent. Thus he has nothing to say and is relegated to complete silence. It is no surprise that Demea finally leaves. If religion has no grounds in reason then its foundation is to be understood in different terms. But in this venture, Orthodoxy with its dogmatic commitment to rationalistic reasoning has nothing to

61 Op.Cit., p.103.

62 Op.Cit., p.93.

say. Thus Demea makes his exit and the venture is left to the sceptic and the empiricist.

Philo's Conclusion

With Demea gone, the debate about God's nature is put to rest. Since the standing claim to reason has been eliminated in natural religion, the issue now shifts gears. The matter about religion and its claims moves toward an understanding of religion that does not involve argument. It can be noticed that the dialogue between Cleanthes and Philo in the closing of the Dialogues does not have the atmosphere of contention. The focus is not upon reasonable arguments concerning religious claims. The approach through reason in religion has already been shut down. Now the discussion attempts to venture beneath the rational and empirical arguments into the real sense in which religion has its foundations. It is again another interesting peek into Hume's epistemology that the final words on natural religion stem from the sceptic and the empiricist. The tensions between the fundamental assumptions of Philo and Cleanthes mirror the operational nature of Hume's theory of knowledge. Cleanthes' empiricism is urged by Philo to be faithful to its principles wherever they take him. This is probably the ultimate issue between the two characters. If the empiricist is to accept religion then the empiricist must realize that the basis of such an acceptance is not through any reasoning. It is through this emphasis that Philo seeks to convince the religious empiricist that the consistent end of empirical arguments in natural religion is scepticism. Hume's epistemological dictum deems it necessary that the end of true empiricism is a sceptical attitude and outlook.

Philo and Cleanthes now engage in the study of religion behind its intellectual facade. Here Philo is the dominant speaker. His monologues show that the sceptic is the empiricist's guide in this venture. Philo posits that clear definition and sound reasoning can facilitate the resolution of various disputes.⁶³ He observes however that disputes about quality can never be resolved by reasoning and argument.⁶⁴ He then surmises that theistic arguments in religion belong to this kind of dispute. The various arguments for religious claims concerning God's nature are disputes over quality. The attributes of Deity can be argued even to a point that, Philo confesses, makes the argument from design possible. Here the sceptic seems to have a change of heart as he expounds the viability of the design argument. But the emphasis resounds that despite this possibility, religious arguments are still disputes about quality. As such they are beyond resolution. To this Cleanthes is silent. His response comes in an assertion of his concerns about religion. He expresses the conviction that religion is a necessary foundation for morality. His devotion to this primal function of religion is to the extent that he is willing to say: "religion however corrupted is still better than no religion at all".⁶⁵ Here Philo contends that religion has always been a major source of intolerance. The implication of course

63 Rurak, p.28.

64 Ibid.

65 Popkin, p.82.

is that such an attitude is hardly a quality of that which claims to be a moral foundation. To this Cleanthes replies:

The proper object of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and its operation is silent and only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked.⁶⁶

Notice that the nature of religion is now relegated to a deeper level far beyond reasonable argument. The sceptic has once again directed the empiricist. Philo concedes to the deeper fact about religion. But he still insists that religion plays only a superficial role in affecting moral conduct. "The smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems."⁶⁷ Philo is really admonishing that religion ought to be understood in terms of its concrete effect on moral conduct rather than in terms of the exalted purposes it describes for itself.⁶⁸ In this manner Hume echoes the Natural History in that religion should be viewed as a phenomenon (i.e. a passion of human nature). This reality of religion however is epistemologically beyond the justification of reason. The movement of the Dialogues then begins to deal with the core of Philo and Cleanthes' venture. If religious claims are not within the scope

66 Ibid.

67 Op.Cit., p.83.

68 Rurak, p.29.

of reason then they are essentially a matter of faith. The philosopher might reason to the plausibility of the design argument. But that argument cannot lead to belief. Religious persons might devote themselves to the conviction of God's infinite nature. But this does not necessitate an influence upon philosophical assent nor moral conduct. Thus in these deliberations the Dialogues echoes the Natural History. Religion is just like nature. It is inherently deep in human character. But like nature it cannot furnish human reasoning with doctrines and morals of meaningful significance.⁶⁹ The thoughts of this dialogue finally converge in Philo's conclusion about natural religion. If the foundation of religion is not in reason then what is the significance of natural religion? Philo answers:

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, revolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined, proposition, "that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence..."⁷⁰

A.G. Vink in his analysis of this conclusion, asserts that the words probably, some, and remote are Philo's intimations that there is really no such analogy.⁷¹ The one or more internal principles of order detectable in the universe might have some structural analogy to human intelligence.⁷² In Philo Hume was willing to allow the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Popkin, p.88.

⁷¹ A.G. Vink, "Philo's Conclusion in Hume's Dialogues", Religious Studies (v.25,Dec.1989), p.490.

⁷² Op.Cit., p.498.

epistemological integrity of the design argument. But such an integrity is of no particular significance to the nature of religion. Philo then closes in distinctly Humean fashion the subject of religion based on reason. Since natural religion is empty of theological content, then the religious believer is rightfully driven to the notion of revelation. It is in revealed religion that the real nature of religious claims are found. Philo contends that piety and devotion to religious principles are facilitated by the notion that such principles are not reasoned but revealed. But such revelations are realized only by faith. Hence, they are true to the innermost religious sentiments inherent in human nature. Hume has made the connection between natural and revealed religion. The former is to be discovered as void of any reasonable argument. The latter is only legitimized by faith. Philo thus ends by affirming his scepticism as the surest way in which a person realizes the futility of reason and is thus brought to the realm of faith (faith as the true nature of religion). It is the sceptical onslaught that breaks down the dogmatic adherence to reason and paves the way for the experience of faith. It is in this sense that Philo triumphantly declares:

To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.⁷³

In the light of this conclusion Pamphilus closes his narration of the dialogues. His conclusion on the matter, if Hendel is taken to be

⁷³ Popkin, p.89.

right, is quite definitive of Hume's views on religion. If Pamphilus speaks for Hume at this point then the pupil's verdict must be considered of utmost importance. Philo's principles were declared to be more probable than Demea's. But Cleanthes' principles were closer to the truth. The probability of Philo's views over Demea's is evidently detectable. The pious Orthodox believer was persistent in his conviction that God's incomprehensible nature was determinable by rational argument. When it became clear that he was denied this position, he refuses to continue the discussion. Thus the sceptic's lethal probe which was supposed to lead one to genuine religion was refused its claim in Demea. If Demea persists in a religion that is founded on reason then his views are less probable than Philo's. It is the sceptic's view that is closer to the real foundation of religion. Such a view perceives that the vanity of rational argument for religious claims leads to the realization of true religion. Here Hume points to the very nature of religion as grounded on innate sentiments of human nature. It is an issue of human passion that is evoked in the experience of faith. As such, religion is non-rational and is consequently unapproachable by reason. It is in this sense that Philo is more probable than Demea. But Cleanthes' views as being much closer to the truth is a more difficult verdict to perceive. If anyone's view is to be lauded as truthful, it should be Philo's. But instead the final triumph is awarded to the empiricist who was refuted in his claims. This is the point where the synthesis of Hume's epistemology becomes the only avenue for understanding Hume's last words in the Dialogues. His theory of knowledge is synthetically the underlying current beneath the discussions of the characters. It

has been brought to attention at certain points when this subterranean synthesis has manifested itself (at times quite explicitly). Hume's epistemology holds the answer to the riddle of Pamphilus' appraisal of Cleanthes. There are two avenues in which Hume's theory of knowledge unlocks this enigma. Both avenues are actually connected and inseparable as the two lanes of a highway.

(1) In its historical context the Dialogues involves a battle between rationalism and empiricism. Hume has joined the fray in his epistemological writings. In the Treatise and the Enquiry, Hume has opted to show that empiricism has the upper hand when it comes to the matter of human understanding. He therefore stands with Locke and Berkeley in the empiricist tradition. In the Dialogues, this is clear in the specific instances when rationalistic Demea is refuted in his arguments. Notice that it is the empiricist Cleanthes who frustrates every attempt Demea makes in arguing for rational Orthodoxy. Hence it is the empiricism of Cleanthes that defines Hume's basic commitment as a philosopher of knowledge over and against the rationalism of Demea. So that in the end it is the empiricism of Cleanthes that embodies the epistemological integrity of knowledge which is definitive of religion.

(2) Given the fact of (1), Philo's role is in relationship to Cleanthes' empiricism. Although Philo and Demea teamed up in the Dialogues, it is clear that the real alliance is between Philo and Cleanthes. The purpose of the sceptic's alliance with the pious Orthodox believer was to castigate the religious empiricist. Here again Hume's epistemology comes into play. As emphasized in the second chapter, Humean empiricism is consistent to the end. And if the empiricist view of

knowledge is taken to its ultimate consequences then it leads to scepticism. In Philo, the empiricism of Cleanthes is forced to follow its epistemological maxims. The sceptic shows that if Cleanthes is consistent with his empirical commitment then he shall soon realize that religion has no foundation in reason. If Cleanthes is faithful to his empiricism, then he will realize that the foundation of religion is in human nature (i.e. the experience of faith). But without Cleanthes' empiricism, Philo's scepticism cannot render the realization of true religion effectual. The philosophical sceptic cannot make the essential leap to becoming a sound and believing Christian without the empirical context of the religious empiricist. It is therefore the empiricism of Cleanthes (purged by Philo's scepticism) that is indeed closer to the truth.

It is in these terms that Philo's enigmatic acceptance of the design argument can be understood in its fullest sense. Cleanthes bases the argument on experience. He asserts fervently that it is only in and through empirical means that the argument is rendered true. His mistake was the assumption that such an argument was sufficient basis for religious claims. This is where Philo corrects him. The real support behind the design argument is not its rationality but the compulsion to believe it. The belief in the argument is not based on reason but on a kind of natural belief. In Hume's epistemology such a belief is one that human nature is constitutionally prone to hold.⁷⁴ Belief in God as laid out by the design argument is analogous to the

⁷⁴ Pheroza Wadia, "Professor Pike on Part Three of Hume's Dialogues", Religious Studies (v.14, Sept. 1978), p.326.

belief in the existence of external objects.⁷⁵ The wisdom of Coleman's estimation of Pamphilus' pronouncements is quite appropriate. Cleanthes is nearer to the truth because human instinct inclines one to reason in the way of Cleanthes.⁷⁶ Philo's objections are logically sound that its abstruse nature strains the instincts to appeal to common sense.⁷⁷ It is only in the corrected position of Cleanthes' views that Philo's objections become propositions of substance. Cleanthes' natural theology accords with natural instincts that it is more apt to public opinion.⁷⁸ Cleanthes triumphs only because he is baptized into Hume's epistemological scepticism with regards to metaphysical speculation. Humean theory of knowledge puts a high premium on practicality and common sense. Religion is properly understood only in this practical and common sense level as it is descriptive of instinct and natural belief. When this is true in religion then its claims rightly understood are within the limits of human knowledge. This is why the sceptic concedes to the empiricist in the end of the Dialogues. The closing statement of Pamphilus' narration must be read in the light of Hume's remark in his introduction to the Enquiry:

It is certain that the easy and obvious philosophy will always with the generality of mankind, have the

75 Ibid

76 Dorothy Coleman, "Interpreting Hume's Dialogues", Religious Studies (v.25, June. 1989), pp.189-190.

77 Ibid

78 Ibid

preference above the accurate and abstruse; and by many will be recommended, not only as agreeable, but more useful than the other.⁷⁹

79 Ibid

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The synthesis of Hume's theory of knowledge is undeniably an underlying feature in Hume's philosophy of religion. This study began with the assumption that there is an interconnection and interrelation between the subjects within Hume's philosophy. It was maintained that an analysis of Hume's thoughts on a certain field can facilitate the understanding of his views on another. The notion was established that Hume's philosophy of religion inevitably embodies the essence of Humean epistemology. The testing ground for this seminal thought was Hume's timeless classic: the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. The working problem for this thesis was expressed in a question. How does the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion show the synthesis of Hume's theory of knowledge in his philosophy of religion? The purpose was clearly to explore this literary work as the arena in which the connection and relation of Hume's epistemology with his philosophy of religion can be discovered. Because of the concentrated nature of this endeavor, the limits were purposely set exclusively within the subjects of Hume's theory of knowledge and his philosophy of religion. The entire activity was intentionally contained in one of Hume's religious writings: the Dialogues. The hypothesis was that the epistemological synthesis of Hume's theory of knowledge is discoverable in the Dialogues. Expectations and notions anticipated the validity of this hypothesis. It remained therefore to be seen whether this study would indeed render a validation of such expectations and notions. But certain things had to be accomplished before the Dialogues was

subjected to intensive study. A sufficient understanding of Hume's epistemology and his philosophy of religion needed to be attained before anything else.

The second chapter therefore delved into the the world of Hume's epistemological principles as explicated in the Treatise and the Enquiry. Sceptical empiricism was concluded as the final description of Humean epistemology. It was a theory of knowledge that refuted eighteenth century rationalism. But it also brought the true conclusion of empiricism in its sceptical outlook. The implications of this sceptical empiricism was pursued in the third chapter's focus on Hume's philosophy of religion. It was discovered that Hume's main concern with religion was its conformity to epistemological realities. His conclusion was that religion has gone beyond the limits of human understanding. The empirical nature of Hume's theory of knowledge showed the inability of rational argument to establish theistic claims. Its sceptical character demonstrated the inconclusive end of empirical arguments for natural and revealed religion. The conclusion of Hume's philosophy of religion was that the foundation of religion is not reason nor experience. The nature of religion is in the human sentiments within human nature. It was identified that this conclusion is the coherent end of the sceptical empiricism characteristic of Humean epistemology.

With the connection and relation established between Hume's theory of knowledge and his philosophy of religion, the fourth chapter tested this finding in the Dialogues. As a premier work of Hume's religious thinking, the Dialogues was expected to express religious ideas reflective of Humean epistemology. In the dialogues

between Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo certain Humean principles were evident. (1) There is no foundation for religion in reason. (2) The only foundation for religion is faith that originates from the passions of the human heart. The implications therefore were of utmost importance. The nature of God and its effect upon human piety, devotion, and moral conduct are unjustified by any form and method of reasoning. Such religious maxims cannot be established upon rationalistic principles. They cannot hold any conclusive claim to be empirical realities. The only alternative is the experience of faith that is energized by the deepest sentiments from within. Hume's sceptical empiricism became evident as the epistemological framework of these findings. In the Dialogues, Hume's empiricism broke down the rationalistic claims of natural religion. His scepticism castigated empiricism and guided it to its true conclusion: the non-rational foundation of religion.

Therefore, the synthesis of Hume's epistemology is manifested clearly in Hume's enquiry into natural religion. He has demonstrated in the Dialogues that rationalism is refuted in natural theology. And in the same Dialogues, empiricism is rebuked and directed to its ultimate end. Hume's sceptical empiricism has indeed claimed that it is a necessary point of view that leads to the experience of true religion.

This study therefore can point to certain directions in responding to Hume. It is no secret that Hume's philosophy is vulnerable and faulty. But like any legitimate point of view, it has its strengths as well as its pitfalls. In this exploration of the synthesis of Hume's epistemology in the Dialogues, certain suggestions can be formulated

to direct the attempts at challenging Hume. There are two general directions in which the answer to Hume can be facilitated.

(1) The challenge to Hume must be undertaken from the outside to the inner sanctum of his theory of knowledge. This is probably the most effective method of answering Humean philosophy. The procedure is not to buy into Hume's epistemological assumptions. The most vulnerable point of Hume's philosophy is his epistemology. It is very difficult to refute most of Humean arguments especially in the area of natural religion and morals, if his theory of knowledge is left intact. To prove the implausibility of most of any subject in Humean philosophy, one must first show his epistemological framework to be implausible. Excellent examples of this can be cited. Charles Hartshorne in his evaluation of western philosophy makes a critical case of exemplary proportions against Hume's epistemology.¹ Hume makes three basic metaphysical statements in his theory of knowledge. (a) That no event or thing that is distinguishable from another can or should be logically dependent or inseparable. (b) That strict determinism is logically possible. (c) And that nothing can exist by necessity. Hartshorne cleverly points out that Hume's combination of (a) and (b) gives him conclusions that are based upon an irreconcilable union. And at (c) Hume tries to argue that there is no validity in metaphysical statements. Ironically, by stating (c) Hume is actually making one. The much older James Orr also attempts to correct Hume by refusing to accept the plausibility of

¹ Charles Hartshorne, Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers (Albany: New York State UP), pp.136-143.

Hume's epistemological framework. Orr asserts that Hume failed to solve the problem of knowledge because he excluded rational presuppositions.² By excluding the rational element as key to the nature of knowledge, Hume made a grievous error. As a result he ignores the rational self as an inherent nature of humanity.³ Without the rational self, Hume has championed a lost cause. The contentions of Hartshorne and Orr are only a few of the valid (if not successful) challenges to Hume. Again their effectiveness is in the fact that they went for the cornerstone of Hume's philosophical edifice. This approach is evident in the epistemological classic that overshadowed the Scottish sceptic himself and his brand of empiricism: Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.

(2) The challenge to Hume can be undertaken at isolated points of his own views given his epistemological framework. There are certain Humean arguments that are refutable even when Hume's principles are allowed. This paper indicates that they are found in Hume's criticisms of revealed religion in general and of miracles in particular. It is the opinion of this work that Hume's reasoning concerning miracles is unsatisfactory even to his own epistemology. Miracles are realities that fulfil Hume's prescription for valid claims. The assertions based upon miracles do not go beyond the empirical parameters of religion. Hume's appeal to the argument of probability, though not implausible, is unsatisfactory given his theory of knowledge. His attempt to rest the argument on the

² Orr, p.vii.

³ Ibid.

superior probability of natural laws poses certain problems. Both natural laws and miracles are empirical realities. Both are established by perceptions. The only advantage awarded to the probability of natural laws is the extent in which they are experienced. The former is more public than the latter. Hume can be accused of two violations. (a) Uncritical acceptance of the naturalistic testimony to the realities of experience without convincingly discounting the testimony of miracles to the realities of the same. (b) Biased definition of miracles in terms of the probability of natural laws that already discounts miracles in the outset. These difficulties might very well be Hume's thorn in the flesh. It demonstrates the fact that Hume might have a stronger case in natural religion. But he does not have the same fortress in the subject of miracles and revelation.

It could very well be that the synthesis of Hume's epistemology in the section "On Miracles" of the Enquiry might yield a contrasting conclusion for Hume's philosophy of religion. Perhaps it can be found in that work that there is a foundation for religion in empirical reality. Such an empirical reality might be experienced that it evokes the deepest passions of the human heart in the experience not only of faith but of the actual object of belief itself.

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