Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 10 | Issue 3 Article 13

7-1-1993

Yandell, HUME'S "INEXPLICABLE MYSTERY"

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Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery," by **Keith E. Yandell**. Philadelphia: Temple University Press Publishing Co., 1990. Pp. xvii and 360. $39.95 (cloth).

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This is a bracing, perceptive, full-scale examination of the whole range of Hume's writings on the philosophy and psychology of religion. As one who shares Yandell's conviction of the importance and power of these writings, I welcome the book's appearance enthusiastically. Inevitably it prompts comparison with John Gaskin's *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*[1], but such comparison is not really fair to either. For the person seeking a guide, Gaskin's work is still the place to go, and should be studied before a serious reading of the original; Yandell should be left until after such a reading. Part of the reason is that Gaskin is much more in sympathy with Hume's conclusions than Yandell is. No serious reader, now, can manage without both.

The strength and assurance of Yandell's Hume scholarship manifests itself in the centrality he accords to the *Natural History of Religion*, which is often neglected for the *Dialogues*. Yandell begins with the *Natural History*, and I will comment first on his treatment of it. He skillfully displays the extent to which its psychological analysis of the sources of belief in God parallels Hume's accounts of the genesis of the natural beliefs in the *Treatise*. Hume's psychology depends on the identification of "propensities," or dispositions, which he tends to take as ultimate and inexplicable—although one can infer, as Yandell does, that his views of the self imply that they can somehow be reduced to associative mechanisms. It is a fundamental part of the argument of the *Natural History* that the rather miscellaneous bunch of propensities to which he ascribes the origins of religion are "secondary" when compared with those that generate the natural beliefs in causal regularity, physical objects, and self-identity; it seems that a propensity is secondary if it is in some way defeasible, as the propensities that generate the natural beliefs are not. If Hume has any view that following the natural beliefs is a rational thing to do, in spite of their lack of intellectual justification (which is controversial), or that yielding to the religious propensities is not rational (which looks less so), it will have to derive from this alleged psychological difference.

Yandell couples his responses to the *Natural History* with a discussion of Part XII of the *Dialogues*, a coupling that helps give us a chance of making full sense of the latter's complexities. We can thus see that Philo is there acknowledging the presence in himself of those secondary propensities to which Hume ascribes the origins of theism in the earlier work. Yandell sees the thrust of both to be the claim that these propensities are hazardous to our natures because they may disrupt the otherwise beneficent effects of the primary propensities that ground the natural beliefs, and he thinks it is easy

enough to counter this claim by offering a theory like that of Calvin that theism comes from a primary and indefeasible propensity, and polytheism is a corruption that has secondary sources. While I agree with this, I think Yandell underrates the plausibility of Hume's account of how monotheism grows from polytheism. This account gains its power by identifying real pressures within the psychology of worship, and has the explanatory merit of accounting for the ambivalences within faith that monotheistic believers themselves concede.

The treatment of the *Natural History* and of Part XII is textually sensitive and deeply grounded in the understanding of Hume's system. Yandell says fascinating things about the implications of Hume's theory of belief-propensities for his doctrine of the self, and has as good an explanation as any I know of the nature of Hume's own worries about that doctrine in the notorious Appendix to the *Treatise*. But although the book is a rich source of understanding on these themes, I find it oddly unsatisfying when Yandell comes to criticism. That is because he elects to combat Hume's psychology of religion by arguing for the view that the most plausible explanation of religious [especially numinous] experiences, is that they are veridical. But on the surface at least, this is only indirectly connected with Hume's theories. Hume offers no explicit treatment of such experiences; rather, he offers a theory of how human beings come to believe in invisible, intelligent power, first in polytheistic forms and then in monotheistic forms, that ascribes it to other causes. No doubt any theory about this that ignores the fact that so many have claimed to encounter God directly is woefully inadequate to religious facts, and I agree that there are difficulties in presenting such a theory as truly neutral about the truth of theistic claims; but if such a theory succeeds in locating causes that are genuinely operative in the religious life, it may supply us with reasons for wondering whether these causes are not, perhaps, likely to make us accept the significance of numinous experiences too readily. So although Yandell integrates Hume's psychology of religion splendidly with his epistemology, and defends religious experience nobly against Humean-style attacks, he does not, surprisingly, engage with the genetic tale Hume tells of the way that theism has arisen.

I turn now to the *Dialogues*. Yandell agrees, for the most part, with Hume's critique of the Design Argument in Parts II to VIII, offers some good reasons for not joining in the traditional chorus of praise for Cleanthes' refutation of Demea in Part IX, and fights back against Hume's treatment of the problem of evil in Parts X and XI. I have two very general reservations about his otherwise excellent treatment. First, he says, without argument, that Hume is a radical evidentialist about religious belief—that is, that he holds "a religious belief is reasonably accepted only by someone who has evidence in its favor." I used to think that this was true, and that Hume was in some way inconsistent

in thinking this generates a difficulty for religion when the lack of evidence for the natural beliefs should not lead us to question *them*. But I now wonder whether this is the best way of describing Hume's position. I wonder because in spite of his repeated assaults on the evidence Cleanthes offers, Hume does not appear, in Part XII, to resist our acquiescence in the "thin" theism that seems to satisfy Philo at the conclusion. I do not think Hume himself believed in it; but he does not seem to suggest that we should shed it merely because the evidence does not support it. (I do not think we can read Part XII as telling us that the evidence *does* support it; on the contrary, I suggest that the *Natural History* tells us a story that is supposed to explain why we are predisposed to think it does when it does not.) Consistently or not, Hume does appear to concede that there can be acceptable beliefs (beliefs that the wise man can forbear contesting) which the evidence does not sustain. The issue is too complex to develop in a review, but I think the moral is that the use of the notion of rationality in contemporary defences of the proper basicality of belief in God needs much self-examination, and certainly cannot be applied to Hume interpretation without it.

My second interpretive reservation concerns Yandell's response to Hume's discussions of evil in Parts X and XI. He argues strongly against Hume's attempt to show that evils refute theism, and correctly raises difficulties when Hume says that evil is *a priori* unlikely in a world we are assured is created by "a very good, wise, and powerful being." But he is oddly quiet about the main conclusion of Part X, where Philo claims to "triumph." He claims to triumph because he has undermined Cleanthes' attempt to infer God's goodness by analogical reasoning from his effects. Yandell says that "this, as we have already said, seems quite right" (p. 254); but (a) I missed the first time, and (b) I think it needs saying more emphatically. For it means that evils *are* counterevidence to Cleanthes' design argument, even if they can be reconciled with a theism that is adopted for other reasons, or for the causes listed in the *Natural History*.

Yandell gives more than a run for their money to the overrated essays on Superstition and Enthusiasm, Suicide, and Immortality. He manages to bring some fresh thought to the debate on the Section "Of Miracles," and makes a persuasive case for thinking that Hume's core argument there is best judged in a form that is immune to objections based on post-Newtonian science and paradigm shifts. His plausible speculative reconstruction bases Hume's argument on the stability of "true garden-variety generalisations," and makes it imply that even one's own sensory experience should be questioned if it runs counter to one of these. While I agree that such an argument (if it is indeed Hume's) is manifestly inconclusive, it is not *weak*; for the Section (together with the *Natural History*) offers many suggestions of what might predispose us to yield to such apparent observations too readily—love of the marvelous,

lack of relevant expertise, etc. The "wise man" will join the recognition of these factors to the weight of the uniformity of past experience when weighing the import of present observation. I agree, however, that the result of such a weighing is at most a caution in judgment, not the inevitable "proof" Hume claims to offer that the case for a miracle must always lose.

This book is fine philosophical criticism, and essential reading for philosophers of religion and Hume scholars alike.

NOTE

1. J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*. Second edition, London, Macmillan, 1988.