

“True Religion” and Hume’s Practical Atheism

And though the philosophical truth of any proposition by no means depends on its tendency to promote the interests of society; yet a man has but a bad grace, who delivers a theory, however, true, which he must confess, leads to a practice dangerous and pernicious.

—HUME, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*

IN A SERIES of contributions I have argued that Hume’s philosophy should be interpreted and understood in terms of the fundamental theme of irreligion.¹ Hume’s concern with problems of religion runs throughout his philosophy, beginning with the *Treatise* (1739–40) and ending with the posthumously published *Dialogues* (1779). The label of “atheism,” I maintain, subject to some qualifications, is entirely appropriate when applied to Hume’s position on this subject. According to this account, Hume regards “the religious hypothesis” (EU, 11.18/ 139; D, 12.5/ 216), where he takes this to suppose that there exists some immaterial, intelligent power that is the Creator and governor of the world, to be false under any of the familiar, orthodox interpretations of that hypothesis. The only concession Hume shows any sign of making in respect of this stance is that he, perhaps, allows that if the concept of God is sufficiently reduced or rendered “thin,” stripping it of all anthropomorphic attributes, we may simply suspend belief relating to this matter, one way or the other.² There is no version

1. Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise*; Russell, “Hume on Religion”; Russell, “Hume’s Philosophy of Irreligion”; Russell, “David Hume and the Philosophy of Religion.” It should be noted that many—if not most—of Hume’s own contemporaries, from the publication of the *Treatise* on, read him as being an “atheist” of some kind.

2. Hume is well aware, of course, that from the perspective of the orthodox a *true* conception of God carries with it a full complement of the essential attributes—including, crucially, the

of theism that Hume endorses and, in every familiar form advanced, he firmly rejects the hypothesis as wholly improbable or plainly incoherent. Although this interpretation of Hume's views is no doubt controversial, it is not my intention in this chapter to repeat or rehearse arguments and evidence already presented.³ Instead, my discussion in this chapter will use the irreligious/atheistic interpretation as a *starting point* for investigations into a further set of issues and problems that arise from it.

Atheists may well agree that the religious hypothesis is false but still disagree about the *practical* significance of this conclusion. Some claim, for example, that for the good of society, we need to retain and accommodate religion in some preferred or more benign form (e.g., "true religion" of some kind). Others have argued that the atheist should aim to eradicate all traces of religion. The brand of atheism that Hume recommends rejects both these proposals. The first proposal, he maintains, mistakenly supposes that there is some benign and constructive form of religion available to the masses that will effectively support and sustain ethical life. The second proposal fails to acknowledge the extent to which religious propensities are, in various ways, an inescapable feature of human life and society. In the final analysis, both these proposals rest on optimistic assumptions that Hume rejects. The form of practical atheism that Hume defends is founded on a more pessimistic understanding of the human predicament.

I. Two Old Atheists—Spinoza and D'Holbach

In the context in which Hume was writing (i.e., the first half of the 18th century), there can be little doubt that the dominant atheistic thinker of this period was Benedict Spinoza. Samuel Clarke, the great Newtonian philosopher and theologian, singles Spinoza out as "the most celebrated

moral attributes (D, 10.28/ 199; and cp. 12.8/ 219). This is not required, however, for what *Hume* refers to as "genuine theism," which involves the minimal notion of an intelligent, immaterial being that explains the origin of the world (qua its creator and governor)—as implied by the religious hypothesis (NHR, 4.1–2/122).

3. Some argue that Hume retained some sort of belief in theism, such as "attenuated deism" (e.g., Gaskin *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*; see also Capaldi, *David Hume*, Chap. 9). Others argue that Hume was a "sceptic" (i.e., agnostic) and that, as such, he neither asserted nor denied the theist hypothesis (e.g., Mossner, "Religion of David Hume" and Mossner, "The Enlightenment of David Hume"; Norton, *David Hume*, 50, 246–47). For an illuminating commentary that complements and elaborates on my own irreligious interpretation, see Bailey and O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion*.

patron of atheism in our time.”⁴ This was a view that was widely shared by Hume’s contemporaries, as well as by most contemporary scholars.⁵ Spinoza is certainly an “atheist” in relation to the account of theism of the kind that Hume describes in his *Natural History of Religion* (i.e., as cited earlier). His metaphysical system dogmatically excludes any transcendent being of a kind presupposed by even the most minimalist, reduced form of “genuine theism.”⁶ These general features of Spinoza’s metaphysical system more than justify Bayle’s famous assessment that Spinoza was “the first who reduced Atheism to a system.”⁷

Granted that Spinoza is an atheist with respect to the primary question concerning the *truth* of the religious hypothesis, where does he stand on the secondary question concerning the *value* of religion? While Spinoza held that religion in its popular forms was full of falsehoods and subject to corruption of various kinds, he did not take the view that *all* religion is without value for society. On the contrary, in his *The Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), Spinoza suggests that there is a form of religion that is *essential* to the well-being of society and most of those who live in it.⁸ While

4. Clarke, *Demonstration*, 20 [Sect. III].

5. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 159: “Spinoza then, emerged as the supreme philosophical bogeyman. . . .” On Spinoza’s influence in British philosophy during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, see Colie, “Spinoza and the Early English Deists”; Colie, “Spinoza in England”; and also Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, esp. 49–53; and Jacob, *The Newtonians*, esp. 169–71; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, esp. 603: “Spinoza, then, to a considerable extent came to displace Hobbes. . . .”

6. According to Spinoza’s metaphysical system, there is only one substance and it is infinite, eternal, and self-existing (*Ethics*, Part I). There are no other substances, nor can one substance create another. On this basis Spinoza claims that God and Nature are one and the same being. There does not and cannot exist any kind of God that is the creator and governor of Nature. God’s being is manifest in and through the world and should not be conceived as distinct or prior to it. Any theistic conception of this kind is demonstrably false. (For some helpful remarks on some of the problems associated with the use of the label of “atheism” as applied to Spinoza, see Curley, Editor’s Preface, 47–49.)

7. Bayle, *Dictionary*, art. “Spinoza,” note A (*Selections*, 291). In his *Continuation des Pensées diverses* Bayle describes his understanding of atheism in these terms: “One may reduce atheism to this general tenet, that nature is the cause of every thing; that it is eternal and self-existent; and that it always acts to the utmost extent of its power, and according to unchangeable laws of which it knows nothing.” It is significant that Hume adds the “Spinozist” to his list of forms of atheism in his “Early Memoranda” (MEM, 503/ #40).

8. Spinoza’s *The Theological–Political Treatise* was certainly enormously influential throughout the late 17th and much of the 18th century. Jacob suggests that it was “much more widely read” than his *Ethics* (Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 52). The first English translation of Spinoza’s *The Theological–Political Treatise* appeared in 1689. John Toland published an abstract of this work in 1720, along with an abridgment of Jean Colerus’s (sympathetic) *Life*

religion, as we commonly find it, is corrupted and destructive, it would be a mistake, Spinoza maintains, to conclude that we would be better off altogether without it.

The framework Spinoza employs for assessing the value of religion is based upon three overlapping distinctions. They are:

1. A contrast between the aims and function of philosophy and of religion.
2. An account of the difference between "true religion" and "superstition" (or false religion).
3. The contrast between the (learned) philosopher, on one side, and "the common people," on the other.

With respect to the first distinction, Spinoza states, in several contexts, that his "main purpose" in the *The Theological–Political Treatise* is to differentiate philosophy and theology.⁹ Philosophy and theology, he argues, belong to two different "domains." As such, they have very different aims and functions. Philosophy and reason aim at truth and wisdom. By contrast, theology and religion are concerned with "piety and obedience."¹⁰ What Scripture provides is not so much a set of true doctrines but rather historical narratives that serve to influence the imagination and guide human conduct.¹¹ The relevant and essential teachings of Scripture are simple and contain an ethical message that is valid for all: to love our neighbour and practice justice and loving-kindness.¹²

of Spinoza (1706). For details, see Colie, "Spinoza and the English Deists," esp. 25, 32. Useful commentary on Spinoza's *The Theological–Political Treatise* is provided in Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*; and see also James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, and Curley's Editor's Preface to *The Theological–Political Treatise*.

9. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, Pref. 34, 2.58, 11.22, 14.5, 15.1, 15.21–22 [8, 34, 144, 158–59, 165, 169, 172]). Spinoza's aim to separate philosophy from theology was shared by Hobbes, who was likely an important influence in his thinking on this subject. See, e.g., Hobbes's remarks about "true religion" in his Postscript to *Of Liberty and Necessity* (p. 42): "We ought not to dispute God's nature; he is no fit subject of our philosophy. True religion consists in obedience to Christ's lieutenants, and in giving God such honour, both in attributes and actions, as they in their several lieutenancies shall ordain." On the relevance of Hobbes for Spinoza's views in the *The Theological–Political Treatise*, see Curley, "I durst not write so boldly'."

10. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 14.8, 14.20–23, 15.21 [159, 161, 169].

11. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 1.40–47, 12.33–35, 5.40–46, 6.44, 15.23–25 [19–20, 151, 67, 79, 169].

12. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 7.27, 12.33–37, 13.8, 14.9, 14.17, 14.22, 14.33 [91–92, 151, 153–54, 159, 160, 162].

Related to this point there is, according to Spinoza, an important distinction to be drawn between faith or “true piety” and philosophical dogmas and truths.¹³ It is our “works” or obedience to the command to love our neighbour, rather than our particular understanding of God’s being and attributes, that is evidence of faith.¹⁴ Spinoza summarizes this point by saying that “the best faith is not necessarily manifested by him who displays the best arguments, but by him who displays the best works of justice and loving-kindness.”¹⁵

The distinction between religion and philosophy serves as the basis of Spinoza’s distinction between true and false religion. Only when we separate religion and philosophy can we free religion from superstition and its corrupting influence.¹⁶ Any effort to make Scripture conform to philosophy or philosophy to Scripture is liable to distort and corrupt both.¹⁷ As each has its distinct “domain,” true religion will confine itself to the simple, core ethical teaching of Scripture and the prophets—that we should practice justice and loving-kindness.¹⁸ Similarly, philosophy should not seek to impose itself on Scripture and subject its claims to the standard of reason and truth. Clearly, then, Spinoza’s understanding of “true religion” is not about theological truth or truths but rather about *faith*, which is essentially a matter of ethical conduct (i.e., “obedience”). Having a set of true theological beliefs is not, on this account, required for true religion, as it is possible to display real faith even on the basis of false and contradictory theological beliefs.

The function of Scripture, Spinoza maintains, is to use imagery, metaphor, and narrative to direct humans along the path of virtue, which is true piety. What people believe, in respect of their various and contradictory understandings and interpretations of God’s nature, is of no consequence for faith, as long as they accept and obey the simple, core ethical message of justice and loving-kindness.

13. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 14.13–38, 15.1–3, 19.16–28 [160–64, 169, 214–16].

14. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 14.6–33 [159–63].

15. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 14.33; cp. Pref. 28, 14.16, 18.26 [163; cp. 6–7, 160, 209].

16. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 11.22 [144].

17. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 15.1–3, 15.25 [165, 169].

18. Spinoza summarizes “all the tenets of faith” in *The Theological–Political Treatise*, Chap. 14 (14.25–28 [161–62]).

. . . we don't want to maintain without qualification that nothing which is a matter of pure speculation pertains to the teaching of Scripture. . . . All I maintain is this: there are very few such things, and they are very simple. Moreover, I've resolved to show here which these are and how they are determined. This will be easy for us now that we know that the purpose of Scripture was not to teach the sciences. From this we can easily judge that it requires nothing from men but obedience, and condemns only stubbornness, not ignorance.¹⁹

Spinoza goes on to argue that as "obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbour . . . it follows that the only knowledge Scripture commends is that necessary for all men if they are to be able to obey God according to this prescription." He continues: ". . . Scripture does not touch on speculations which do not tend directly to this end, whether they are concerned with knowledge of God or with knowledge of natural things."²⁰ In sum, it is Spinoza's view that ethical conduct is both necessary and sufficient for salvation or blessedness.²¹ In contrast with this, false religion or superstition resists this conclusion and confuses philosophy and religion, all of which results in quarrels, hatred, and intolerance.²²

How, then, is "true religion," so understood, relevant to our social practices and circumstances? Philosophy is, by its very nature, limited to a few individuals who have the aptitude and opportunity to "acquire a habit of virtue from the guidance of reason alone."²³ If the path to love of God, which is man's highest happiness, relied entirely on reason and philosophy, then almost all the "multitude" or "common people" would be cut off from salvation and blessedness.²⁴ This is not, however, our situation. Since Scripture is concerned to make us "obedient, not learned," it employs

19. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 13.6–7 [154].

20. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 15.8 [154].

21. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, Pref. 20–28, 4.9–15, 5.31, 7.27–28, 7.68–69, 11.15, 13.24–29, 14.13–17, 14.27, 14.44n23), 15.44–45, 18.26, [4–6, 49–50, 66–67, 91, 98, 142, 157, 160, 162, 172, 209, 238n31].

22. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, Pref. 4, 11.2, 15.10, 18.7–26, 2.44–6 [4, 144, 167, 206–09, 229].

23. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 15.45; and also 13.9–19 [172; also 154–56].

24. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 4.10–15, 7.78–82, 13.1–4, 13.24–29, 15.25–45 [50, 101, 153, 156–61, 170–72].

methods that are suitable to the limited understanding of the common people, appealing primarily to their “imaginative faculty” and not to reason.²⁵ Each person may, therefore, adapt and interpret Scripture as he sees fit, as long as it serves the purpose of guiding ethical conduct—which is all that is required for our salvation.²⁶ It follows from all this that although Scripture is not to be confused with a set of philosophical doctrines or truths about the nature of God or Nature, it is still of considerable value and worth. Its value rests with the “very great comfort” it brings to mankind by making salvation possible for all. Scripture and prophecy is, then, of value, not for the “learned” or philosophers, since they do not need it, but for the masses, who would otherwise be lost without it. Although religion is widely misused and corrupted, by theologians and by others, it is, nevertheless, essential for the well-being of society. Spinoza’s aim, therefore, is not to free society from religion but to free (true) religion from superstition.²⁷

Spinoza makes clear that he is writing his own treatise for the “learned reader” and the philosophers who, he claims, will be familiar with the “main points” that he is making. He suggests, however, that “the masses” and “common people” should not read his work, since they are not “governed by reason” and are “carried away by impulse.”²⁸ Considered from this point of view, there is a sense in which Spinoza’s *account* of “true religion” should be understood as a *philosophical* doctrine about the nature and function of religion in relation to philosophy and ethics (i.e., that Scripture and theological doctrine are essentially rhetorical and literary devices to support morality, not to advance human knowledge). Those who *practice* “true religion,” according to this account, are the (truly) faithful who obey the fundamental command of Scripture and display love of their neighbor through acts of justice and loving-kindness. Clearly, then, it is important to distinguish Spinoza’s *philosophy* of true religion from the *practice* of true religion (i.e., “true piety”). The practice of true religion does not, on

25. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 13.20–29; and also 1.25, 1.35, 1.40–48, 2.52–53, 4.37, 5.41–46, 14.6–10, 14.20–23 [157; and also 17, 19–20, 32, 55, 67–68, 159, 161].

26. Spinoza points out that due to their limited understanding and reliance on imagination rather than reason, the common people are prone to an anthropomorphic (and false) conception of God’s nature (*The Theological–Political Treatise*, 1.35, 1.43–47, 2.40–45, 4.16, 4.30, 4.37, 13.26 [17, 19–20, 30, 50–51, 53, 55, 157]).

27. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 11.23; and cp. Pref. 3–9 [144; and cp. 1–3].

28. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, Pref. 33–4 [7–8].

Spinoza's account, presuppose or depend on a *philosophical* understanding of true religion—much less on a philosophical understanding of God, beyond the basic understanding of the command to love our neighbor.

Spinoza's standing as a leading representative of atheism, as we have already noted, was widely accepted in the 18th century. Among those who recognized Spinoza as a "celebrated atheist" was Baron Henri D'Holbach.²⁹ D'Holbach's most important work, *The System of Nature*, was published in 1770 and it has been described as "the first avowedly atheistic work."³⁰ In 1772 D'Holbach published *Good Sense*, a condensed and accessible version of his *System*.³¹ While D'Holbach's *System* is the lengthier statement of his outlook, *Good Sense* is not only more condensed, it is also "more completely critical."³²

Although D'Holbach does not adopt Spinoza's geometric (rationalist) methodology, his stance on the question of the existence of God is no less dogmatic.³³ In a number of contexts D'Holbach argues that "the notion of God is impossible,"³⁴ on the ground that the idea of God is not only

29. *System of Nature*, 214 [II, Chap. 2]; see also p. 226 [II, Chap.3]. D'Holbach was heavily influenced by Spinoza's philosophy (see, e.g., Blom, *Wicked Company*, 85–86; and for a rather different perspective Israel, *Revolution of the Mind*, esp. 20–21). His perspective on Spinoza was influenced in important ways by his accompanying interest in the writings and thought of Thomas Hobbes and John Toland. In 1768 D'Holbach, in collaboration with Jacques-Andre Naigon, translated and published Toland's *Letters to Serena* (1704). Toland's work contains a (largely) sympathetic account of various elements of Spinoza's philosophy.

30. Berman, *Atheism in Britain*, 37; and also Kors, "The Atheism of D'Holbach and Naigeon," 276. Dennis Diderot (who was also a good friend of Hume's) was closely involved with the development and writing of D'Holbach's *System of Nature*. See the editor's Introduction to D'Holbach's *Christianity Unveiled*, lxxiv. There is, in particular, some evidence that Diderot played a crucial role in D'Holbach's "conversion" to atheism (on this, see Holoman's introduction to *Christianity Unveiled*, lv; and also Blom, *A Wicked Company*, Chaps. 6 and 9; and Buckley, *Origins of Modern Atheism*, Chaps. 4 and 5).

31. Published under the name Jean Meslier. Prior to this, in 1761, D'Holbach had published *Christianity Unveiled*, using the name N. A. Boulanger.

32. Lebuffe and Gourdon, "Holbach," 33; and also 38–39. Blom suggests that *Good Sense* "made much the same argument more effectively on less than a third of the pages" (Blom, *A Wicked Company*, 159).

33. There is, as with Spinoza and Hume, some debate about the interpretation of D'Holbach's arguments and commitments. Some commentators suggest, for example, that there is a more skeptical and less dogmatic aspect to D'Holbach's views than is generally recognized. Kors claims, in particular, "that from a formally philosophical point of view, materialist atheism was more a moral choice than a philosophical choice, a will towards the pursuit of happiness" (Kors "The Atheism of D'Holbach and Naigeon," 296–300). For a brief and persuasive defence of D'Holbach's "intellectual atheism," see Lebuffe and Gourdon, "Holbach."

34. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 16—this being the title of section 8.

unintelligible and incredible,³⁵ it is actually “contradictory.”³⁶ It is in this (dogmatic) spirit he refers to theology, in general, as “a continual insult to human reason.”³⁷ Despite their methodological differences, therefore, we can place D’Holbach securely beside Spinoza as a representative of dogmatic atheism.³⁸

The question that now concerns us is where D’Holbach stands with regard to the *value* of religion? Does he, for example, accept Spinoza’s account and defense of “true religion”? It is clear that D’Holbach explicitly rejects any form of “true religion” of a kind that is meant to guide the masses and support morality. There is, according to D’Holbach, no distinction to be drawn between true and false religion because *all* religion is foolish and wicked. In his Preface to *Good Sense* D’Holbach identifies his target in the following unqualified and sharp terms:

In a word, whoever will consult common sense upon religious opinions . . . will easily perceive that these opinions have no solid foundations; that all religion is but a castle in the air; that Theology is but ignorance of natural causes reduced to a system; that it is but a long tissue of chimeras and contradictions. . . . [T]he hero himself is made up of qualities impossible to reconcile. . . . The notion of this imaginary being, or rather the word by which we designate him, would be of no consequence did it not cause ravages without number upon the earth.³⁹

In a later passage, D’Holbach explicitly argues that there is no distinction to be drawn between “true religion” and “superstition.” “All religion,” he says, “in reality [gives] us the same ideas of God,” all of which are equally contradictory and at odds with our experience of the world.⁴⁰ Morality does not, in any case, need religion for its foundations, which actually rest with

35. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 8, 14, 19, 20, 31, 36.

36. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 8, 19, 20, 114, 122, 123–24, 131.

37. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 13.

38. A good summary of D’Holbach’s own views on what he understands by “the name of atheist” can be found in his *System of Nature*, II, xi. See, in particular, his remarks at II, 219: “This granted. . . .”

39. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 2.

40. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 58–59; and cp. 115, 123–24, 153.

human nature and human passions.⁴¹ Religion, in all its forms, serves only to pervert and corrupt morality and leave the population vulnerable to misery, cruelty, and tyranny.⁴² In general, D'Holbach makes little or no effort to distinguish among the various religions in terms of their foolish beliefs and pernicious consequences, a task that he plainly regards as a distraction from the central message that he aims to deliver.

Not only is D'Holbach not interested in distinguishing the various vulgar and popular religions from each other (e.g., Islam and Christianity; Catholicism from Protestantism; etc.), and adjusting his condemnation of each accordingly, he also firmly condemns both Deism and skepticism. The God of the Deists, he argues, is also full of contradictions and incompatible qualities.⁴³ Nor is a God of this kind any more useful or necessary for social life.⁴⁴ Religion, in any form, is unnecessary for morality and serves only to erode and corrupt it.⁴⁵ Deism, therefore, is not a viable alternative to superstition, it is just another false and problematic version of it. Nor is D'Holbach any more favourably disposed to scepticism. On the contrary, to be a sceptic, D'Holbach claims, "is to lack the motives necessary to establish a judgment."⁴⁶

Sensible people deride, and with reason, an absolute pyrrhonism, and even consider it impossible. A man who could doubt his own existence, or that of the sun, would appear ridiculous. . . . Is it less extravagant to have uncertainties about the non-existence of an evidently impossible being? Is it more absurd to doubt of one's own existence, than to hesitate upon the impossibility of a being whose qualities destroy each other?⁴⁷

D'Holbach could hardly dismiss the skeptic in a more dogmatic manner. He carries on to suggest that religious skepticism is, in the final analysis, both an intellectual and moral failing. Skepticism results from a superficial

41. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 198–201.

42. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 154–214.

43. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 124.

44. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 181–82.

45. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 177–80; 190–91; 197–201.

46. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 131.

47. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 131–32.

examination of subjects and it “arises ordinarily from laziness, weakness, indifference, or incapacity.”⁴⁸ If D’Holbach entertains any degree of skepticism on the issue of religion, the existence of God is not where this occurs.

The upshot of all this is that not only does D’Holbach firmly reject any form of Spinozist “true religion,” he also (dogmatically) repudiates both Deism and skepticism. He has no sympathy with any form of “two domain” doctrine and he refuses to discriminate among the various religions. Any effort to accommodate religion, in *any* form, he maintains, serves only to placate and encourage this enemy of truth, progress, and human happiness.

What, then, should our practical attitude and policy be in relation to religion? D’Holbach’s response here is similarly decisive and uncompromising. Given the heavy costs of religion, he argues that we need to “annihilate” or “eradicate” it.⁴⁹ We should, he says, “combat” religion at all levels—theology, Scripture, church, and clergy.⁵⁰ His stance throughout is aggressive and uncompromising, allowing few, if any, concessions to religion of any kind. It is not inaccurate to describe his stance on this subject as a form of “militant atheism.” At the same time, however, although D’Holbach may aim to *eliminate* religion, he acknowledges that this is a very difficult goal to achieve.

He who combats religion and its phantasies by the arms of reason, is like a man who uses a sword to kill flies: as soon as the blow is struck, the flies and the fairies return to the minds from which we thought to have banished them. . . . all religions are easy to combat, but very difficult to eradicate.⁵¹

Religion is, D’Holbach suggests, deeply rooted in our human nature and our circumstances. Its origins rest, in particular, with our ignorance and fears, along with our established and entrenched prejudices and education.⁵² Overcoming these obstacles is no easy task.

48. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 132.

49. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 8, 115.

50. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 113.

51. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 113–15. Similar sentiments regarding the challenge of using philosophy to defeat religion is like “pretending to stop the ocean with a bulrush” (Hume, NHR, 11.5).

52. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 16–17, 165, 190, 197–98, 230, 231–32, 235.

Given the difficulties involved in achieving the eliminativist goal, what is the point of "preaching" or arguing for atheism to "the common man"?⁵³ It would be a mistake, according to D'Holbach, to conclude that this pursuit is simply a hopeless task. On the contrary, there are many other topics of investigation, such as mathematics, medicine, and so on, that are also difficult and beyond the capacity of the ordinary person. It does not follow from this that they are of no value or that no benefit is derived from them.⁵⁴ The principles of atheism are, in any case, D'Holbach maintains, better secured in "common sense" than those of theism and theology. As long as "sensible and peaceable people enlighten themselves," he claims, "their light spreads itself gradually, and in time reaches the people."⁵⁵ We may conclude, in light of these observations, that D'Holbach's practical program contrasts sharply with Spinoza's account of "true religion." The question we now come to is where does Hume stand on this significant divide within the atheist camp.

II. Hume and Spinoza's True Religion

Although Hume mentions the notion of "true religion" in a number of different contexts, the only context in which he discusses this issue in any detail is in the last section of the *Dialogues* (XII). It is, in any case, his discussion of "true religion" in this context that has been the principal focus of interest and debate among commentators.⁵⁶ The context in which this discussion arises is an exchange between Philo and Cleanthes (i.e., two of the principal characters in the *Dialogues*) concerning the practical

53. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 231.

54. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 231–32.

55. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 232.

56. There are a number of relevant and interesting contributions to this literature. Among those the reader may consult are: Livingston, "Hume's Conception of True Religion"; Falkenstein, "Hume on 'Genuine', 'True', and 'Rational' Religion"; Penelhum, "Hume's Views on Religion"; Lemmens, "Beyond the Calm Sunshine of the Mind"; Lemmens, "The 'true religion' of the Sceptic"; Garrett "What's True About Hume's 'True Religion?"; and Willis, *Toward a Humean True Religion*. Although these accounts vary significantly in the interpretations that they offer and defend, a number of them (e.g., Garrett and Willis) argue that Hume endorses belief in an intelligent power as the ultimate cause of nature and claim, on this basis, that he was not an atheist of any kind. However, rather than attempt to respond to all these diverse and varying interpretations in the secondary literature, my focus in this discussion will remain on the relevant primary literature (especially Spinoza and D'Holbach).

consequences of religion and atheism for morality.⁵⁷ Having tried to reconcile the theist and the atheist by encouraging them to agree that there is “some remote inconceivable analogy” that holds between the original cause of “the works of nature” and the human mind (D, 12.1–8), Hume moves on to address the issue of the practical consequences of religion.⁵⁸ Philo begins by assuring Cleanthes that he has expressed his “unfeigned sentiments” (thus alerting the reader to this worry) and goes on to declare that his “veneration for true religion” is held in proportion to his “abhorrence of vulgar superstition” (D, 12.8/219)—this being, of course, a distinction that was also of central importance to Spinoza’s discussion.

Before considering the content or nature of Hume’s understanding of “true religion,” we might begin by asking what reason we have for believing that Hume took an *interest* in Spinoza’s views on this subject?⁵⁹ There are at least three important considerations that should be noted in relation to this matter. First, as we have already noted, Spinoza was widely regarded as the most prominent representative of modern atheism in Hume’s context. Any informed discussion of atheism, in this context, would need to take some notice of Spinoza’s views. Second, Spinoza’s *The Theological–Political Treatise* was not only an especially influential work in this context, it was itself centrally concerned with the issue of the relationship between religion and morality and addressed this issue under the heading of “true religion.”⁶⁰ Third, quite apart from the specific issue of “true religion” and

57. This is a topic that Hume has broached in the first *Enquiry* but did not pursue at any length (EU, 11.4/ 133–34). Hume returns to this issue in *Dialogues* XII (D, 12.19–31), where he discusses the practical consequences of religion.

58. With respect to the argument advanced (i.e., the argument from design), Hume claims: (a) that the analogy in question is “remote and inconceivable”; (b) that there are other equally strong analogies that are available (and imply very different conclusions) (D, 12.7/ 218); (c) that the moral attributes are especially poorly supported (D, 12.8/ 219); and (d) any notion of God we are left with is of little or no practical consequence (D, 12.33/ 227). Even if we grant that these critical arguments fail to support atheism, they (completely) undermine any effort to *vindicate* the religious hypothesis on the basis of the argument from design. That many humans will continue to retain an (unstable) belief in a “supreme being” of some kind, even though it lacks any rational justification, is not a view that Hume denies—since he offers a detailed *explanation* for this propensity in his *Natural History of Religion*.

59. Although the literature on Hume’s views about “true religion” is vast, little, if any, attention has been given to the (potential) relevance of Spinoza’s account of “true religion” for the interpretation of Hume’s views. I am not aware of any extended or detailed discussion of the relevance of Spinoza’s “true religion” for Hume’s views on this subject. Indeed, most discussions of Hume’s views on this subject do not even *mention* Spinoza in relation to this matter.

60. Spinoza’s influence over the generation of deists and freethinkers who flourished in Britain during the first few decades of the 18th century was considerable. Stephen remarks,

its immediate and direct relevance to Hume's own discussion of this topic, Hume's entire philosophy is structured and oriented around an irreligious program in which Spinoza (along with Hobbes) was a pivotal figure in the various debates that Hume was primarily focused on.⁶¹ In light of all this it is *not credible* that Hume would not have considered Spinoza a key figure in this context. At the very least, the burden of proof rests (heavily) with those who would deny this.

When we turn to Hume's various arguments and the way in which he presents the issue of "true religion," the essential features of Spinoza's account all appear. After Philo expresses his "veneration" for true religion Cleanthes follows by suggesting, first, that even a corrupt religion is preferable to no religion and, second, that the doctrine of a future state is a necessary support for morality (D, 12.10/ 219). Philo immediately challenges both these claims. In reply to this, Cleanthes claims that "the proper office of religion" is to "humanize" our conduct and support "the motives of morality and justice" (D, 12.11/ 220)—a suggestion that could come straight from Spinoza. The irony here, as would be obvious enough to many of Hume's contemporary readers, is that any such view of religion would entirely undermine Cleanthes's effort to defend the *truth and rationality* of the theist hypothesis (since this would be a separate and distinct "domain" of concern). The standard for assessing any religion, on the view proposed, would not be its truth but its *practical effects on conduct*. We have, in any case, independent reason to conclude that this was, in fact, *Hume's*

for example, "that the whole essence of the deist position may be found in Spinoza's 'Tractatus Theologico-Politicus'" (Stephen, *English Thought*, I, 27 [1.33]). This influence is especially pronounced in respect of the topic of the relationship between morality and religion. Two thinkers of particular note, in this regard, are Lord Shaftesbury (*Characteristics*, 1711) and Matthew Tindal (*Christianity as Old as Creation*, 1730). Any complete account of Hume's concern with Spinoza's "true religion" would need to give further attention to the role of these two thinkers (and others in their circle).

61. Regarding Hume's knowledge of Spinoza and his *The Theological–Political Treatise*, see Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, esp. Chap. 7; and also Russell, "'Atheism' and the Title-Page of Hume's *Treatise*." For a long time it was assumed that Hume did not read Spinoza and that all he knew about him came through Bayle's *Dictionary* article (which may be part of the explanation for the otherwise puzzling neglect of Spinoza in this context). More recently, however, a number of scholars have argued that Hume was *immersed* in Spinoza's philosophy—especially his *Ethics*. See, e.g., Baier, "David Hume, Spinozist," and Klever, "Hume Contra Spinoza?" In *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* I offer a rather different assessment of the relevance of Spinoza for Hume's philosophy and its development—although I also hold that Spinoza is a figure of *considerable* importance for understanding Hume's philosophy in general.

understanding of what “true religion” is. In a suppressed Preface written in 1756 for one of the volumes of his *History of England*, Hume wrote:

The proper Office of Religion is to reform Men’s Lives, to purify their Hearts, to inforce all moral Duties, & to secure Obedience to the Laws & civil Magistrate.⁶²

These remarks are entirely consistent with Spinoza’s account of “true religion.” They serve, moreover, as a succinct and pithy statement of the bare essentials of Spinoza’s doctrine. In this case, however, the remarks come directly from Hume, not through the voice of Cleanthes.⁶³

If Hume’s understanding of “true religion” is, in its essentials, a *Spinozist* understanding, what then is his *attitude* to “true religion,” so interpreted? A proper analysis of this requires that we keep in mind the distinction that we drew earlier between Spinoza’s (philosophical) *account* of true religion and the actual *practice* of true religion (i.e., what Spinoza believes he is giving an account of). Let us, then, distinguish between the philosophical account, call it TRP, and the practice itself, call it TRE. The practice of true religion (TRE) is simply ethical conduct. Ethical conduct, Spinoza argues, requires very little in the way of theological doctrine—only the most simple of tenets are required for obedience to the “Word of God” or divine law.⁶⁴ This simple doctrine serves as both a necessary and sufficient condition to move the common person to act in accordance with God’s command. In this way, ethical conduct (TRE) is grounded in the simple content of the Word of God, as presented in Scripture and by the prophets. Call this the *doctrine* of true religion or TRD.

Given these distinct aspects of Spinoza’s “true religion,” where does Hume stand in respect of them? A number of commentators have read the remarks that Philo “venerates” true religion to imply that he *endorses*

62. Cited in Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 306.

63. See also Hume’s earlier remarks in a letter written in 1743, where he suggests that “what we commonly call Religion” may be reduced to “the practice of morality, & the assent of the understanding to the proposition *that God exists*” (NL, 12–13, italics in original). Not only is the proposition assented to here stripped of all distinct content, it could not, given Hume’s own philosophical principles, serve as a basis for *belief* (as there is nothing to believe *in*). Clearly, then, (true) religion is simply a matter of the practice of morality, as in Spinoza’s account.

64. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 11.22, 13.4, 13.6, 13.27–29, 14.6–10, 15.24–25 [144, 153, 157, 159, 169]].

true religion.⁶⁵ For reasons already given, if Hume did endorse "true religion"—and I will suggest that this claim requires significant qualification and restrictions—it is "true religion" as broadly understood in *Spinozist* terms. On a strict understanding, therefore, "true religion" is simply ethical conduct or TRE—which is something that Hume would plainly have reason to "venerate." What, then, about "the doctrine of universal faith" that guides this ethical conduct (i.e., TRD)? Spinoza describes these doctrines as terminating in this point: ". . . that there is a supreme being, who loves Justice and loving-kindness, and whom everyone, if he is to be saved, is bound to obey and to worship by practicing Justice and loving-kindness towards his neighbour."⁶⁶ Hume, through the voice of Philo, describes this as "so pure a religion as represents the deity to be pleased with nothing but virtue in human behaviour" (D, 12.15/ 221). He deems it unobjectionable, and even admirable, to the extent that it aims to support the practice of virtue. Be this as it may, however, Hume (through Philo) makes clear that a "refined" or "philosophical" religion of this kind is "utterly incapable" of moving or guiding the vulgar in the manner that Spinoza suggests (D, 12.15/ 221). Any influence that true religion of this kind may have (qua TRD) will always be "confined to very few persons" (D, 12.22/ 223). Whereas Spinoza believes that true religion serves to close the gap between the philosophers and the common people, Hume holds that "true religion," understood in these terms (i.e., TRD), is itself "a species of philosophy" and, as such, fails to engage or influence the vulgar. In sum, while it is true that Hume may well "venerate" true religion understood in terms of TRE (ethical conduct), and with it TRD (the simple doctrine that God requires nothing more than virtue from us), he still *rejects* the core practical claim of TRP—as presented in Spinoza's account of "true religion." That is to say, according to Hume it is a mistake to suppose that TRD achieves the *practical effect* of supporting and sustaining TRE among the masses.

It should now also be clear, in light of the preceding analysis, that a Spinozist account of true religion must be (sharply) distinguished from "genuine theism" of any kind—including deism or any reduced form of "thin" theism. These differences include the following:

65. See, e.g., Garrett, "What's True About Hume's 'True Religion?'," 218. Garrett, like many other commentators, also takes Hume to endorse "true religion" as "belief of invisible intelligent power" of some kind.

66. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 14.24 [161–62].

1. True religion, understood as ethical conduct (TRE), is *not* a matter of belief in any particular set of philosophical doctrines about the nature of God. By contrast, genuine theism is a matter of belief about the being and nature of God (i.e., as an immaterial, intelligent being who bears some analogy to the human mind).
2. According to Spinoza's philosophical account of true religion (TRP), genuine theism is a *false* philosophy. As such, it is not impossible that it might still support ethical conduct (TRE) but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for this task.⁶⁷
3. Granted that genuine theism (including attenuated deism of any kind) is an effort to make theology conform to philosophy, it violates Spinoza's "two domain" doctrine, which involves separating philosophy from theology.
4. True religion, as Spinoza and Hume understand it, is plainly a matter of the regulation and guidance of conduct—this being the relevant function and aim of religion (not truth or knowledge of any kind). Genuine theism not only aims at truth and knowledge concerning God's being and nature, it has no *essential* connection with (ethical) conduct. According to Hume, where genuine theism is reduced to its bare content (e.g., as per the "undefined proposition"), it has little or no practical influence over our conduct (D, 12.32/ 227).⁶⁸ Since any form of thin theism or (attenuated) deism lacks practical force, it cannot satisfy this essential requirement of "true religion."

Given all these significant points of divergence, it is a mistake to confuse "true religion" (TRE) with "genuine theism" of any kind. On the account defended here, although Hume may "venerate" true religion as ethical conduct (TRE), he, nevertheless, rejects *both* "genuine theism" and "true religion" understood in terms of Spinoza's account (TRP). His reasons for rejecting these two doctrines are obviously different. The religious hypothesis fails, according to Hume, because the argument and reasoning behind it (i.e., the design argument) relies on weak reasoning that cannot

67. See Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 13.29 [157].

68. It is for this reason that Cleanthes seeks to retain an anthropomorphic account of "genuine theism," otherwise it would, he claims, lose its practical effect. Hume (pace Philo) argues that even thick (anthropological) conceptions of God of this kind have little or no steady or reliable influence over our conduct—a "refined" or reduced conception will have even less (practical) influence.

support its conclusion. Spinoza's doctrine of "true religion" fails because its claims about the *practical influence* of "true religion" (TRD producing TRE) are not credible. The tenets or doctrines of "true religion" (TRD) are too "refined" and "philosophical" to have any real influence over the vulgar or the masses. While superstition has little in the way of a steady or reliable influence over the vulgar, a philosophical and pure religion of the kind that Spinoza proposes will have even less (D, 12.20–25/ 222–25).

In sum, Spinozist "true religion" is the form of true religion that concerns Hume (i.e., in D, XII). Although he respects it and grants that it is admirable (qua TRE) and has no destructive or unpleasant consequences (qua TRD), he judges that it is, nevertheless, *ineffective* in achieving its (essential) end of supporting morality, contrary to TRP. For this reason we may conclude that Hume rejects Spinoza's philosophical account of "true religion" (qua TRP).⁶⁹

III. Hume and D'Holbach's Militant Atheism

Since Hume rejects Spinoza's account of "true religion" (TRP), despite its obvious attractions and admirable intent (qua TRE and TRD), should we assume that he endorses "militant atheism" of a kind that d'Holbach presents as an alternative?⁷⁰ To answer this question we need to distinguish the following two issues:

1. Do we need or want to "combat" and "annihilate religious prejudices"?
2. Granted that we may have reason to eradicate religion, is this an objective that we can achieve—is it possible for us?

69. My discussion in this section has benefited greatly from comments and suggestions provided by Steven Nadler.

70. There is, of course, an oft-repeated account of Hume attending a dinner party at D'Holbach's home where he is supposed to have first encountered atheists in the flesh. Commentators such as Mossner have drawn the conclusion from this that "it is certain that Hume did not regard himself as an atheist." ("Hume and the Legacy of the *Dialogues*, p. 22n38; and see also Mossner, *Life*, 483f). Mossner takes Hume's remarks to be entirely sincere and serious. I will not repeat my (several) reasons for rejecting this view, as they are stated at some length elsewhere (*The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, 386n18). My own comments draw from Berman's effective response to this suggestion (Berman, *Atheism in Britain*, 101). In this context I will simply state that, contrary to this account, Hume's remarks at D'Holbach's dinner party do not show that he did not believe that atheists exist or that it is certain that he did not view himself as one. (What they show is that Hume had a sense of humor—something that cannot be taken for granted among all his readers.)

D'Holbach's answer to the first question is clear: we have more than good reason to want to achieve this end. His answer to the second question is more hedged or hesitant, since he recognizes that this end will prove "difficult." He believes, nevertheless, that *in time* this goal can be realized. As we have noted, however, his response to both these issues leaves no scope for further qualifications based on discriminating among the various religious sects and their particular doctrines and practices. According to D'Holbach, we have reason to want all religions to be "eradicated" and, although difficult, this is an achievable goal. The targets of his eliminativist program would include not only all the familiar forms of orthodoxy (i.e., Christianity, Islam, etc.) but also Deists and even skeptics, along with any other parties who seek to accommodate or offer apology of any kind for religion.⁷¹

While Hume's theoretical attitude to the question of God's existence is not dogmatic in the manner of D'Holbach, there are, nevertheless, many passages in his writings that give evidence of his sharing D'Holbach's deep hostility to religion. Perhaps this surfaces most explicitly in Hume's *Natural History of Religion*. Consistent with his usual practice, Hume introduces some of his harshest remarks and observations about religion under cover of more orthodox sentiments.⁷² In the final section of his *Natural History of Religion* Hume begins by saying:

71. Although D'Holbach speaks in favor of liberty of thought and complains of the intolerance and persecution encouraged by religion (D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 175, 178, 224–25, 231–32), it remains unclear as to what limits or constraints should be set for the "war" on religion that he advocates. In defense of D'Holbach, however, it should be noted that, while he sharply *criticizes* religion, he does not, in contrast with the established doctrine and practice of his religious opponents, advocate their persecution, much less that they should be subject to coercion and violence.

72. One immediate difficulty that we face in interpreting Hume is that the intolerant climate of the times ensured that any theologically unorthodox thinker—atheist or not—had to conceal their real meaning behind the camouflage of evasive language. D'Holbach describes this esoteric technique in the following terms: "In all ages one could not, without immanent dangers, lay aside the prejudices which opinion had rendered sacred . . . all that the most enlightened men could do was to speak and write with hidden meaning; and often, by a cowardly complaisance, to shamefully ally falsehood with truth. A few of them had a double doctrine – one public and the other secret. The key of this last having been lost, their true sentiments often become unintelligible and, consequently, useless to us . . ." (D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 245–46).

Suffice it to note that Hume was entirely comfortable about practicing the art of "double doctrine" or "hidden meaning" and employs it in any number of contexts. For a helpful account of "the suppression of atheism" as it relates to Hume's 18th-century context, see, e.g., Berman, *Atheism in Britain*, esp. 101–05; and also Russell, "Epigram, Pantheists and Freethought in Hume's *Treatise*."

The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant to human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind, than to be thus selected from all other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal creator. (NHR, 15.5)

He immediately goes on to point out that when we "consult this image" what we see is how "disfigured" and "degraded" it is.

Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than serious, positive, dogmatic assertions of a being who dignifies himself with the name of rational. (NHR, 15.5)

The severity and scope of these observations and remarks approaches closely the standard set by D'Holbach.⁷³ These scathing and sweeping remarks about religion are also entirely consistent with Hume's observations, through the voice of Philo, concerning religion "as it has commonly been found in the world" (D, 12.22/ 223). There is, to say the least, nothing moderate or restrained about them and they accurately represent the general tenor of Hume's position on this subject.

Hume is also in agreement with D'Holbach, in contrast with Spinoza, that morality does not need religion of *any* kind. Much of his ammunition is spent establishing the various ways that "vulgar superstition" corrupts and distorts moral life and conduct. This is not just an important theme in *Dialogues* XII but also a prominent feature of both the second *Enquiry* (EM, 199, 270, 279, 341–42) and the *Natural History of Religion* (NHR, 9, 10 and 14/ 145–50, 175–79). Although "true religion" or any other religions of a more philosophical and rational kind may do no *harm* to moral practice, they are not required for it. The general force of Hume's several (extended)

73. Despite remarks of this nature—and many others could be found in Hume's works—some scholars continue to present Hume as a "religious conservative" of some kind (see, e.g., Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 692–93; and for effective criticism of Israel's views in this respect, see Vink, "David Hume: Sceptical Atheist or Religious Conservative?").

discussions of morals, running from the *Treatise* all the way through to the *Dialogues*, converge on several of the same basic points that D'Holbach also advances and defends. These are that "morality is founded upon the relations, the needs, and the constant interests of the inhabitants of the earth" and that, to the extent that religion becomes involved, it generally "weakens or destroys the ties which unite man."⁷⁴ In all these fundamental respects Hume and D'Holbach are in complete agreement.

Given these points of agreement between Hume and D'Holbach we might expect Hume to fully endorse the eliminativist program, insofar as it can be achieved or realized. There are, however, crucial respects in which Hume's analysis diverges from D'Holbach's and directs him down a rather different path—a path that is, in some degree, more cautious and measured. One crucial respect in which Hume differs from D'Holbach is that he firmly rejects an *indiscriminate* attitude to religion. According to Hume, any policy or program for dealing with religion must be *sensitive* to the significant variations and differences that we find among its sects. It is a recurrent theme, throughout Hume's writings on religion, to emphasize the ways in which religious sects and parties differ from each other, not only in their doctrines and practices but also in their causes and effects. It is in this spirit that Hume distinguished between superstition and enthusiasm, Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and the several Protestant (Reforming) sects, as well as between polytheism and monotheism.⁷⁵ The various comparisons and contrasts that he draws pay particular attention to the way in which some forms of religion pose a threat to human happiness and the peace and stability of society much more than others. It is, therefore, a serious mistake, from this perspective, to simply lump all these sects and groupings together and condemn them all without any further qualification. Our practical situation is considerably more complex and messy than an approach of this kind allows.

The importance of these distinctions for Hume is evident in his discussion in the final passages of *Dialogues* XII. As the dialogue reaches

74. D'Holbach, *Good Sense*, 198.

75. Among the most important of these discussions is Hume's (early) essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," where he distinguishes both the causes and effects of these "two species of false religion" (ESY, X). It is a major theme of his *Natural History of Religion* to contrast polytheism and monotheism, generally to the detriment of monotheism. Similarly, throughout his *History of England* Hume weaves his account with observations showing the considerable differences between the various Christian sects and the way in which each individual sect may vary and change over time.

its conclusion, Philo suggests that the disagreement between the theist and the atheist is really "a mere verbal controversy" and that a reconciliation may be achieved on the basis of some reasonable concessions coming from each side (D, 12.7/ 217–19). The quarrel between these two parties, Philo suggests, is simply about the *degree* to which there is some analogy between the human and divine mind, based on the reasoning provided by the argument from design. The theist maintains that the analogy is "strong" and the atheist (or skeptic) insists that it is weak or "remote." At first Philo reverses his skeptical doubts about this argument and allows that there is a "great analogy" between the works of nature and human productions (D, 12.2–4/ 214–16; and cp. 2.5/ 143). However, before the dust has settled on this concession, Philo performs a double reversal and argues that there is a "vast difference" between them (D, 12.5/ 217). This simply reiterates the point about the weakness of this analogy that Hume had made earlier in his first *Enquiry* (EU, 11.27/ 146). The specific proposition that Philo suggests as a basis for reconciling the two disputing parties, near the end of the dialogue, is "that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence" (D, 12.33/ 227, Hume's emphasis). Even the dullest reader is in a position to recognize that the proposed reconciliation is heavily one-sided and constitutes a complete defeat for Cleanthes's defense of theism.⁷⁶ Apart from anything else, the field is left wide open for other equally probable hypotheses and it strips the conclusion of all significant content and practical force. In the *Enquiry* Hume sums up this situation when he points out that the religious hypothesis, so tamed and restricted, "is both uncertain and useless" (EU, 11.23/ 142).

Although the proposed reconciliation that Philo secures at the end of the *Dialogues* may appear fraudulent and empty, it is not. There is an important subset of participants in this debate who can agree and settle on this final "undefined proposition"—even though it plainly excludes all those (such as Cleanthes) who are in any way or to any degree orthodox

76. It has been suggested that Hume's aim in this context is to reconcile Philo and Cleanthes, where Cleanthes is taken to be a representative of the "moderate party" in the eighteenth-century Scottish context (Penelhum, "Hume's Views on Religion," 324–26). While Cleanthes (and the moderates) may well be more tolerant than the evangelical or "popular" wing of the Church of Scotland (e.g., as represented, arguably, by Demea), he remains firmly committed to the existence of a God with *moral* attributes as well as to the doctrine of a future state (D, 12.24/ 224). Doctrines of this kind are excluded by the terms laid down in the proposed reconciliation arrived at near the end of the *Dialogues*.

theists. The parties who may be reconciled in these terms include (attenuated) Deists, sceptics and (nondogmatic) atheists. All of them are, in the first place, opposed to the pernicious and corrupt influence of “vulgar superstition.” Moreover, although each of them adopts a different position on the theoretical question, and there remain real differences among them in respect of this, all can accept the “undefined proposition,” since its content remains wholly obscure and is largely empty. Most importantly, because the proposition arrived at is so thin and ambiguous in its content, it can, as Philo’s remarks suggest, “afford no influence that affects human life” (D, 12.33/ 227). In other words, the final position settled upon is *inert* and is of no *practical* significance. The position arrived at is not Spinoza’s “true religion” (which Hume/Philo has rejected) but an open-ended *theoretical* conclusion that entirely drains the theoretical issue of any *practical* force, however it may be interpreted by the parties it aims to reconcile.⁷⁷ By this means, Hume, in evident contrast with D’Holbach, firmly *allies* himself with Deists and sceptics (agnostics) while continuing to be equally firm in his opposition to vulgar and pernicious superstition.

Whereas D’Holbach fails to discriminate between sceptics and Deists, on one side, and vulgar superstition on the other, Hume is careful to separate these groups and associates himself with the former. His lack of dogmatism is, to this extent, matched by a practical attitude of acceptance and pluralism, at least with regard to those who oppose superstition. By itself, however, this provides no guidance about how this broad alliance—let us call it the Party of Enlightenment—should respond to the persisting threat of superstition in all its various forms. To answer this practical question Hume, once again, relies on the importance of distinguishing among the various sects and groups who belong to the opposing Party of Superstition. Hume, as we noted, agrees with D’Holbach and rejects the suggestion that morality requires *any* form of religion for its support. He is also in agreement with D’Holbach that *all* forms of superstition (i.e., religion “as it is commonly found”) corrupts and injures both morality and society. They are further agreed that, given the deep roots of religion in our human nature and the human condition, religion will prove very difficult

77. It is worth emphasizing, again, that it is a mistake to suppose that what the parties agree to in this context is “true religion” (i.e., as Hume understands it). The *essence* of true religion rests with its *practical* value and force (i.e., to support morality), whereas the “undefined proposition” that serves as the basis of the reconciliation has no practical force or value of any kind—as Philo (and Hume) point out.

to "eradicate." Where Hume differs from D'Holbach, in respect of this matter, is on the sort of compromises and measures that need to be taken to contain and limit religion in its most pernicious forms. D'Holbach's approach is both uncompromising and unqualified. Hume advocates a different approach.

IV. Subduing Religion: Hume's Modest Pessimism

Among the most important measures we can take to tame and subdue religion are, on Hume's account, the following:⁷⁸

1. We should advance and defend a skeptical philosophy that will discourage the abuse of philosophy by theology (EU, 1 and 11; LFG; and NHR, XI). A philosophy of this kind will serve to promote a more modest view of the limits of human understanding and encourage a more critical attitude to the more absurd and incredible doctrines and practices of religion.
2. Related to the first point, we need a moral philosophy or moral science that is based on an understanding of human nature, not on the unstable and destructive foundations of religion. This will prove to be something of a barrier to the more pernicious and corrupting doctrines and practices of religion (see, e.g., EM, 1 and 9).
3. We need to secure conditions of liberty, which will encourage moderation and oppose the various forms of persecution and intolerance that generally accompany religion (e.g., T, intro 7/xxi; EU, 11.2/132–33; ESY, 40–41; 89). Social conditions of this kind will, by themselves, reduce human misery.
4. Finally, when conditions of liberty are protected and secured, learning and knowledge will be supported and encouraged (ESY, 92; 113–15; 276–78). Where there is greater knowledge and learning we also find that commerce and prosperity tend to flourish (see esp. ESY, 92; 115; 253–80). In these circumstances the population is less vulnerable and prone to fear and ignorance, which are the two principal sources of religion in human nature.

78. The list that follows draws from the discussion in Russell, "Hume's Lucretian Mission"; and Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, Chap. 20.

These are all crucial steps that Hume believes are required and feasible, if we are to control and curtail the troubling dynamics of religion in human society. As we might expect, where the church and the clergy are strong there will be powerful resistance to all of these proposed measures. Progress and hope for humanity depends on finding a way to overcome these religious forces, or at least to hold them in check and push them back. On all these crucial points Hume and D'Holbach are in fundamental agreement.⁷⁹ There remain, nevertheless, some real and significant differences between Hume and D'Holbach in terms of how best to *deliver* on these aims and objectives.

It is for Hume, as has been pointed out, a matter of considerable importance that a sensible and effective policy for dealing with the problem of religion begins with a clear appreciation of the significant *differences* among the various religious sects—each of which has its own peculiar dynamics, causes, and consequences. These variations and differences dictate very different forms of threat and challenge (i.e., as seen from the perspective of the Party of Enlightenment). Although Hume's judgments about these features of the various religious sects also changed and evolved over time, he was evidently more favorably disposed to some sects than others.⁸⁰ His favorable remarks about the Church of England provide a particularly striking example of this. In his (discarded) 1756 Preface to the second volume of his *History of England* Hume praises the Church of England for avoiding the extremes of either the Reformers or the Catholics.⁸¹ In a later volume of his *History*, covering the Tudors, Hume explains that his preference for an established church is based on the consideration that this is a better alternative than having the clergy depend on attracting an audience and market of their own, as this would simply encourage the wildest and most irresponsible doctrines, resulting in social disorder and chaos (HE, III, 136). Siebert nicely sums up Hume's attitude and approach in the following:

79. This is not to deny that D'Holbach, as we noted, has his own tendencies to dogmatism and, to that extent, falls victim to some of the vices of religion that he condemns.

80. A helpful and illuminating discussion and analysis of these matters is presented in Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume*, Chap.2.

81. Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 306–07. Another helpful discussion of Hume's views on the established church is presented in Susato, "Taming 'The Tyranny of Priests'."

An established church becomes an ineffectual church, and thereby serves the state. . . . Hume's recommendation is a travesty of religion, but on his terms it is an ideal. . . . [T]he establishment of a state church can be regarded as an inoculation against the religious disease.⁸²

The crucial point that Siebert is making here is that for Hume an established church is a *useful expedient*, which is hardly evidence that Hume had any latent religious sympathies of some kind. As Hume sees it, it is better to have an established church, under the close control of the state, than have society overrun with warring and fanatical sects of every kind, owing no allegiance to the state or the established order.⁸³

In light of these observations we can agree that there is some truth in the claim that Hume holds that "religion of some sort is both a necessary and a desirable part of society."⁸⁴ This is not, however, because Hume supposes that an established church (e.g., the Church of England) serves to advance or represent "true religion" of any kind—since all such institutions are prime examples of (problematic) superstition. The relevant point is that, given our available options, we may be *better off* keeping religion and the clergy in check by this means. This is the central message of Philo's remarks in *Dialogues* XII (D, 12.21/ 223). Hume's endorsement of an established church is, in any case, far from being either enthusiastic or unqualified. Philo suggests, for example, that the "wiser" policy may be for the civil magistrate to give "indulgence to several sects" and "preserve a very philosophical indifference to all of them." Failing this we must expect "nothing but endless disputes, quarrels, factions, persecutions, and civil commotion" (D, 12.21/ 223). At no point does Hume show an unqualified enthusiasm for an established church and he makes clear that the only attraction of this policy is that it serves as a means of avoiding the *even worse* scenario of encouraging competing religious sects.⁸⁵

82. Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume*, 115. Another analogy that comes to mind is that you may not love cats but may still keep one in order to make sure that your house does not become infested with rats.

83. An interesting and important response to Hume's views on this subject is presented in Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, II, 788–95 [V.i.g].

84. Costello, "In every civilized community," 181–82.

85. In his *History*, in the passage explaining why some preference may be given to the policy of supporting an established church, Hume goes on to point out the dangers of this policy—citing the (unhappy) example of "the Romish church" (HE, III, 136–37).

We may conclude from all this that while Hume offers no simple, unqualified support for an established church, he does allow that, in some circumstances, it may be our best option for controlling and containing pernicious and destructive forms of religion. A position of this kind is entirely consistent with his atheism and his general aversion to *all* forms of religion. Nevertheless, with a qualification of this kind in place, Hume's attitude and approach is different from and more flexible than that which D'Holbach advocates. As Hume understands our predicament, it may be unwise to impose a *blanket* policy of eliminating all forms of religion, since this may result in inflaming the problem rather than containing it.

There is one more "loose end" that needs to be addressed in relation to the differences between Hume and D'Holbach and their practical stances on the subject of religion. Just as D'Holbach fails to make any of the important and necessary distinctions among the various religious sects, he also offers no favorable or kind words in respect of any aspect of religion. His condemnation of religion and all those who act on its behalf is as unqualified as it is severe. In contrast with this, consistent with the importance that Hume attaches to the differences among the religions that we encounter in history and throughout the world, Hume avoids a single-note condemnation of every aspect of religion, church, and clergy.⁸⁶ He points out that just as "no human institution will ever reach perfection," so too "the frailties of our nature mingle themselves with every thing."⁸⁷ In a deleted passage to the final section of the *Dialogues* he returns to the same point. Every human institution and practice is "a mixture of good and ill" (D, 12.22/ 223n). We should not expect, therefore, that superstition is *entirely imperfect* any more than that it is entirely perfect. Given that superstition is "composed of whatever is the most absurd, corrupted, and barbarous of our nature" it is hardly surprising that it is *far* from perfect. To this Hume adds that if there were "any one exception to that mixture of good and ill, which is found in life, this [superstition] might be pronounced

86. An example of Hume's willingness to acknowledge that religion is not *completely* corrupt and evil is to be found in his discussion of the "advantages" and the "inconveniences" of the Church of Rome. Although this is a prime case of an established church that is *not* to be welcomed, Hume allows that it has, nevertheless, several "advantages." According to Hume, the Catholic Church has, for example, "served as a cheque on despotism of kings," it has encouraged the fine arts and good taste, and it has promoted contact and cooperation among nations. Despite all this, Hume is still clear that these advantages "were but a small compensation for its inconveniences" and that "the balance of evil prevailed in the Romish church" (HE, III, 137).

87. Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 307.

thoroughly and entirely ill" (my emphasis). While Hume is careful to avoid D'Holbach's wholly one-sided and bigoted attitude to everything concerning religion, he in no way retreats from his deep and systematic hostility to all that religion involves. It is a *travesty* of his outlook to present him as taking an "impartial" or "balanced" position between religion and its critics. Hume is a *strong partisan* of the critical side—albeit neither a foolish nor a bigoted one.⁸⁸

None of the preceding concessions, in relation to religion, serve to show that Hume in any way wavered in his atheistic commitments or attitudes. Hume sides, decisively, with the Party of Enlightenment against the Party of Superstition—which is the divide that is, as he sees it, of real *practical* importance and significance. He stands firmly and steadily with D'Holbach in his opposition to religion in *all* its forms—even though circumstances may require us to accept and accommodate religion in some of its *less* pernicious forms in order to prevent something *much worse*. No form of religion—not even the (philosophical and rational) form "true religion" proposed by Spinoza—is to be recommended as either a reliable prop for morality or an effective sop for the vulgar. Whatever concessions and accommodations to religion Hume is willing to make, they are motivated entirely by his concern that we give priority to weakening and removing the even more destructive and harmful forms of religion that we inevitably and unavoidably confront.

The differences that we have found between Hume and Spinoza and Hume and D'Holbach have, arguably, a deeper, common source. Whatever their differences, the atheism that both Spinoza and D'Holbach defend involves an essentially *optimistic* outlook. In the case of Spinoza this is expressed in terms of his confidence that there is an available form of "true religion," stripped of all ambitions to truth or knowledge, that can, nevertheless, provide a path to a state of "blessedness" or "salvation" that is open to *everyone*—not just to the philosopher or the sage.⁸⁹ Neither Hume nor D'Holbach share this form of optimism. D'Holbach, however, displays his own form of strong optimism with respect to his hopes and

88. It is an odd and implausible assumption of some commentators on Hume's philosophy that unless an atheist is *both dogmatic and bigoted* they cannot be entirely committed to or sincere in their atheist principles. Hume was neither dogmatic nor bigoted in his atheism. This certainly puts him at some distance from D'Holbach, who is undeniably more exposed to these charges.

89. Spinoza, *The Theological–Political Treatise*, 5.40–46, 14.10, 14.27, 15.25–27, 15.45 [67–68, 159, 162, 169, 172].

expectations for a future state of “enlightenment,” free of all religion, that will secure continual progress in the direction of peace and happiness for all mankind.⁹⁰ Religion, according to D’Holbach, is the principal obstacle holding back humankind and preventing our progress to this happy state of affairs. There is every reason to believe that Hume did not share an optimism of this kind.⁹¹ On the contrary, to the extent that D’Holbach encourages an outlook of this kind, it is one that Hume, in any number of contexts, regards with considerable skepticism.⁹² In his 1756 (discarded) preface to the second volume of his *History*, Hume makes very clear that all aspirations to perfection or some ideal condition or state of affairs is a sign of “enthusiasm,” to which the religious are especially vulnerable.⁹³ What drives this is a psychological state of “unaccountable elevation and presumption, arising from prosperous success, from luxuriant health, from strong spirits, or from a bold and confident disposition. . . . Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of Enthusiasm” (ESY, 74). There is no reason to assume that atheists are immune from these “flights of fancy” (ESY, 74), and that this might well include D’Holbach and other (militant) atheists of a similar cast of mind.⁹⁴ The practical lesson that Hume would draw from all this is that atheism should not aim to cater to or satisfy (illusory) aspirations and hopes of this kind. A sensible atheism must be constructed and put into practice around a more modest and more pessimistic assessment of our options and possibilities in human life.

How *deep*, then, is Hume’s pessimism? In order to gauge this accurately we need to separate the following claims and issues.

90. D’Holbach, *Good Sense*, 9, 232, 243–45.

91. See, in particular, his comments to Turgot in a letter written in 1768 [LET, 2: 180]: “I know you are one of those, who entertain the agreeable and laudable, if not too sanguine hope, that human Society is capable of perpetual Progress towards Perfection, that the Encrease of Knowledge will still prove favourable to good Government, and that since the discovery of printing we need no longer Dread the usual Returns of Barbarism and ignorance. . . .” (Turgot was, of course, one of those who belonged to D’Holbach’s circle or “coterie.”)

92. This attitude is, for example, apparent in his essays “The Epicurean” and “The Stoic,” where the general aspiration to a state of “perfection”—whether for the sage or society—is presented as an unattainable fantasy. See also “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth.”

93. Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 306–07.

94. Marx’s brand of materialist atheism, with its delusional aspirations to a perfect society that has overcome all conflict and internal struggle, exhibit these symptoms in particularly stark form.

1. The human condition is one of considerable and constant misery and suffering (see, e.g., D, X, XI). While there is a mixture of misery and happiness in this world, no life is entirely without both and, for many (in our present condition), misery predominates.
2. Religion, in its various forms, is a significant source of misery and suffering. Although it also combines good and evil features and qualities, in all of its familiar forms the balance falls heavily on the side of evil.
3. Curbing and reducing the role and influence of religion in human life will contribute significantly to human happiness and well-being.
4. There are many other sources of misery and evil in the world apart from religion and they will continue to operate even in its absence. Religion is far from the sole source of human misery and it should itself be understood as an (imperfect) effort to cope with suffering and misery in human life. Religion, in this sense, responds to a real human need.
5. The propensity to religion is so rooted in our nature and circumstances that we cannot reasonably expect to *entirely* escape it. We must reconcile ourselves to always having to deal with religion in some form or other—including dangerous and pernicious forms.
6. It is a mistake to suppose that we can arrive at or achieve a state of affairs where we will successfully transcend or overcome *all* suffering and misery in this world or in our individual lives. Human life lends itself to no such condition or state and it is an illusion to seek perfect happiness or tranquility of any kind. Although religion is particularly prone to such illusory aims and ends, this vulnerability is also apparent in some forms of atheism.
7. Human life is not one of undiluted or uncompensated suffering and misery. We may entertain reasonable hopes, as individuals and collectively, to *improve* our condition and secure ends that make life worth living and that are of value to us.

I take Hume to be committed to all seven of these claims. The last claim suggests that he should not be understood as either a nihilist or an extreme pessimist of any kind. The sixth claim suggests that it would also be a mistake to take him to endorse any form of extreme optimism. The first five claims suggest that Hume is not only a modest pessimist with respect to the human condition (claims 1 and 4), but that he is a modest pessimist with respect to religion in particular (claims 2 and 5). Hume's endorsement of modest pessimism with respect to religion is not, however, incompatible with him holding that we can successfully improve and

ameliorate the human condition and do a *great deal* to reduce human suffering (claims 3 and 7). This includes taking effective steps to curb and control religion in its most pernicious forms. Hume's modest pessimism about religion is, in this way, complemented by a modest optimism. From Hume's perspective, both Spinoza and D'Holbach are inclined to modes of extreme optimism in respect of religion (i.e., they are both reluctant to accept claim 6, although for different reasons). They are both disposed to providing an *alternative basis* for extreme optimism, of the kind that (false) religion purports to provide. Approaches of this kind, as Hume sees it, manifest the same vulnerabilities and vices that are commonly found in the religious temperament. Atheism is better off without any of this. A sensible atheism is, therefore, best understood as a mixture of modest pessimism and modest optimism.⁹⁵

V. Hume and the "New Atheism" *(The Contemporary Debate)*

What, if any, relevance does this debate among three prominent old atheists about the practical value of religion have for the contemporary discussion of these matters? Much of the contemporary debate has swirled around the contributions of "New Atheism." The principal representatives of New Atheism are its "four horsemen": Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.⁹⁶ Although their arguments and views (and style) vary greatly, there are certain core themes that their critics have identified as bringing them together into one cluster.

95. It may be noted that there is, on this analysis, no sharp or definitive boundary to be drawn between extreme and modest pessimism (or between extreme and modest optimism)—they may bleed into each other as a matter of degree. D'Holbach's metaphysical attitude, depending on how he is read, operates along this unstable boundary (in contrast with Marx, who clearly belongs at the extreme end of optimism). The form of sensible, practical atheism that Hume defends insists that we should be just as vigilant and vigorous in rooting out and rejecting these optimistic "flights of fancy" as they arise in forms of atheism as when we are in respect of religious systems and outlooks. It is here that we find the greatest distance between Hume and both Spinoza and d'Holbach.

96. See, in particular, Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*; Harris, *The End of Faith*; and Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*. A compendium of their views is presented in Dawkins, et al., *Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens: The Four Horsemen*. A review of their main ideas and of the debate that they have generated is provided in Stenger, *The New Atheism*.

Significantly, these critics include other atheists and skeptics.⁹⁷ For our present purposes, I want simply to identify the following (overlapping) core features that these critics object to.

1. The stance adopted by the New Atheists, it is said, is aggressive and militant in a manner that is similar to their fundamentalist religious opponents. This includes the concern that they (indiscriminately) *demonize* their opponents—the religious.
2. The intellectual stance of the New Atheism is perceived as dogmatic and close-minded. This is manifest, critics say, in their excessive confidence in their assertions and a failure to engage with opposing views and arguments in a respectful and informed manner.
3. Another feature of the New Atheism that critics find objectionable is its “scientism.” This is taken to involve an extreme emphasis on the importance and value of science as a basis for understanding our human situation and what is significant and worthwhile in human life.
4. The New Atheists are also disposed, critics claim, to an excessive optimism about what a society free of religion is capable of. They have, it is said, unwisely encouraged the view that without religion serving as an obstacle to knowledge and scientific progress, we can hope for a world that will satisfy and secure all our fundamental human needs and interests. In this respect they fail to acknowledge the more difficult and troubling aspects of human life that religion serves as a response to.⁹⁸
5. Finally, the New Atheists are widely accused of failing to distinguish adequately among the various religious groups and sects they criticize and ridicule. They also fail to acknowledge properly the many valuable and significant contributions and admirable qualities of religion and those who have acted in its name.

97. E.g., Ruse, “Why I Think the New Atheists Are a Bloody Disaster”; Nagel, “Dawkins and Atheism”; Kaufman, “New Atheism and Its Critics.”

98. Williams expresses this objection in the following forceful terms: “Humanism in the sense of militant atheism encounters an immediate and very obvious paradox. Its specialty lies not just in being atheist—there are all sorts of ways of being that—but in its faith in humanity to flourish without religion. . . . The general idea is that if the last remnants of religion could be abolished, humankind would be set free and would do a great deal better. But the outlook is stuck with the fact that on its own submission this evil, corrupting, and pervasive thing, religion, is itself a *human* invention. . . . So humanists in this atheist sense should ask themselves: if humanity has invented something as awful as they take religion to be, what should that tell them about humanity? In particular, can humanity really be expected to do much better without it?” (Williams, “The Human Prejudice,” 135).

While it is not my particular concern in this context to assess the accuracy or justice of these various criticisms, this list does accurately represent how the critics of New Atheism understand its weaknesses and shortcomings.⁹⁹

Both the New Atheists and their critics (religious or not) tend to view these issues in a rather ahistorical manner. There are two important consequences of this. One is that the variations and disagreements among atheists are not properly acknowledged. Another is that both sides of this debate—atheist or religious—lack forms of self-criticism that a historical perspective encourages and requires. There is an important sense in which both religion and atheism are not simply static ideologies that stand opposite from each other but are, rather, living and evolving movements, with their accompanying ideologies, that can only be understood and assessed, in *practical* terms, from a historical perspective. This raises the question of how old and new atheism stand in relation to each other?

The first observation to make is that, whatever our perspective or commitments, the New Atheism shares a great deal with D’Holbach’s militant atheism.¹⁰⁰ Both the theoretical and practical features of their respective positions are very similar. It may be argued that the eliminativist agenda is, perhaps, even more heavily pronounced in the views and works of the New Atheists. Second, given that there is clearly *some* distance between Hume and d’Holbach, we should expect to find a similar set of gaps between Hume and the New Atheism. This is manifest not only in the theoretical aspect, where Hume’s stance is obviously less dogmatic, but also in the practical dimension, where Hume’s modest pessimism serves as a check on the more optimistic features of the eliminativist program that the New Atheists advance.

One of the most interesting and challenging contributions to the current debate about New Atheism has come from Philip Kitcher. Kitcher describes himself as a “secular humanist” but he is troubled by what he

99. I would point out, however, that even if we agree that these criticisms have *some* real foundation and merit, they are not made credible when they come from religious apologists of various stripes who are egregiously guilty of displaying great sensitivity to these concerns in relation to atheism, while showing little or no interest or knowledge of the *far worse* practices and doctrines of religious apologists and functionaries, not only in the past but also in present times. Suffice it to say that none of the New Atheists cited in any way advocate violence or coercion against their religious opponents—however harsh, sweeping, and severe their *commentary* on religion may be.

100. This is noted, for example, by Gottlieb, “Atheists with Attitude,” who presents D’Holbach as laying the way for “today’s militant atheists.” According to Gottlieb, although Hume had “no trace of religion,” he “couldn’t have been more different from today’s militant atheists.”

regards as the aggressive and bombastic stance adopted by New Atheism. Although Kitcher agrees with the New Atheists that most of the religious doctrines concerning the existence of a transcendent realm are "thoroughly false,"¹⁰¹ he cannot accept the "now dominant atheist idea that religion is noxious rubbish to be buried as deeply, as thoroughly, and as quickly as possible."¹⁰² The essence of Kitcher's critique is that the New Atheists are "in the firm grip" of a particular model of religion—"the belief model." The belief model takes religion to consist of a set of doctrines about the "transcendent" entities and that to be committed to a particular religion is to believe these doctrines.¹⁰³ The basic question that arises from the belief model is whether or not the beliefs and doctrines in question are *true*. If they are not, then the religion and its doctrines lack any relevant justification or legitimacy.

While the belief model may be one way to think about religion—especially when dealing with fundamentalists—it is not, Kitcher argues, the *only* conception of religion that we might form. There is an alternative model that frames the question of religion, and our options in respect of it, in very different terms. Instead of beginning with the idea of belief in a transcendental being of some kind, the alternative model begins with the concept of an *orientation*.

A person's orientation identifies particular goals as valuable, not only with respect to his own life but beyond the compass of that life. . . . I am interested in considering forms of religious life for which orientation is primary.¹⁰⁴

The orientation model suggests a different way of understanding religion as "refined religion."

At the core of religion, then, is not a body of doctrine, a collection of descriptions of the transcendent, but a commitment to values that are external to (independent of) the believer, and indeed to all human beings. Doctrine only enters in the guise of metaphors

101. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 6, 15, 24, 63, 124.

102. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, xii, 2–3.

103. Kitcher, "Militant Modern Atheism," 3.

104. Kitcher, "Militant Modern Atheism," 4.

and stories, apt for conveying the most fundamental values and for guiding the devout toward realizing them.¹⁰⁵

From the perspective of the orientation model, “religious doctrines held without compelling evidence” may still be “legitimate.” Their legitimacy depends not on their epistemic credentials or reasonableness (e.g., as Hume defines it) but on their effectiveness in sustaining and supporting values that are important to us. “The legitimacy at stake,” says Kitcher, “is ethical.”¹⁰⁶

It is evident, I suggest, that Kitcher’s “orientation model,” and the accompanying distinction that he draws between it and the “belief model” of religion, conveys the whole essence of Spinoza’s doctrine of “true religion” and the related distinction between “two domains.”¹⁰⁷ The *value* of religion, from this perspective, is that it fills a void that remains open for secular humanism and it helps us deal effectively with issues of “orientation” in our own lives. It is Kitcher’s thesis that secular humanism leaves many with an “impoverished form of human existence” and a sense of disenchantment with the world.¹⁰⁸ A religious orientation, with its commitment to “transcendence” of some kind, can fill this void (*Life after Faith*, 87–88). When religion is understood as *refined* religion, with primacy given to our inescapable need for an orientation to ethical values rather than true and reasonable doctrines, it can be regarded as an *ally* of secular humanism.¹⁰⁹ All this is consistent, Kitcher continues, with secular humanists envisaging “a broadly progressive future, not one in which religion disappears, but one in which it metamorphizes into something else . . . refined religion is a way station, not the final destination.”¹¹⁰ In this way, while “soft atheism”¹¹¹ allows that “militant modern atheism is entirely correct in its assault on those types of religious life that fit the belief

105. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 64.

106. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 16–18.

107. Both of these accounts—Kitcher’s and Spinoza’s—are also similar in important respects to Gould’s “Nonoverlapping magisteria,” which has been the source of further debate and controversy in relation to New Atheism. See Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria.” I will not, however, pursue the significance of this in this chapter.

108. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 2.

109. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 93.

110. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 94; and cp. 63–64, 67.

111. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 23–24, 63.

model,"¹¹² it has no sympathy with the eliminativist program. Religion should not be viewed "as an undifferentiated mass of rubbish, to be carted away as thoroughly and as speedily as possible."¹¹³ This is the very same conclusion that Spinoza reached in his *The Theological–Political Treatise* three centuries before, when he advanced his account of "true religion."¹¹⁴

The obvious parallels between D'Holbach's "militant atheism" and the views of the New Atheists make it clear enough how Hume's views stand in relation to the New Atheism—and this requires no further elaboration. A few brief remarks are called for, however, in relation to the way that Hume might respond to Kitcher's "soft atheism." Hume would, I suggest, reject soft atheism for the same general reason that he rejected Spinoza's "true religion." While it may be admirable, it is ineffective and fails to deal with the real challenges that we face in respect of this matter. From a Humean perspective the same basic dilemma presents itself. Religion, as Hume understands it, must take one of two forms. Either it can be seen in the radically reduced terms that Philo describes at the end of the *Dialogues*, in which case it not only lacks interesting content, it also lacks any *practical* significance or value. In Kitcher's terminology, religion of this thin or reduced kind fits the belief model but is entirely lacking force or value as a form of (religious) orientation. Alternatively, religion can retain enough substance and content, in relation to "transcendent existence" of some kind, that it can serve as an effective basis for "orientation" in human life. Any such commitments, however, as Kitcher agrees, are a tissue of falsehoods. Whereas Kitcher (and Spinoza) maintain that we can still appreciate the *value and worth* of the orientation, without denying that it is wholly unreasonable, considered as a set of beliefs aiming at literal truth, Hume is highly skeptical about this. For Hume this is an unstable and unconvincing case of trying to have our religious cake and eat it too.

The operating assumption behind the "two domain" doctrine, as advanced by Spinoza and Kitcher, is that the orientation and practical value of religious belief can be stripped away from its metaphysical moorings at

112. Kitcher, "Militant Modern Atheism," 6.

113. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 2–3.

114. Although Kitcher presents himself as firmly in the atheist camp, and Willis presents himself as situated well outside of it (Willis, *Toward a Humean True Religion*, Chap. 5, esp. 184–85), there is, nevertheless, *considerable* affinity between their respective views. Certainly Willis's account of "true religion," with its emphasis on the *practical* value of religion, comes much closer to Spinoza's and Kitcher's outlook than it does to Hume's (although Willis seems to be unaware of this).

little or no cost to its *effectiveness*. It is this assumption that Hume is skeptical about and regards as (wildly) optimistic. This problem presents itself in terms of the issue of *transparency*. According to this view, we are invited to suppose that the general public (i.e., the vulgar, the masses, etc.) need to adopt some set of religious beliefs in order to “orient” their (ethical) lives. On one interpretation, these religious followers are *aware* that their beliefs are merely useful “myths” and that they lack any real foundation beyond their rhetorical and instrumental force. On another interpretation, this situation is not transparent to the religious adherent and while (per hypothesis, according to soft atheism) their beliefs are literally false, they do not know or believe this.¹¹⁵ The fundamental problem for this retentionist proposal is that if the ordinary religious believer is made *aware* of their situation, this will erode their ethical confidence and render their religious beliefs, such as they are, significantly less effective in practice—if they have any effect at all. On the other hand, if the religiously oriented are *unaware* of the false and illusory nature of their beliefs (i.e., that they are really just “myths”), then, as Hume sees it, they will still be prone to the various forms of ignorance and evil that render the belief model so unattractive in the first place. The fact that they take their beliefs to actually describe how things are in the world—to reveal its real metaphysical structure—is exactly what results in the pernicious dynamics of superstition. The price of their beliefs being instrumentally effective and having real practical traction in their lives is, therefore, that the beliefs are themselves corrupting and predominantly destructive—generally speaking, such beliefs are no longer benign.¹¹⁶

115. Kitcher distinguishes several different positions that a person may take with respect to the beliefs or “doctrinal sentences” involved in their religious orientation. Some are “mythically self-conscious” and “clearly disavow any interpretation of the statements that implies substantive doctrine about transparent entities.” Others are “doctrinally entangled,” take their beliefs to function “as a description of aspects of the universe.” There is another group that falls between these two: the “doctrinally-indefinite” think of religious language as functioning like great poetry, “in ways that cannot be captured in the preferred modes of speech of their opponents” (“*Militant Modern Atheism*,” 5–6). However these distinctions may be further articulated and interpreted, the fact remains that with respect to the existence of transcendent beings the religious person is either aware or unaware that their beliefs are *false*, as judged by reliable epistemic standards (i.e., a point that Kitcher grants: *Life after Faith*, 15).

116. Kitcher’s (and Spinoza’s) account of the “common man” retaining religious beliefs in the face of the philosopher who knows that these beliefs are false but judges them to be, nevertheless, ethically useful, raises the specter of what Bernard Williams has described as “Government House” morality—where there are two classes of people: those in the know and those who are not. As Williams suggests, this creates “a deeply uneasy gap” between

The "two domain" doctrine that Spinoza and Kitcher advocate is intended to provide a path for the masses that will remove the "darkness" and sense of disenchantment that may prevail in their lives.¹¹⁷ Understood this way, this is an admirable ideal. It is, nevertheless, as Hume sees it, a flawed and ineffective ideal. Hume would, no doubt, readily acknowledge that for many, if not most people in this world (in contrast with "closeted intellectuals"),¹¹⁸ everyday life can be bleak and provides little hope or comfort. Religion is a response to this *real need*—much as quack cures are a response to real medical need (where, often, there is none to be had). In this case, however, the cure being offered—religion of some kind—is either wholly ineffective or liable to be worse than the disease. It may also be argued that "the sense of loss" or disenchantment is itself a product of illusory aspirations for a state of salvation or bliss that religion encourages. In the absence of *this*, the religious believer is prone to a feeling of despair and extreme pessimism. What a sensible atheism should aim at, on this view, is a willingness to affirm the world as we find it—which is a *mixture* of good and evil. One way to defeat the sense of hopelessness and despair is to *purge* ourselves of the optimistic ends that religion holds out for us as part of our "orientation." This stance is neither complacent, nor entirely comfortable—but it is more *truthful* than the religious alternative. The relevance of Hume's practical atheism for the contemporary debate, we may conclude, is that it suggests a way between Kitcher's "soft atheism" and the much harder alternative that the school of New Atheism has served up. Suffice it to say that, judged by these standards, Hume's atheism remains hard enough.

VI. *Good Reasoners or Good Citizens?*

In the first *Enquiry*, in the context of his critical discussion of "the religious hypothesis" and the practical consequences of religion and atheism for morality, Hume considers the objection that the Epicurean view, which denies "a divine existence, and consequently a providence and a future state," has the effect of weakening morality and destabilizing society (EU,

rulers and the ruled (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 120). It is arguable that this is no longer a viable option for a modern society.

117. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 2, 125–26, 142.

118. Kitcher, *Life after Faith*, 126.

12.4/ 133–34). Near the end of this discussion the objection is presented that while atheists may be “good reasoners” it does not follow that they are “good citizens” (EU, 12.28/ 147). It is this core issue that he returns to in the final, opaque section of his *Dialogues*. The discussion presented in this chapter has proceeded from the position that Hume took atheists to be perfectly “good reasoners.” The religious hypothesis has little or nothing to be said for it from a rational or epistemic point of view. With respect to the question of if and how this can be reconciled with atheists being “good citizens,” his answer is more nuanced and qualified. While religion has little to be said in its favor, either in terms of reason or ethics, we have to deal with human nature and the human condition as we find it.

A crude policy of “eradicating” all religion may well prove not only difficult to achieve but counterproductive. It is excessively optimistic to suppose that a happy condition awaits us in a religion-free society.¹¹⁹ It is also excessively optimistic to suppose that there is some available form of benign and humane religion that can serve the needs and hopes of the masses, without corrupting or disappointing them. A sensible, practical atheism will avoid both these extremes—elimination or retention. That does not, however, leave us in a condition of extreme pessimism, unable to cope with life or without hope for our future. A sensible, practical atheism will accept and reconcile itself to a mixture of moderate pessimism and moderate optimism, whereby we may aim to curb and contain the worst excesses of religion and accept human beings and human life as we find it.¹²⁰

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119. Hume laid bare his own eliminativist ambitions when he was dying and he jocularly remarked to close friend Adam Smith that he had hoped that if he lived a few years longer he might “have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition” (LET, 2:451). On this episode, see also Mossner, *Life of Hume*, Chap. 39. Suffice it to say that the fact that Hume was obviously *joking* in this situation is indicative of his moderate pessimism, since he plainly saw no real prospect of achieving this end.

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