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THE ROLE OF THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION IN HUME'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Abstract: I argue that Hume's naturalistic explanation of religious belief in the Natural History of Religion has significant epistemic consequences. While he argues in the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (and in other works) that belief in God is not justified on the basis of testimony or philosophical argument, this is not enough to show that religious belief is not warranted. In the Natural History, Hume provides a genetic explanation for religious belief. I contend that the explanation of religious belief in the Natural History, given Hume's conclusions in his other works, provides grounds to reject religious belief. Thus, I conclude that the Natural History plays an important role in Hume's overall critique of religion insofar as it is a necessary component in Hume's arsenal against the warrant of religious belief.

Keywords: Hume, Natural History of Religion, Religion, Religious Belief, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Natural Belief, Treatise Of Human Nature, Warrant, Propensity, Anthropomorphize, Adulate, Monotheism, Polytheism

1. Introduction¹

Hume opens the Natural History of Religion:

As every enquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature (NHR Introduction.1; 134).

Hume's works on religion—the *Natural History* and the *Dialogues*-are often interpreted as two separate projects—the *Dialogues* an investigation

References to *A Treatise of Human Nature* are to the Clarendon edition (Hume 2000b), abbreviated *T* in the text and cited by book, part, section, paragraph number, followed by the page number from the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition (Hume 1978). For example (*T* 2.3.9.3; 438). References to *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are to the Gaskin edition (Hume 1993), abbreviated *DNR* in the text and cited by the section number, followed by the page number from the Kemp Smith edition (Hume 1947). For example (*DNR* X; 95; 193). References to the *Natural History of Religion* are from the Clarendon edition (Hume 2007), abbreviated *NHR* in the text and cited by section and paragraph number, followed by the page number from the Gaskin edition (Hume 1993). For example (*NHR* 1.3; 135). References to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* are to the Clarendon edition (Hume 2000a) and cited by section, part, and paragraph number. For example, (EHU 4.1.5).

of religion's foundation in reason; the *Natural History* an investigation of religion's origin in human nature. However, I argue that these two works contribute to a unified epistemological project. Hume intends the explanation he provides in the *Natural History* to have negative epistemic consequences insofar as it shows that religious belief—be it polytheistic or monotheistic—is not a "natural belief".² Taken in conjunction with his arguments in *Dialogues* and in some of his other texts, it justifies rejecting_religious belief. Thus, the *Natural History* plays an indispensable role in Hume's critique of the epistemic status of religious belief.

In Section 2, I briefly recap the conclusions of Hume's other works on religion, including the essay "Of Miracles" and the *Dialogues*. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that the result of these taken together is that, according to Hume, religious belief is not justified by testimony or cogent philosophical argument.³ In Section 3, I note that given a naturalistic interpretation of Hume's epistemology, the fact that religious belief is not justified on the basis of philosophical argument is not enough to show that religious belief should be rejected—it may be a natural belief and therefore enjoy positive epistemic status. In order to determine whether religious belief is a natural belief, we must investigate its genesis, determining whether the propensities responsible

By arguing that Hume has an epistemic goal in the Natural History, I do not intend to deny that Hume has other goals. For example, Mark Webb argues that Hume's goal in the Natural History is to convince his audience to abandon traditional Christian practice; in particular, he contends that the arguments in the Natural History purport to show the moral inferiority of popular religion, in part by showing that polytheism is morally preferable to monotheism (Webb (1991) 150ff). Webb's account not only coheres with what Hume has to say in his other discussions of religion—in particular, with several of Philo's comments in Dialogues part XII—but also presents an excellent interpretation of parts IX through XV of the Natural History. Critiquing the effect on morality caused by popular religion was certainly important to Hume. So, while I agree that the moral critique plays an important role in Hume's goals in the Natural History, I disagree with Webb's claim that it "is principally a moral critique aimed at severing allegiance to traditional religion" (Webb (1991) 149, my emphasis). Webb's interpretation does not do justice to Hume's aims in sections I-VIII of the Natural History. He claims that Hume's account of the causes of religious belief is merely the means to an end—the end of severing allegiance to traditional religious practice: "while the work purports to be a natural history of religious beliefs and practices, suggesting something of a 'scientific' examination of a 'natural' phenomenon, that feature of the work clearly is intended by Hume to facilitate his moral critique of traditional religious belief" (Webb (1991) 145). But I will argue that this is not the case: Hume's explanation of the origin of religious belief has important epistemic consequences. While I do agree that Hume's moral critique of religious belief is an important aspect of the Natural History, Hume's account of the causal origin of religious belief is not merely in the service of this goal.

³ Hume's focus in these texts is centered on refuting arguments for monotheism (and Christianity in particular), as he mostly takes for granted the falsity of polytheism. However, much of what he says would be applicable to arguments or testimony in favor of robust polytheism. I discuss Hume's attitude toward polytheism in more detail in my "Hume on the Epistemic Superiority of Polytheism to Monotheism" (unpublished manuscript).

for the belief are similar to custom or more like those that Hume contrasts negatively with custom. In Section 4, I examine the primary psychological principles responsible for religious belief and argue that Hume's explanation of religious belief has negative epistemic consequences. Not only is religious belief not natural, but given its causes, we have reason to reject it. In Section 5, I conclude that the *Natural History* plays a crucial role in Hume's overall critique of religious belief.

2. Hume's Conclusions in The Dialogues and Other Works

The *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, along with other relevant texts, such as the essay "Of Miracles" (*EHU* 10), provide a scathing critique of the justification of religious belief. While a full survey of Hume's other works is beyond the scope of this paper, I will summarize the highlights below.

In the essay "Of Miracles", Hume argues that religious belief cannot be justified by testimonial evidence. He concludes, "we may establish as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion" (EHU 10.2.35).

In the essay "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State", Hume denies the justification for belief in "a providence...and supreme governor of the world, who guides the course of events, and punishes the virtuous with honor and success..." (EHU 11.20) on the grounds that this inference is not warranted on the basis of an inference from known effects to causes, but rather a fallacious inference ("a gross sophism" (EHU 11.20)) from an assumed cause (a benevolent deity) to expected effects.

In the *Enquiry* as well as in the *Treatise*, Hume rejects all *a priori* arguments in support of "matters of fact"—truths the negations of which are conceivable.⁴ For Hume, *a priori* arguments for God's existence are rejected because the "matter of fact" (that God exists) is not demonstrable.⁵ Hume reiterates this position in the *Dialogues*:

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a "matter of fact", or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it (DNR IX; 91; 189).

⁴ See EHU 4.1.6ff. and also T 1.3.1.1ff.; 69ff.

Moreover, in the *Treatise*, Hume implicitly rejects the traditional ontological argument insofar as he argues existence is not a property or predicate (T 1.2.6.3–5; 66–67).

Hume devotes an entire work—the *Dialogues*—to the argument from design—one of the two traditional *a posteriori* arguments for God's existence.⁶ The *Dialogues* provides numerous forceful objections against the *a posteriori* argument from design: e.g., that the analogy between the universe and a machine is weak (DNR II); that the argument (at best) allows us to infer an imperfect deity (DNR V), and would also justify us in inferring a multitude of deities (DNR V); that the analogical argument does not establish that the principle governing order is intelligence, rather than vegetation or generation (DNR VII); and that there are alternative (Epicurean and proto-Darwinian) explanations of the order found in the universe (*DNR* VIII). The *Dialogues*, as a whole, conclude that belief in God cannot be justified by the *a posteriori* argument from design.⁷

For the purposes of this paper, I will operate on the assumption that, taken together, Hume's arguments against religious belief found in the *Dialogues* (and other texts besides the *Natural History*) show that it cannot be justified on the basis of testimony, or on *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument.

3. Natural Belief and the Explanation of False, Meaningless, or Unjustified Beliefs

For Hume the naturalist, the fact that religious belief is not justified by philosophical argument is not enough to show that it should be rejected. After all, Hume showed that beliefs based on induction are not justified by argument but still have positive epistemic status. A predominant view among naturalist interpreters of Hume suggests that he holds that some beliefs—

⁶ Hume also argues against the cosmological argument in Part IX of the *Dialogues*.

The most pressing challenge to this interpretation is the problem of "Philo's Reversal" in Dialogues XII. J.C.A. Gaskin, for example, argues that "he [Philo] concedes that belief in a designer is after all a rational belief" (Gaskin 1988, 138), and concludes that Hume therefore endorses "attenuated deism": the view that the argument from design justifies the belief in a designer of the universe who possesses "the power of an agent," and who bears 'some remote analogy to human intelligence," but "cannot be known to have any moral attributes" (Gaskin (1988) 167). Other commentators (e.g., Andre, Holley, Immerwahr) are sympathetic to this view, though some go on to argue that all things considered, Hume does not endorse theism. Still other commentators (Falkenstein, Garrett, Black and Gressis, Willis, etc.) argue that something a bit more robust—"genuine," "true," or "philosophical theism" is warranted, though the details vary. I argue against "genuine theism" views, offering an alternative interpretation of Philo's Reversal in my "Philo's Reversal and Hume on Belief" (unpublished manuscript) where I conclude that the supposed belief Philo endorses is so qualified and so void of content (meaningless)—that it does not constitute a belief according to Hume's understanding of that term. Russell 2008 and Lemmens 2012 argue for a similar conclusion. Kraal 2013 argues for a related conclusion, claiming that Dialogues X shows that moral terms applied to God are meaningless. Holden 2010 also argues for a related conclusion--that in Hume's view no first cause could possibly have moral attributes, and the existence of a first cause would not have any implications for human behavior).

natural beliefs— are warranted⁸ by features of the belief-forming mechanisms that produce them, and that he would endorse a naturalistic theory of warrant—perhaps reliabilism, or a proper function theory—to sustain this position.⁹ Here, I take it for granted that there are natural beliefs, and that beliefs based on induction are among them. Given this broad interpretive framework, religious belief, some argue, is yet another Humean natural belief—like induction, warranted in virtue of the mechanisms that cause it.¹⁰

It should be noted, however, that Hume notes that not all beliefs based on custom are natural beliefs, insofar as some lack warrant, based on certain circumstances that may occur in the belief-forming process: when the objects are not perfectly resembling or constantly conjoined, when a counterexample in experience happened in the distant past but confirming experiences happened more recently, and when we rely on general rules (T 1.3.13 1–9; 143–147). This problem, Hume claims, can be corrected by ensuring adherence to several "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" such as ensuring that the cause and effect are contiguous in space and time, with the cause being prior to the effect, only endorsing the causal claim when cause and effect are constantly conjoined, etc. (T 1.3.15; 173–176).

Like beliefs based on induction, religious belief is widespread. Hume admits that belief in "invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages" (NHR Introduction.1; 134). He argues in the *Natural History* that religious belief, like inductive belief, is the result of several natural propensities of the imagination. But having natural causes does not guarantee that a belief is a natural belief (in the technical sense) since every belief has a natural cause. Just because Hume provides a naturalistic explanation of a belief does not entail that it is a natural belief.

In the *Treatise*, Hume frequently provides causal explanations of unjustified, false, or meaningless beliefs, often after pointing out or arguing for a defect in the justification or content of the belief. This is not surprising, since once he has shown that a belief is defective, certain questions arise: Why do people believe what is obviously false? If the belief is not justified

⁸ While commentators differ on how to describe beliefs that possess positive epistemic status, I will call them *warranted*, following Plantinga who introduced the term as a "name for that property—or better, *quantity*—enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief" (Plantinga (2000) xi).

⁹ The term natural belief was coined by Kemp Smith in his "The Naturalism of Hume I and II," (Kemp Smith 1905 a and b) and elaborated upon in his *The Philosophy of David Hume* (Kemp Smith 1941). Some other commentators who hold this view include: Arnold 1983, Beauchamp & Mappes 1975, Beauchamp & Rosenberg 1981, Broughton 1983, Connon 1976, Craig 1987, Fogelin 1985, Lenz 1958, Loeb 2002, Schmitt 1992, Spector 2003, Winters 1979, and Wolterstorff 1996.

¹⁰ See Butler 1960, Costelloe 2004, Harris 1987, Hurlbutt 1985, Logan 1992, 1993 and 1996, Noxon 1995, Penelhum 1979 (though he changes his view in Penelhum 1983), Pike 1970, Prado 1981, Reich 1998, and Tweyman 1986.

by evidence or argument, on what basis do people hold the belief? Because Hume's project is to understand human nature, he is interested in answering these questions.

For example, he explains the source of the vulgar belief in external existence, which is not justified by the senses or reason (T 1.4.2.3–14; 188–193). Belief in body is partly caused by the propensity to ascribe identity to related objects (T 1.4.2.24, 31–35; 199, 202–204). In both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, immediately following Hume's skeptical attack on the justification of inductive beliefs, he provides a naturalistic explanation for them (T 1.3.6.12–15 and EHU 5.1). They're caused by the propensity to believe in (or expect) the unobserved effect of an observed cause (or to believe in the unobserved cause of an observed effect) given previous experience of their constant conjunction.

However, not all beliefs for which Hume provides a causal explanation are natural beliefs. For example, he explains the origin of the philosophers' system of "double existence," a "monstrous offspring of two [opposing] principles," by appealing to a compulsion to "set ourselves at ease as much as possible" (T 1.4.2.52; 215). He grounds the ancients' beliefs in "sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum"—beliefs he calls "fictions"—in the propensity to anthropomorphize (T 1.4.3.11; 224). He says that the "unreasonable and capricious" "fiction" (T 1.4.3.1; 219)—belief in material substance (T 1.4.3.2–8-; 219–222)—is "derived from principles as natural as any of those above-explaind" (T 1.4.3.2.8; 222).

Hume thinks inductive beliefs have positive epistemic status (or, as I would put it, warrant), ¹¹ but some beliefs for which he gives naturalistic explanations do not. According to the naturalistic interpretation of Hume, it is because of the *naturalness* of beliefs based on induction that Hume deems them warranted: "tho' causation be a *philosophical* relation, as implying contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction, yet 'tis only so far as it is a *natural* relation, and produces an union among our ideas, that we are able to reason upon it, or draw any inference from it" (T 1.3.6.16; 94). He

Before the main arguments concerning induction in Book I, Part II, Section VI, Hume claims that "the relation of cause and effect" is the only relation that allows us to "go beyond what is immediately present to the senses, either to *discover* the real existence or the relations of objects" (T 1.3.2.2; 73, emphasis added). He says that the relation of causation "*informs* us of existences and objects which we do not see or feel" (T 1.3.2.3; 74, emphasis added). Within Section VI, he claims that the relation of causation "tis the only one, on which we can found a *just* inference from one object to another" (T 1.3.6.7; 89, emphasis added). After Section VI, he not only refers to inductive inference as a "true species of reasoning" (T 1.3.7.5 n20; 97), but also states, "A person, who stops short in his journey upon meeting a river in his way, *foresees* the consequences of his proceeding forward; and his *knowledge* of these consequences is convey'd to him by past experience, which *informs* him of such certain conjunctions of causes and effects" (T 1.3.8.13; 103, emphasis added). Finally, Hume claims, "one who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons *justly* and naturally" (T 1.4.4.1; 225, emphasis added).

distinguishes between natural beliefs and unwarranted beliefs on the basis of certain features of their causes—while some belief-forming mechanisms confer warrant, others do not. He explains:

I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular;[...] The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. For this reason the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected. (T 1.3.4.1; 225)

Those beliefs caused by permanent, irresistible, and universal principles are warranted natural beliefs; those beliefs caused by changeable, weak, and irregular principles are not. Hume makes this explicit in the case of the opinions of the ancient philosophers. Thus, in order to determine whether a belief is among the natural beliefs, we must look for more than the mere existence of a causal explanation of the belief.

Because natural beliefs have positive epistemic status, one way to determine whether a belief is a natural belief is to examine directly what Hume says about the epistemic status of the belief. If he expresses epistemic approval, this is evidence that the belief in question is a natural belief; if he expresses epistemic disapproval, then this is evidence that the belief is not natural. Depending on his language, this may also be evidence that the belief should be rejected. For example, if Hume says a belief is false, then this is evidence that he believes we should avoid or reject it.

Additionally, natural beliefs are warranted by features of the psychological propensities that cause them; so, another way to determine whether a belief is natural is to examine its particular cause(s). If the propensity responsible for the belief is not irresistible, universal, or permanent, then the belief is not natural. If the propensity in question causes other beliefs that Hume impugns epistemically, then we have evidence that no belief caused by that propensity is natural. If the belief-forming mechanism is explicitly contrasted with custom, then a belief formed by it is not a natural belief. If the propensity can

^{12 &}quot;But one, who is tormented he knows not why, with the apprehension of specters in the dark, may, perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too: But then it must be in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, tho' it be contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of man. The opinions of the antient philosophers...are like the specters in the dark, and are deriv'd from principles, which, however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature" (T 1.4.4.1–2; 225–226).

or should be resisted or subverted, or if it is weak or irregular, beliefs caused by it should be withheld or rejected.

To determine the epistemic status of religious belief, then we must turn to the *Natural History* where Hume's stated goal is to determine religion's "origin in human nature" (NHR Introduction.1; 134). Hume's project in the *Natural History* mirrors his treatment of the beliefs of the ancient philosophers, but also beliefs based on induction. This provides an opening for the view that Hume thinks religious beliefs are warranted. On this view, Hume's naturalistic explanation of religious belief in the *Natural History* has *positive* epistemic consequences. I argue that this is not the case. I show that the propensities responsible for religious belief do not generate natural beliefs and that the language Hume uses demonstrates his epistemic disapproval. I argue that Hume's naturalistic explanation of religious belief has *negative* epistemic consequences and conclude that this gives us reason to reject religious belief.

4. The Explanation of Religious Belief in the Natural History

In the *Natural History*, Hume provides a causal account of religious belief. He claims early religious belief is polytheistic and over many generations is transformed into monotheism. He asserts that religious belief is caused by several propensities—including the propensity "toward a system that provides satisfaction" (NHR 3.1–2; 141), the propensity to anthropomorphize and the propensity to adulate. Hume claims both polytheism and monotheism originate from the belief in invisible, intelligent power ("the original belief"),¹³ caused by the propensity toward a system triggered by the disorder in nature. Other propensities, including anthropomorphizing and adulation, operate on the belief in invisible intelligent power, causing first robust polytheism and eventually monotheism. Throughout, Hume emphasizes the role of fear and ignorance, along with the desire to relieve related anxieties. In what follows, I show that the propensities active in Hume's account have negative epistemic consequences for the beliefs they generate.¹⁴

¹³ Kail refers to the belief in invisible intelligent power as the "core concept," and notes that all religious belief, according to Hume, stems from this original belief (Kail 2000a 192 and 2000b 7).

¹⁴ Kail (2007b) has a different, but I think complimentary, interpretation of the *Natural History*. He claims that Hume's explanation in the NHR provides reason to suspend all religious belief insofar as it provides reason to suspend belief in invisible, intelligent power (the core concept), the content of which is necessary and sufficient for any religious belief. He claims that Hume's line of reasoning is aimed at the fideist (who believes that one can be rational in maintaining religious belief even if there are no arguments, reasons, or evidence in favor of it) insofar as it provides reason to suspend belief without attacking arguments or evidence in its favor. I will claim, instead, that it provides reason to reject and not just suspend religious belief. For someone (like the fideist) who has not already examined the arguments for and against religious belief, they would need to do so before rejecting that belief, as Kail suggests. Hume, on the other hand, typically only

4a. The Propensity Toward a System that Provides Satisfaction

Hume describes the propensity responsible for the first occurrence of belief in invisible, intelligent powers as "a propensity in human nature, which leads to a system, that gives them some satisfaction" (NHR 3.1–2; 141). This propensity functions as a means of coping with the situation in which man¹⁵ finds himself—terrified and dependent on the world around him--by leading him to feel that he has some control over his own destiny. He fears the unknown causes of calamitous natural events; he hopes that the course of nature will unfold in such a way to keep him safe, secure, and well-fed. By positing that nature is controlled by intelligent powers, man can more easily believe that he has a means of controlling his fate. For example, he can provide sacrifices in order to please the intelligent powers. This reduces the anxiety produced by lack of control.¹⁶ In this way, the propensity toward a system is akin to wish-fulfillment, a mechanism that produces beliefs that produce happiness or comfort.¹⁷

Both the propensity toward a system and wish-fulfillment operate in conditions where the believer is afraid, and both relieve anxiety. In both cases, an explanation is believed, but it doesn't matter how well the explanation fits the relevant data; instead, the aim of belief formation is happiness or the relief of anxiety. Like wish-fulfillment, the propensity toward a system that provides satisfaction is not truth-oriented.

From the fact that the propensity toward a system is not truth-oriented, we cannot immediately conclude that it is a propensity that does not generate natural beliefs. This fact alone does not show that it is changeable, weak, irregular, avoidable, or opposed to custom. However, if we discover that a belief is caused by a propensity that is not truth-oriented, this gives us a reason to suspend belief until we examine the evidence. Suppose, for example, I seem to remember eating potato casserole for dinner last week. I think about it for a minute, and realize that I actually dreamt that I ate potato casserole for dinner. This doesn't necessarily give me reason to reject that belief, though it does give

provides genetic explanations for beliefs that cannot be justified by reason, argument, or evidence. While Kail thinks Hume has a very targeted audience for the NHR, I believe the audience is broader—directed at all believers; thus anyone who has considered the arguments for and against religious belief and is searching for an alternative explanation (as Hume searches for an explanation of inductive beliefs), would see that the natural explanation for religious belief does not provide the warrant that the parallel explanation does in the case of causal beliefs.

¹⁵ In the *Natural History* and his other writings, Hume uses gendered language throughout (e.g., "man", "mankind"). In what follows, I will often mimic Hume's gendered language; though I will sometimes use more gender-neutral terms such as "people," proceeding on the assumption that Hume means these gendered terms to refer to all humans.

¹⁶ Jones (1972) 322, and Ferreira (1995) 595, argue for a similar interpretation.

¹⁷ Similarly, Kail (2000a 199–200 and 2000b 10–11) argues that belief in the core concept arises due to a kind of motivated irrationality.

me reason to suspend it until I verify my memory. Given that the belief in invisible intelligent power is caused by a non-truth-oriented propensity, beliefs caused by it are not natural beliefs insofar as the propensity toward a system doesn't generate beliefs with *positive* epistemic status.

Hume goes on to say that the propensity toward a system does not generate true belief. Instead, he claims that early man is *ignorant* of the true causes of natural occurrences (NHR 3.1; 141, emphasis added). Belief in invisible intelligent power as the cause of natural events is belief in something false. This evidence suggests that instead of merely suspending belief in invisible intelligent power, we should reject it as we should reject any false belief.

According to Hume, the first instantiation of the original belief is a kind of minimal polytheism (insofar as anthropomorphism has not yet begun to operate and attribute further human characteristics to the invisible intelligent powers¹⁸) (NHR 1; 135–138). Hume condemns minimal polytheism: calling it "the grossest theory" (NHR 4.12; 149) and "superstitious" (e.g., NHR 3.3, 4.2, 4.5). Since he often makes negative comments about the polytheistic system, it is clear that Hume thinks minimal polytheism, and therefore the original belief in invisible intelligent power, unwarranted.

4b. The Propensity to Anthropomorphize

The second mechanism causally responsible for religious belief is the propensity to anthropomorphize: a "universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves" (NHR 3.2; 141). This propensity is responsible for man's ascribing intelligence and other human characteristics to the invisible powers of minimal polytheism. While Hume says that the propensity to anthropomorphize is universal, this does not mean he thinks it cannot be resisted. He writes: "we find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds, and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us" (NHR 3.1; 141, emphasis added). It is clear that Hume thinks that the tendency to personify can and should be avoided, especially since it results in false beliefs, noting that in poetry, "mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion" (NHR 3.2; 141). Although this tendency is sometimes avoided, Hume makes a point to emphasize that it is not done easily: "philosophers cannot entirely exempt themselves from this natural frailty; but have oft ascribed it to inanimate matter the horror of a vacuum, sympathies, antipathies, and other affections of human nature" (NHR 3.2; 141).

Hume's language echoes that of *Treatise* 1.4.3, "Of the antient philosophy," where he discusses the propensity to anthropomorphize with an even more disapproving tone. In explaining the ancient philosophers' ideas of "sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum," he claims, "there is a very remarkable inclination in human nature to bestow on external objects

¹⁸ I discuss this further in section 3b.

the same emotions, which it observes in itself; and to find every where those ideas, which are most present to it" (T 1.4.3.11; 224). Here though, Hume claims that it can be *easily* avoided, and makes clear that beliefs caused by it are unwarranted: "this inclination, 'tis true, is suppress'd by a little reflection, and only takes place in children, poets and the antient philosophers" (T 1.4.3.11; 224). Although he thinks it understandable that children personify the stones that hurt them--and poets, everything--he is not so ready to free the philosophers from blame. He asks, "we must pardon children, because of their age; poets, because they profess to follow implicitly the suggestions of their fancy: But what excuse shall we find to justify our philosophers in so signal a weakness?" (T 1.4.3.11, 225).

The paradigm example of a Humean natural belief is belief based on induction, but in the *Treatise* Hume takes care to distinguish beliefs caused by the personifying propensity from beliefs caused by custom (T 1.4.4.1; 225). This is where he differentiates between principles of the imagination that are "permanent, irresistible, and universal; *such as the customary transition from causes to effects*" and those that are "changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of" (T 1.4.4.1; 225, emphasis added).¹⁹ He refers to these principles as a defect, and contrasts them with those that "arise only from the solid, permanent, and consistent principles of the imagination" (T 1.4.4.2; 226). Hume explicitly contrasts beliefs caused by the propensity to anthropomorphize, negatively, with those caused by the inductive propensity, making clear that beliefs based on the personifying propensity are those that ought to be rejected.

Moreover, Hume says that beliefs produced by the propensity to anthropomorphize are absurd. In the *Treatise*, Hume calls beliefs based on the propensity "fictions" (T 1.4.3.11; 224). Likewise, this is the case when this propensity causes religious belief: "The absurdity is not less, while we cast our eyes upwards; and transferring, as is too usual, human passions and infirmities to the deity" (NHR 3.2; 141). As the *Treatise* predicts, in the *Natural History*, beliefs based on the personifying principle, including religious beliefs, are not warranted.

4c. The Propensity to Adulate

Both the propensity toward a system and the propensity to anthropomorphize are responsible for polytheistic belief in invisible intelligent power. Monotheism is caused (in part) by the adulation propensity. After some time, the polytheist chooses a favorite god. The propensity to adulate causes the polytheist to elevate the favorite god, adding numerous positive qualities to his description (NHR 13.3; 176–177) until he reaches the idea of a perfect God. This tendency to raise the favorite god higher and higher is triggered by the desire to persuade the god to help him avoid misfortune and gain success (NHR 6.5; 155).

¹⁹ In the first paragraph of 1.4.4, he has in view the propensity to anthropomorphize, the topics of the final paragraph of 1.4.3.

Despite the fact that men originally fear the gods and depict them as cruel, to gain the favor of their favorite god, they exalt him above the rest:

Here therefore is a kind of contradiction between the different principles of human nature, which enter into religion. Our natural terrors present the notion of a devilish and malicious deity: Our propensity to adulate leads us to acknowledge an excellent and divine. And the influence of these opposite principles are various, according to the different situation of the human understanding (NHR 13.3; 176–177).

Man's desire to relieve anxiety influences the operation of the adulation propensity. In this way, it is similar to the propensity toward a system—by raising one god to infinity, man hopes to better control his destiny: "the same anxious concern for happiness, which begets the idea of these invisible intelligent powers, allows not mankind to remain long in the first simple conception of them; as powerful, but limited beings; masters of human fate, but slaves to destiny and the course of nature" (NHR 8.2; 159). The fact that the propensity operates to relieve anxiety is evidence that it is not directed at producing true beliefs.

Moreover, Hume notes that this propensity often causes contradictions within religion: the Catholic's worship of Mary as a person equal to God, Homer's occasional tendency to honor Oceanus and Tethys as the original parents of things, and at other times bestow that honor on Jupiter, etc. (NHR 6.7–11; 156–157). He laments, "rather than relinquish this propensity to adulation, religionists, in all ages, have involved themselves in the greatest absurdities and contradictions" (NHR 6.10; 156). This indicates that at least some of the beliefs caused by the propensity are false.

But there is additional reason to reject beliefs based on the adulation propensity: Hume claims, "Men's exaggerated praises and compliments will swell their idea upon them; and elevating their deities to the utmost bounds of perfection, at last beget the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality" (NHR 8.2; 159). It is clear that, according to Hume, beliefs based on adulation are not true; instead, they are exaggerated. He also claims that the propensity to adulate leads man to attribute *false* praise to the favorite god. Because he is afraid, man must approve of what normally would be considered negative behavior or characteristics. Hume explains:

They must then be careful not to form expressly any sentiment of blame and disapprobation. All must be applause, ravishment, extacy. And while their gloomy apprehensions make them ascribe to him measure of conduct, which, in human creatures, would be highly blamed, they must still affect to praise and admire that conduct in the object of their devotional addresses. (NHR 13.6; 178)

Thus, it is clear that beliefs about the favorite god, caused by the propensity to adulate, are not natural beliefs, and are false and should be avoided.

4d. Monotheism Causally Dependent on Polytheism

It is important for Hume that monotheism is not a separate belief-system, unconnected to polytheism. Rather, it is the culmination of a process of belief-transformation, beginning with polytheism and ending finally in monotheism. Over time, man is led from polytheistic belief to monotheistic belief by various psychological mechanisms. I will argue that monotheism thus inherits the epistemic problems of polytheism.

Hume's discussion of the philosopher's belief in double existence provides evidence that he thinks that epistemic problems transfer from the first belief to the second when the second belief is causally dependent on the first. According to Hume, "there are no principles either of the understanding or fancy, which lead us directly to embrace this opinion of the double existence of perceptions and objects, nor can we arrive at it but by passing thro' the common hypothesis of the identity and continuance of our interrupted perceptions [the vulgar hypothesis]" (T i.4.2.46; 211). In other words, belief in double existence is causally dependent on the vulgar belief in body. He goes on to explain, "however philosophical this new system may be esteem'd, I assert that 'tis only a palliative remedy, and that it contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself" (T 1.4.2.46; 211). Given that belief in double existence depends on the vulgar belief, it is subject to any epistemic degradation resulting from the propensities that cause the vulgar belief.

For Hume, man arrives at monotheistic belief only after polytheistic belief in invisible intelligent power has been transformed by the propensity toward a system and anthropomorphized into a more robust polytheism. Only then does the propensity to adulate result in monotheistic belief. Thus, monotheism is subject (at the very least) to whatever epistemic difficulties face polytheism, including the negative consequences derived from the propensity to anthropomorphize.²⁰

4e. Hume's Attitudes Regarding the Propensities that Cause Religious Belief

There is additional evidence that Hume thinks the propensities responsible for religious belief, taken together, are unlike custom and the other warrant-producing belief-forming mechanisms. He claims that the mechanisms that produce religious belief are known to produce other false beliefs: "the same principles naturally deify mortals, superior in power and courage, or

One might argue here that monotheistic belief may be warranted in some other way, via an argument, testimony, empirical evidence, or some direct propensity to believe in a designer. I briefly review evidence in Section 2 that Hume does not think monotheistic belief is justified by any argument, and I argue in my "Cleanthes's Propensity and Intelligent Design" that Hume does not think belief is warranted on the basis of a propensity to believe in a designer; however, further discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

understanding, and produce hero-worship, together with fabulous history and mythological tradition, in all its wild and unaccountable forms" (NHR 5.9; 152). Given that he argues that the same propensities cause other problematic beliefs, we have reason to reject religious belief, just as we have reason to reject other mythological traditions.

Moreover, in the Introduction to the Natural History, Hume claims:

This preconception [invisible, intelligent power] springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature...first religious principles must be secondary; such as may easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation too, in some cases, may, by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances, be altogether prevented. (NHR Introduction.1; 134)

Thus Hume thinks that while the propensities that cause religious belief are common, they more strongly resemble those he opposes to custom—those that are rejected by philosophy: "neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life... [and] may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition" (T 1.3.4.1; 225). Since religious beliefs are unlike custom in this way, they ought to be rejected.

At this point, one might object that the causal explanation of the religious belief (or any belief) does not lead to rejection of religious belief (or any other belief), as this would be an instance of the genetic fallacy. Instead, they might argue that this generates only skepticism about the belief. For example, if I have a belief that it is 9.15am now because I made a guess, the fact that I formed that belief by guessing does not provide a ground for me to reject the belief that it is 9.15am, though I am skeptical about whether it actually is 9.15am now. Thus, the objector may claim that after learning the pernicious causes of religious belief, we have reason to temporarily suspend our belief; and then we must determine whether belief is justified in some other waywe must examine the evidence and arguments both in favor of and against religious belief.

However, in this particular case, the situation is different. In Hume's view, religious belief is not justified on the basis of any cogent philosophical arguments (see Section 2, above). Moreover, the fact that Hume provides a causal explanation of religious belief is reason to think that it cannot be justified in some other way. If a belief is justified by observation, by philosophical argument, or by testimony, then the questions that motivate Hume to provide a genetic explanation do not arise. In general, while there will still be a natural cause for a belief, that cause will not normally affect the warrant of a justified belief. Only if the belief is not warranted on the basis of evidence or philosophical argument does the naturalistic explanation for belief play a role in its epistemic status. Hume rarely if ever examines the causal explanation of a belief that is justified; it is only *after* he has discovered that the belief is not reasonable (false, meaningless, or unjustified) that an

examination of its origin becomes especially pressing. Given that Hume provides a naturalistic explanation for religious belief, we have good reason to believe that Hume doesn't think it warranted by some other means.

Thus, for the case of religious belief, Hume's argument comes in two parts. First, in Parts IX and X of the first *Enquiry* and in the *Dialogues*, Hume contends that there is no cogent *argument* to justify religious belief. This parallels his claim in *Treatise* 1.3.6 that no cogent arguments support belief in the uniformity of nature. Second, in the *Natural History*, the propensities that cause religious belief confer negative epistemic status on religious belief. In this regard, the causes of religious belief are similar to the causes of the beliefs of the ancient philosophers—in substrata, sympathies, antipathies, and so forth. With the second part of Hume's argument, the parallelism with inductive beliefs—those caused by the "universal, permanent, and irresistible" principles of human nature—comes to an end. When we learn that the beliefs of the ancient philosophers, for example, are caused by a propensity Hume explicitly contrasts with custom, we ought to avoid or reject those beliefs. There is no need to reconsider the arguments in favor of those beliefs. Thus, Hume's causal explanation of religious belief provides grounds to *reject* religious belief.²¹

5. Conclusion

Hume's explanation of religious belief in the *Natural History* does not support the claim that religious belief is among the Humean natural beliefs.²² In examining the details of the propensities responsible for religious belief, it is clear that religious beliefs (both polytheism and monotheism) have negative epistemic status. The propensities that cause religious belief are contrasted explicitly with custom and the other "permanent, irresistible, and universal" propensities of the imagination. Religious belief is produced in circumstances of fear and ignorance by belief-forming mechanisms not aimed at truth. Hume's description of the beliefs themselves, containing terms like "exaggerated, superstitious, absurd, and the like" provide further evidence that religious belief as described in the *Natural History* is unwarranted.

²¹ Rejecting religious belief does not mean that one may endorse the opposite. While Hume's attack on the arguments in favor of religious belief and his discussion about the causes of religious belief provide reason to reject religious belief, this does not give license to positively endorse claims such as "God does not exist." In order to do that, one would have to have arguments, evidence, or reliable testimony for that claim (or it would have to be a natural belief based on a warrant-conducing propensity). Hume, however, provides us with no arguments or evidence or genetic description of atheism.

At this point, one might object that while the propensities that cause religious belief as described in the *Natural History* do not produce natural beliefs, there's another source: The *Dialogues*. Perhaps there's another form of religious belief, akin to "genuine theism" or "attenuated deism," not justified on the basis of the argument from design, but instead caused by a universal propensity to believe in a designer triggered by the observation of apparent *telos* in nature. It's possible, then that *this* belief, with this cause, is a natural belief. I argue against this objection in my "Cleanthes's Propensity and Intelligent Design" (2011).

In the *Dialogues* and other texts, Hume argues against a foundation in reason for religious belief and concludes that religious belief is not warranted by testimony or cogent philosophical argument. In the *Natural History*, he provides what he thinks is the only other viable explanation for religious belief and shows that religious belief is not caused by warrant-generating psychological propensities. Rather, he claims that religious belief is based on psychological propensities (toward a system, to anthropomorphize, and to adulate) that generate unwarranted beliefs. The *Natural History* provides a crucial part of Hume's attack on religious belief, which, taken as a whole, suggests that we ought to reject religious belief in all of its forms.

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