Is Hume’s ‘True Religion’ a Religious Belief?

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I

Hume was detached from religion. His relation to it did not spring from personal problems. Neither was he moved by a reforming zeal to rescue people from superstition. In that respect he was a pessimist, believing that though future generations may smile at our superstitions, they will entertain new ones of their own. Hume’s interest in religion was philosophically motivated, arising from his central preoccupation with the nature and limits of human knowledge. He wanted to combat two philosophical tendencies: one, the tendency of rationalists and the religiously orthodox to go beyond the limits of human knowledge; and two, the tendency of sceptics to restrict these tendencies prematurely.

Hume’s philosophical critique of religion has two aspects. First, in The Natural History of Religion, he assigns all substantive monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs to the pathology of religious belief. Again and again he exposes the malign influence of enthusiasm and superstition. Van Harvey does not think that Hume’s relation to religion is quite as clear-cut, and reminds us of a passage at the outset of the essay where Hume says: ‘The whole frame of nature bespeaks of an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.’¹ Van Harvey thinks it is strained to explain the passage away as an attempt ‘to throw dust in the eyes of the censors’ (p. 70).²

To explain this passage we need to turn, not to the kind of explanation Harvey rejects, but to the second aspect of Hume’s philosophical critique in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. There we see the poor thing ‘the primary principles of genuine...
Theism and Religion' turn out to be. At best the principles turn out to be an attenuated deism, devoid of factual or cognitive content, having no consequences for the conduct of our lives. The principles are merely an intellectual assent to the proposition ‘God exists’ which is itself ambiguous or ill-defined. Van Harvey agrees that the ‘God’ affirmed is not ‘God’ as ordinarily understood in religious belief. No sane person would spill a drop of blood over ‘genuine’ theism. ‘True religion’ amounts to no more than the belief that the cause or causes of order in the universe bear some remote analogy to human intelligence. With respect to this cause or causes, the theist is prepared to admit that there are great differences between the mind of man and the mind of God, and the atheist is prepared to admit the remote analogy between the ultimate cause or causes and human intelligence. Hume concludes that the dispute between them is purely verbal. The effect of ‘true religion’ on human conduct is purely negative: it makes the mind immune to superstition and fanaticism.

Hume insists that philosophical reflection leads to ‘true religion’, which guards us against the presumptuousness of metaphysics and religion in claiming to give us substantive accounts of the ultimate explanations of order in the universe. ‘True religion’ prevents us from saying more than we know, an outcome Van Harvey finds attractive, and one to which I shall return at the end of the chapter.

In this first section, for the most part, I have been summarising a widely agreed view of Hume’s relation to religion which can be found, with minor variations, in J. C. A. Gaskin’s study of Hume, and in introductions to his work by Richard Wollheim, Martin Bell and Norman Kemp Smith. Where I differ from most contemporary philosophers is in the conclusions I think should be drawn from this view. Such differences of opinion have a crucial bearing on what we can learn from Hume’s philosophy of religion. To the end of his life Hume held the view expressed in his Treatise: ‘Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.’ Clearly, Hume did not think that his own strictly philosophical conclusions concerning ‘true religion’ fell into this latter category. I shall argue that his notion of ‘true religion’ is unintelligible, and that Hume should have followed his own advice with respect to other metaphysical theses: consign it to the flames.