Voices in Discussion
D. Z. Phillips

Voice C

In the previous symposium we assumed that Hume leaves no logical space for substantive religious belief. But a consideration of what I call Hume’s ‘mitigated scepticism’ may make us revise this view.

As we know, Hume believed that certain commonsense, instinctive beliefs could be held rationally as long as there is no counterevidence. He had in mind beliefs in the external world, and belief in the continuing existence of physical objects. These have been called natural beliefs. Could religious belief be regarded as one of them? To think so is to claim parity for the belief. I have in mind what is called in the *Natural History* ‘the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion’, namely, that ‘The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author.’ This belief is instinctive and non-inferential. It is said that the reason for not calling it a natural belief is that, unlike the others, it is not universal, uniform or undisputed. And even if these difficulties were put aside, it is said that Hume’s moral critique of religion would still hold.

Hume investigates the origin of religious belief because, for him, there is a connection between origin and value. Is religious belief a primary or secondary impression of nature? He insists on the minimal belief because any substantive elaboration leads to a perversion of morality. So, here, too, the moral critique predominates.

But what of the requirement that natural beliefs are universal? Hume hedges about the primary principles of theism, saying that perhaps they are not universal, but that they are almost universal. Perhaps we ought to distinguish between a universal belief and a universal tendency. The tendency is uniform. The moral critique comes in, however, once one elaborates on the nature of the object of worship. As we have seen, Hume thinks this leads to a perversion of morality. Because the moral critique predominates, Hume does
not press through with the notion of religious belief as instinctive, groundless, but surviving critical reflection. Instead, he turns to philosophy as the means by which superstition is to be avoided.

Voice H

Don’t you need to emphasise, as Hume does, that vulgar people, due to their ignorance, ascribe events to the workings of an invisible power? After all, Hume emphasises our ignorance about causation generally. His view is that when this is fleshed out by religion it leads to superstition and perversion.

Voice C

I am suggesting that the universality applies only to the non-inferential, instinctive belief in an intelligent being as the author of nature, not to the way in which that is fleshed out.

Voice A

I do not see what C has achieved with the appeal to the universality of the instinctive universal belief. Even if granted, it would be purely descriptive carrying no religious authority. In religion, of course, the belief is meant to be predictive. It must make a difference to human lives.

Voice I

A’s question is whether the universal tendency to entertain the instinctive belief itself establishes any epistemic right. We must remember that the belief must also survive, and what it has to survive is critical reflection.

Voice C

But, of course, there would be no evidence for the belief. It is groundless.

Voice F

But for this reason I was puzzled about your claim that it must survive critical reflection. In the case of natural beliefs it makes no