

RESPONSES

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Reply to Ryan

Todd Ryan directs his critical attention entirely to “The Material World and Natural Religion in Hume’s *Treatise*”.¹ This paper offers an “irreligious” interpretation of Hume’s discussion of our belief in the material world in the *Treatise* 1.4.2 (“Scepticism with regard to the senses”). Hume’s irreligious arguments concerning the material world are presented as part of Hume’s more general fundamental irreligious intentions, as advanced throughout the *Treatise* and reaching beyond this to include his other later philosophical works.² Whereas it has been widely held that in the *Treatise* has little or no substantial interest in problems of religion, this paper argues that there is a close connection between the problem of the material world and issues of natural religion as discussed by Hume. This is a connection, moreover, that would have been obvious both to Hume and his own contemporaries.

The irreligious interpretation turns on three overlapping questions:

- (1) Is there any significant connection between the issue concerning the existence material world and problems of natural religion? In other words, is it correct to claim, as the orthodox view would have it, that Hume’s discussion of the material world is of no relevance to questions of natural religion?
- (2) If Hume’s discussion of this topic is of relevance to matters of religion, to what extent and on what basis can his views be properly described as “irreligious” in character?
- (3) Finally, if Hume’s arguments and views on this subject are substantially irreligious in character, does this reflect his fundamental philosophical concerns and intentions throughout the *Treatise* as a whole?

According to the irreligious interpretation the correct answer to all three of these questions is affirmative. One could, of course, accept that Hume’s arguments concerning the material world are of some relevance to natural religion but still deny that they are *irreligious* in nature, much less that they reflect his *fundamental* aims and intentions throughout the *Treatise*. Each of these questions should, therefore, be

¹ Hereafter all references to *Recasting Hume* will be abbreviated as RH.

² The irreligious interpretation is defended in more general terms in *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise*. It is also discussed in several later essays, including “Hume’s Philosophy of Irreligion” (RH, Chp. 16), which is considered in more detail further below.

considered separately. In order to address these questions, we need a full and proper appreciation of the relevant background that frames and structures Hume's specific arguments. More specifically, without an accurate and detailed understanding of the relevant debates that Hume and his contemporaries were engaged in, interpretations will inevitably misrepresent his core concerns. With regard to Hume's views on the material world, this includes some important debates in Hume's immediate Scottish context – especially those involving Andrew Baxter – which scholars have consistently overlooked or ignored.

The irreligious interpretation identifies two core challenges to natural religion. The first is the “skeptical challenge”, which relies on Hume's effort to show that our belief in the material world, if not false, lacks any justificatory support. Any argument along these lines serves the purposes of discrediting those proofs of God's existence that proceed from our (certain) knowledge of the existence of matter. Although it is true that Berkeley, for example, denied the existence of matter and had no such irreligious (or skeptical) intent, it was crucial to Berkeley's defence of his position to show that it had no such irreligious implications. Berkeley's critics – particularly his Newtonian critics (including Clarke, Baxter and Maclaurin) – were anxious to highlight the “dangerous” implications of Berkeley's immaterialist arguments. They argued that, whatever Berkeley's intentions may have been, his arguments serve the purposes of “atheism”. The basis of their objections was that both the argument a priori (cosmological argument) and the argument a posteriori (argument from design) rested on the foundation of our knowledge of the existence of the material world. For *those thinkers* (i.e. Newtonian critics of Berkeley) there was an intimate linkage between skepticism about the material world and atheism. Although there are significant differences between Hume's views and Berkeley's, Hume agrees with Berkeley that “the doctrine of matter” not only lacks any secure philosophical foundations, it is either false or meaningless. Obviously any theological system that *begins* with our knowledge of the existence of the material world will be discredited by skeptical views of this kind (whatever the intentions of the author may be). In respect of this, one obvious point of difference between Berkeley and Hume is that Berkeley – strongly and repeatedly – emphasizes that his aim is to *refute* atheism. Hume, by contrast, offers no such disclaimer and is conspicuously silent about the problematic (“dangerous”) implications of his skepticism about the existence of the material world.³

The second core irreligious argument advanced by Hume in this context is the “deception challenge”. The deception challenge relies on a combination of the stronger skeptical claim and the “naturalist thesis”. The stronger skeptical claim is that our belief in the existence of the material world not only lacks justificatory support, it is actually *false*. The naturalist thesis is that it is the “vulgar” view, which takes our immediate objects of perception to have continued and distinct existence, is the one that we are all constrained to believe in almost all the time. Putting these two claims together, Hume is committed to the view that we are all naturally disposed to believe in the existence of body in the manner of the vulgar, and that we are (systematically) deceived about this. This line of reasoning, as Hume's contemporaries were well aware, can easily be developed to serve irreligious or atheist ends. This involves amending Descartes's

³ In the context that Hume was writing and publishing in there was no question of opening advocating “atheistic” or irreligious arguments of any kind. Throughout his life Hume had to exercise “caution” and restraint about how expressed his views on the subject of religion (and on any subject that was pertinent to it).

argument for the existence of the material world along lines that Bayle describes in his *Dictionary*, a work that Hume was very familiar with.

The point that Bayle draws his readers' attention to is that those who hold that we know that the material world exists on the ground that God is not a deceiver (e.g. Descartes and those who follow him), may have this argument *reversed* against them. More specifically, if it can be shown that the material world does not exist, and that we naturally and inescapably believe that it does, then we must conclude that God (qua Creator, Governor, etc.) is a deceiver. This is a key premise in Descartes' own argument and widely shared by theistic philosophers of many stripes (e.g. Newtonians). It is precisely a concern to avoid this (atheistic) conclusion that explains why Berkeley (in the *Dialogues*) is careful to *deny* the naturalist claim regarding our belief in the existence of body and argues that his immaterialist doctrine is consistent with common sense and ordinary belief. Failing this, granted our natural inclination to believe in matter, it follows that God must be a deceiver – a point that Descartes, Malebranche, Bayle, and any number of other prominent philosophers of this period, highlighted in their own works.

The *combination* of claims that must be avoided, from the theological view, is that: (i) the material world has no existence (i.e. independent, external existence), and (ii) we are constrained by our nature to believe that it exists. On the assumption that God exists (and is Creator, Governor, etc.), this leads directly to the conclusion that God is a deceiver.⁴ If God *cannot* be a deceiver, as Descartes and those who follow him maintain, the only alternative is to conclude that God does not exist (since we are all, in fact, systematically deceived). None of the principals in this debate – including Berkeley – would welcome *this* combination of claims. In their different ways, they all aim to avoid the suggestion that we are systematically deceived about the existence of the material world. Descartes and Locke, for example, insist that belief in body is evidently true (i.e. the material world exists). Berkeley denies “the doctrine of matter” but maintains that we do not naturally believe this (i.e. his own doctrine of immaterialism is “common sense” etc.). Malebranche suggests that while our belief in matter is *probably* true, we are, nevertheless, capable of suspending judgment with respect to this (i.e. even if this belief is not true we are not compelled to believe it or naturally deceived with respect to it). In contrast with this Hume's naturalist thesis, combined with the strong skeptical claim, leads directly to the conclusion that we are systematically deceived by the natural operations of the human mind. Granted that God would be a deceiver in these circumstances – a point that Hume's principal theist opponents all accept – either God is a deceiver or God does not exist. Since God cannot be a deceiver – a point that Hume's principal theist opponents also all accept – it follows that God does not exist. Although Hume does not *explicitly* draw this conclusion, he shows no inclination in the *Treatise* – or in any of his other writings – to resist or reject this atheistic implication of his views.

In sum, the irreligious interpretation of Hume's views concerning the material world begins with an account of the intimate and deep connections that hold between this issue and matters of natural religion in the context that Hume wrote (i.e. contrary to the orthodox view that denies or overlooks this). On this basis it is shown that the particular combination of arguments that develops and advances are carefully crafted to formulate two powerful irreligious arguments. The first takes the form of the

⁴ See, e.g. Bayle, *Dictionary*, art “Zeno”, Note H.

skeptical challenge, which erodes confidence in both the cosmological and design arguments as developed on the foundation of our knowledge of the material world. The second takes the form of the deception challenge, which endorses a combination of claims that, when combined with widely accepted *theist* assumptions that God would be a deceiver if they were both true, and that God cannot be a deceiver, leads to the stronger irreligious claim that God does not exist. These irreligious themes are not only central to Hume's complex and subtle set of arguments in T, 1.4.2, they are entirely consistent with a wide range of similarly irreligious arguments as advanced throughout the *Treatise*. We should, therefore, interpret the (deeply) irreligious implications of Hume's arguments in this context as an important element of his wider irreligious project in the *Treatise* and, indeed, throughout his philosophy as a whole.

Ryan directs his critical remarks at each of the two "challenges" to natural religion that we have described. Let us begin with Ryan's criticism of the skeptical challenge. The skeptical challenge is, as Ryan suggests, the "less ambitious" of the two irreligious challenges. The aim is not, as with the deception challenge, to show that God does not exist. The skeptical challenge aims to show only that skepticism about the existence of the material world serves to undermine both the cosmological argument (a priori) and the design argument (a posteriori) for the existence of God. In the *Treatise* Hume makes no such explicit claim. In the first *Enquiry*, in a passage that Ryan places some emphasis on, Hume states this view explicitly. "If the external world be once called into question", Hume says, "we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes" (EU, 12.13/153). Why might he suppose this?

The only two arguments for the existence of God that Hume treats seriously are the cosmological argument and the design argument. According to Ryan, skepticism about the existence of the material world provides us with no "*independent* reason" (Ryan's emphasis) for rejecting the argument a priori. More specifically, since the chain of causes and effects might be mental rather than physical, the cosmological argument might be reformulated in these (mental) terms without relying on or making reference to the material world. It cannot, Ryan suggests "plausibly be maintained" that Hume's questioning of our knowledge of the material world is intended to undermine the argument a priori unless he intended to undermine "every version" of the cosmological argument by this means.

How convincing is this response to the skeptical challenge as presented on the irreligious interpretation? In "The Material World and Natural Religion" it is pointed out that, strictly speaking, Locke's version of the cosmological arguments begins with knowledge of our own existence.⁵ Nevertheless, as also noted, Locke goes on to argue that we can use knowledge of the material world to reason about God's being and attributes (*Essay*, 621f). The material world is, Locke maintains, an entirely secure foundation on which to advance our knowledge of God's being and attributes. This way of developing the cosmological argument, drawing on our knowledge of the material world, is further developed by Clarke (and Baxter). It is widely accepted that Clarke provided the most prominent and influential (Newtonian) version statement of the cosmological argument in Hume's context. The whole edifice of Clarke's version of the cosmological argument relies on a dualist ontology. Clarke contrasts atheistic materialism with the theist view that (intelligent, active) mind is ontologically prior to

⁵ Locke *Essay*, 619f, 631; as cited at RH, 79.

(unthinking, inert) matter. Any number of steps in Clarke's reasoning rely on our beliefs about the existence of matter and its properties (e.g. that it is inactive, incapable of thought, etc.). It is not correct, therefore, to suggest that skepticism about the material world is *irrelevant* to the cosmological argument so constructed and as so prominently defended. This was certainly the view of Clarke, Baxter, and their Newtonian cohorts as regards their response to Berkeley's immaterialism. Clearly, therefore, in the context in which Hume published the *Treatise*, his (skeptical) views about the material world were (intimately) connected to debates and controversies relating to the cosmological argument.

It remains true, of course, that Hume's primary assault on the foundation of the cosmological argument rests with his (skeptical) views about causal reasoning, wherein he maintains that it is impossible to *demonstrate* the existence of *any* being - including God.⁶ Insofar as an effort may be made to cast the cosmological argument in ways that do not rely on the material world, Hume has further (independent) irreligious arguments that can address this. None of this, however, shows that Hume's skepticism about the material world is not entirely relevant to the established statements of the cosmological argument as advanced by Locke, Clarke, Baxter and others. What is especially striking about Hume's discussion, in this regard, is that he makes no effort of any kind to evade or defuse the difficulties that his skepticism about the material world generates for the cosmological argument as presented by Clarke and other leading representatives of the (Newtonian) theist camp. In itself, this is more than sufficient to sustain the core claims advanced by the irreligious interpretation as this concerns significance of the skeptical challenge in T, 1.4.2.

What, then, can we say about the significance of the skeptical challenge as it concerns the design argument? Ryan's approach to the skeptical challenge repeats the same general theme he pursues when discussing of the cosmological argument. Just as the cosmological argument need not rely on the existence of the material world, Ryan suggests, there is no reason to suppose that the design argument must do this. If we replace a system of material causes with "a similarly arranged system of mental perceptions" it could be similarly argued that it too "requires an intelligent cause". Although Hume may provide "compelling reasons for rejecting the inference to a designing mind", there is no "*independent* reason for rejecting the a posteriori argument for the existence of God." If this is correct, skepticism about the material world is also irrelevant to the design argument (and any criticism we may advance concerning it).

Ryan is aware that this line of response faces significant problems given that "Hume does state unequivocally that doubt about the material world leaves us with no convincing argument for God's existence" (citing Hume's remarks at EU, 12.13/153). Ryan expresses puzzlement, nevertheless, about *why* Hume believed this. Puzzled or not, it should be noted that Hume was well aware that this was a view that he shared with the theist apologists who he was responding to. This is evident not only in the writings of Clarke and Baxter but also in the work of Hume's close friend and mentor Lord Kames (Henry Home). Kames objected to Berkeley's immaterialism precisely on the ground that it removed our most reliable and accessible knowledge of God's being

⁶ A detailed account of Hume's critique, in the *Treatise*, of the cosmological argument and the causal principles involved, is presented in Russell, *Riddle*, Chap. 10.

and attributes.⁷ Clearly, then, Hume was in no way peculiar or unusual in supposing that skepticism about the material world undermined and discredited the design argument – this was a view that he shared with the religious apologists who he was criticizing. Even if, as Ryan suggests, they were all mistaken about this, it was, nevertheless, widely accepted that that skepticism regarding the material world was of *considerable* significance for the theist position (i.e. since it robs them of *any* arguments for God’s being and attributes etc.). It is sufficient, for purposes of the irreligious interpretation, that this was – as Ryan concedes – *Hume’s* understanding of the significance of skeptical challenge as it concerns the design argument.

Let us now turn to the deception challenge. This is, as we have noted, a more ambitious – and to that extent more “dangerous” – irreligious argument, as it aims to prove that God does not exist. It involves, as Bayle anticipated, reversing Descartes’ argument for the existence of the material world against the theist. The relevant argument has the following structure (RH, 83):

1. We naturally and inescapably believe in the existence of body (i.e., usually and primarily in the vulgar form)
2. Our belief in the existence of body is false and based on illusion (i.e., we are deceived about this).
3. If God exists, and we are naturally deceived about the existence of body, then God is a deceiver.
4. God cannot be a deceiver.
5. If we are deceived in our natural belief about body, then God does not exist.
6.

Therefore, God does not exist.

Ryan agrees that Hume accepts premises 1, 2, and 4. He also accepts that if Hume accepts premise 3 then premise 5 follows, and the conclusion will follow from that. According to the irreligious interpretation, although Hume does not *explicitly* endorse premise 3 in the *Treatise*, it is reasonable to assume that Hume was aware its irreligious relevance and significance in relation to the other premises that he (explicitly) defends and endorses. It is also agreed that Hume not (explicitly or otherwise) *reject* premise 3 in the *Treatise*. As things stand, therefore, given premises 1,2 and 4, if premise 3 is also *accepted*, the atheistic conclusion follows. At the very least, Hume leaves himself exposed, in the *Treatise*, to this understanding and yet he makes no effort to avoid or repudiate premise 3 (or the atheistic conclusion that would flow from it). This stands in obvious contrast with Berkeley, who was careful to deny premise 2.

Ryan’s disagreement with the irreligious account of the deception challenge rests (entirely) with Hume’s brief remarks in the *Enquiry* 12.13 concerning the existence of the material world. Whereas the irreligious interpretation takes these remarks to endorse premises 3 and 4, Ryan accepts that Hume endorses premise 4 (i.e. that God cannot be a deceiver) but claims that Hume explicitly denies premise 3 (i.e. that if God

⁷ See, for example, the passage from Kames’ essay “Of the Authority of our senses”: “It is reported, that doctor Berkeley...” In this context Kames refers to skepticism about the material world as providing “a shrewd argument in favours of Atheism” (Kames, *Essays*, 241; as cited at RH, 94).

exists, and we are naturally deceived about the existence of body, then God is a deceiver). Here is the relevant passage:

To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit. If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention, that, if the external world be once called in question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes (EHU 12.13/ 153).

Ryan takes this passage to show that Hume “is *denying* that if the material world does not exist then God would be a deceiver” (p. 115 - Ryan’s emphasis) - which he describes as “precisely the opposite” of what the irreligious account suggests.⁸ According to Ryan, this passage suggests that “divine veracity is ‘not at all’ at issue in questions about our knowledge of the external world.” (p.115)

How plausible is this alternative (“opposite”) account? The disputed passage may be reconstructed in these terms. It opens with the observation that arguing from God to the material world is “a very unexpected circuit” (i.e. arguing this way is *prima facie* implausible). If we *begin* by assuming that God exists, and that he cannot be a deceiver, then our senses “would be entirely infallible”. If they are infallible, we would *never* be naturally deceived about what they suggest to us concerning the existence of the material world. However, once the existence of the material world is called into question, we have no basis for any arguments that might prove the existence of God or any of his attributes (e.g. veracity). Read this way, what this passage does is to present the theist with a “circle problem”. We cannot, Hume suggests, prove that God exists unless there is some *prior* (or independent) argument for the existence of the material world. Similarly, we cannot prove the existence of the material world unless there is some *prior* (or independent) proof for the existence of God. Hence the skeptic “triumphs” – both with respect to the question of the existence of the material world and (consequently) the existence of God.

In the *Enquiry* passage Hume does not affirm premises 1 and 2. What he does affirm is that *if* God exists, and we know that he is not a deceiver, our senses could *never* be naturally and inescapably deceive us (i.e. as Descartes argues). On the contrary, in these circumstances our senses would be “entirely infallible”.⁹ Hume asserts, in other

⁸ It should be noted that premise 3 is not, as Ryan’s remarks suggest, the claim that “if the material world does not exist, then God would be a deceiver”. Berkeley, for example, *accepts* premise 3 but would, nevertheless, deny that “if the material world does not exist, then God would be a deceiver”. Berkeley also denies that we naturally believe in the existence of matter (i.e. he denies premise 1), and for that reason he is in a position to accept premises 2,3 and 4 and still avoid the atheistic conclusion.

⁹ Here Hume, perhaps in light of Bayle, alludes to the fact that the theist’s (Cartesian) argument for the existence of the material world based on God not being a deceiver actually “proves too much” (Bayle, *Dictionary*, art Pyrrho, note B; as cited at RH, 88n46). More specifically, if this reasoning were correct, it precludes *any* natural deception of the senses – however mundane (e.g. a bent stick in water). Granted that we *know* that we are naturally deceived in respect of our senses in countless cases, and that God cannot be a deceiver, even the most mundane deception of the senses would

words, both premises 3 and 4. Elsewhere (independently), in the *Treatise*, Hume affirms both premises 1 and 2 but does not (explicitly) affirm premises 3 and 4. Moreover, in the context Hume was writing in, in regard to both these works, Hume and his readers are well aware that his principal theist opponents (i.e. Descartes, Clarke, Baxter, et al) accept both premises 3 and 4. Putting all these points together, the *Enquiry* passage supports not only the skeptical challenge but also, in conjunction with Hume's arguments in *Treatise* 1.4.2, the deception challenge. Why, then, it may be asked, if Hume's aim was to present the (irreligious) deception challenge, did he not simply bundle premises 1-4 together in one work? The answer to this is that to present the deception challenge in explicit terms, and *openly* draw the atheistic conclusion, would be to invite serious trouble (supposing that a publisher could be found). Suffice it to say that Hume found plenty of trouble as was, despite his careful efforts to conceal and camouflage his irreligious arguments.

Ryan's response to the irreligious account of the deception challenge focuses on Hume's attitude to premise 3 – which Ryan claims Hume denies (in the *Enquiry*). As my remarks above indicate, Ryan's claim is unconvincing and without foundation. From the perspective of the irreligious interpretation, what should be emphasized is the fact that Hume (and his readers) would be well aware that his principal opponents, on the theist side, accept both premises 3 and 4. Granted that this was the situation, it would be clear to all those involved that whatever *Hume's* attitude to premise 3 may have been, once premises 1 and 2 were established (as per T, 1.4.2), those who accept premises 3 and 4 could not avoid accepting premise 5 and the atheistic conclusion that follows from it. This itself presents Hume's theist opponents an evident difficulty.

Finally, in his commentary Ryan does not ask why Hume's *theist* opponents were generally reluctant to deny premise 3? Clearly premise 3 is essential to Descartes' effort to prove the existence of the material world. Without this premise Descartes' proof would collapse. Unless there is some other argument on offer, one that makes no appeal to God's existence (and veracity), we have, Hume suggests, no argument to defeat skepticism about the material world. In light of this, the theist faces an unattractive dilemma. When presented with premises 1 and 2 (as argued for in T, 1.4.2), and assuming premise 4, either: (a) the theist *rejects* premise 3, which (per hypothesis) cuts off our knowledge of the material world and, thereby, of God's existence; or (b) the theist *accepts* premise 3, which in conjunction with premises 1,2, and 4 leads to the atheistic conclusion. At this point the only remaining avenue of escape for the theist would be to deny premise 4 and accept that God is a deceiver. Clearly, from any orthodox viewpoint, this is to dispense with one of God's essential attributes (goodness) and is tantamount to atheism.

serve to prove that God does not exist. The deception challenge simply makes use of the general difficulty that this argument poses for any *theist* position developed along these lines. Descartes argued, of course, that we are *never* naturally and unavoidably deceived – not even in these simple and mundane cases. Error is always a matter of the (voluntary) misuse of our reason. But since Descartes - and others following him, such as Locke and Clarke - accept that we naturally believe in the existence of the material world (i.e. they accept premise 1), it follows that *if* there is no material world (i.e. premise 2 is true), then either God is a deceiver or God does not exist. The only way to avoid this implication is to deny premise 3, in which case Descartes' argument that God's existence and veracity serve to guarantee the existence of the material world collapses (as God's existence and veracity would be no guarantee of the truth and reliability of our natural beliefs).

Reply to Fosl

Peter Fosl presents a wide ranging survey of problems and interpretations relating to Hume's philosophy. Much of his attention is given to contrasting his "radical skeptical interpretation" with the irreligious interpretation (i.e. as defended not only in *Recasting Hume* but also in *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*). In this context I will not attempt to respond to all the (diverse) claims that Fosl advances in support of his reading of Hume as "a radical and comprehensive skeptic".¹⁰ What I would like to focus on is Fosl's discussion, in the second half of his commentary, concerning our divergent understanding of the relationship between skepticism and irreligion in Hume's philosophy.¹¹ In what follows, I will confine my remarks mostly to "Hume's Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism". In this paper I defend a "hard skeptical atheist" account of Hume's position, whereas Fosl holds that Hume's (radical) skeptical views commit him to "epistemic silence" about the existence of God.

Before saying more about the hard skeptical atheist account, it should be noted that the account defended in *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* is not entirely the same as the hard skeptical atheist account defended in "Hume's Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism". One obvious difference is that the discussion in *The Riddle* is focused on Hume's views in the *Treatise*, whereas "Hume's Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism" is primarily concerned with the *Dialogues*. More importantly, the irreligious interpretation of Hume's *Treatise*, as defended in *The Riddle*, is, strictly speaking, compatible with *any* of the three rival interpretations of Hume's views concerning the existence of God that are examined in "Hume's Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism": these being, deism, agnosticism, and atheism. What is essential to the irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise* is not the claim that Hume was an "atheist", since this will, among other things, depend on what particular conception of God and the divine attributes are at issue. What is claimed is, first, that contrary to the orthodox view, the *Treatise* is deeply and systematically concerned with problems of religion, and, second, the stance that Hume takes with respect to these problems is consistently *hostile* to the aims and doctrines of the religious philosophers. It is, however, consistent with these more fundamental claims to read Hume as committed to any of (attenuated) deism, agnosticism, or atheism.

In *The Riddle* it is argued that with respect to "thicker" or more robust conceptions of God, Hume must be read – in respect of all his works – as holding that there are strong grounds for *denying* that such a being exists.¹² At the same time, in respect of "thinner" conception of God (e.g. some sort of "attenuated deism"), Hume does not actually *deny* the hypothesis, he simply leaves us with a notion so "thin" that it lacks any content or practical relevance for human life. Even on this (qualified) reading, however, it would be a mistake to describe Hume's position as simply one of "skepticism" or "agnosticism", since Hume does not simply "suspend belief" with respect to these matters. His (skeptical) attitude towards the religious hypothesis varies

¹⁰ Readers will, no doubt, want to consider Fosl's interpretation with reference to his recent book *Hume's Scepticism*.

¹¹ The first half of Fosl's commentary is devoted largely to the nature of Hume's ontology – particularly the ontology of "double existence" and the role that it plays in Hume's "proposal for a science limited to appearances alone" (p.83).

¹² Russell, *Riddle*, 282-3.

depending on what sort of conception of God we are considering. For this reason, the most accurate and informative label for describing Hume's views on this subject is *irreligion*.¹³

With these preliminaries out of the way, we may now turn to the argument for the "hard skeptical atheist" reading, as presented in "Hume's Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism". The analysis in this paper rests with an examination of the three alternative views, each of which may be articulated and finessed in different ways. The first view to be considered is that Hume is a sincere theist of some kind, although the theism he is committed to is of a thin or minimal kind.¹⁴ The basis of whatever theism Hume retains is, on this view, based upon the argument from design and relies on the analogy we draw between the order, harmony and beauty we observe in this world and human artifacts or creations. Hume, of course, emphasizes the *weakness* of this analogy and how little we can infer on the basis of it. He also notes that other analogies, suggesting different origins, are available to us. All this results in an idea of God that is vague and obscure. These three factors are not only present with respect to the argument from design, they are directly relevant to Hume's theory of belief. In these circumstances, not only is the idea of God largely without either content or any strong foundation in our experience, our *belief* is substantially weakened if not altogether eliminated. Without belief, moreover, any such conception of God can have little or no practical influence. These dynamics of belief are especially in play in respect of any "minimal" or "attenuated" conception of God. We may conclude, therefore, that in respect of the "religious hypothesis", insofar as it is based on experience and probable reasoning, Hume is not a theist of any kind.¹⁵

Even if Hume is not a theist, it does not follow that he is an atheist. He may have been a "skeptic" who neither asserts or denies the existence of God but simply suspends belief in all such matters – i.e. what we might now call an "agnostic". This way of viewing Hume may be further encouraged by the thought that the skeptic stands opposed to dogmatism, where both theism and atheism are understood as essentially dogmatic. There is, however, no reason to suppose that either the theist or the atheist must be dogmatists, since views of this kind may be moderated and based on (variable degrees of) probable belief. With regard to Hume's skeptical commitments, there is a fundamental contrast to be drawn between extreme skepticism or Pyrrhonianism and moderate or mitigated skepticism. Extreme skepticism aims to discredit all our (common sense) beliefs and inferences. In contrast with this, the principles of mitigated

¹³ Beyond this, in respect of these matters, the label of "skeptic" fails to properly and effectively identify his wholly hostile and critical attitude toward "religion" as it concerns scripture, church and clergy, as well as towards religious morality and the doctrine of a future state. Even if Hume did "suspend belief" in respect of the question of the existence of God – as the simple skeptical interpretation suggests – his irreligious intent is plainly much more aggressive than this.

¹⁴ The most prominent defence of this view is found in Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*.

¹⁵ There are, of course, forms of "unphilosophical" belief that may not only be groundless but actually contrary to reason. To the extent that beliefs may be acquired that are *impervious* to reason, there is no point in *arguing* against them – what is required is explanation and description. The fideist posture is of this nature. To confine theism to forms of fideism serves Hume's purpose of discrediting the *rational* pretensions and ambitions of the religious apologists who he is arguing against. Hume's *Natural History of Religion* provides an extended description of how groundless and unreasonable beliefs of this kind are generated and how they evolve and vary. Hume does not, however, regard theism of *any* kind – however minimal - as a natural belief.

skepticism do not subvert all knowledge or imply any unqualified universal doubt. What the mitigated skeptic insists on is that: (1) we must avoid all dogmatism and adopt an appropriate degree of modesty with respect to our beliefs and inferences, and (2) we must limit our reasonings and speculations to “common life”, where the subject matter falls within our experience and everyday practice. Whereas extreme skepticism is not targeted on any specific area of investigation, the principles of mitigated skepticism are targeted, more specifically, on all theological speculation concerning the two entities (D, 1.10; EU, 1.12, 12.25).

Hume makes clear that he regards extreme skepticism as “excessive” and that in practice it is both unlivable and destructive (EU, 12.21-3; D, 1.13). Pyrrhonian reflections are, nevertheless, of some value when they are employed to sustain and support our commitment to mitigated skepticism. Read this way, Hume allows that we may expect to contribute to and advance human knowledge so long as our enquiries are confined to the bounds of human experience and the limitations that this imposes on us. Since all reasoning concerning the existence of God and origin of the world takes us well beyond these confines, the principles of mitigated skepticism would suggest that Hume is a plain “skeptic” who neither affirms nor denies God’s existence. According to this account, Hume’s “irreligious” arguments are constructed with a view to showing only that the various arguments advanced in support of the theological position fail to convince, much less are they certain. They do not aim to show that God does not exist, as that would involve a violation of his (moderate) skeptical principles.

Does this “skeptical” interpretation provide an accurate and complete picture of Hume’s views on this subject? In order to assess this we need to draw another distinction concerning the nature of skepticism. Consistent with principles of mitigated skepticism, we may distinguish between a “soft” and a “hard” skeptical stance. The soft skeptic neither asserts nor denies belief in respect of some issue or topic – as with the stance of the agnostic in relation to the question of God’s existence. The hard skeptic claims that there is some reasonable basis for denying a claim or hypothesis of a given kind (e.g. that the Loch Ness monster is real). There is no principled reason why a mitigated skeptic cannot take a hard attitude toward some issue that falls within the sphere of our experience and observations. The simple skeptical reading maintains, nevertheless, that Hume’s mitigated skeptical principles commit him to *soft* skepticism when it comes to the specific issue of the existence of God. None of Hume’s skeptical arguments employed in discrediting the theological position, it is argued, go beyond the soft objective of showing that the theist’s various proofs all fail.

Contrary to the “soft” reading, many of Hume’s (skeptical) arguments serve to provide grounds for *denying* the theist hypothesis (in all its relevant forms). Even those who endorse the view that Hume was a minimal theist generally accept that his attitude with respect to *robust* theism is *hard* and not soft. Consider, for example, Hume’s ridicule relating to various anthropomorphic conjectures concerning God’s nature (D, 5.12) or his weightier skepticism concerning the moral attributes (D, 12.8). The more controversial issue concerns Hume’s attitude to minimal theism, the restricted conjecture that there is an invisible, intelligent being who is “the first cause of all” (D, 4.1). In regard to this there is at least one argument that Hume advances that suggests a hard position. All our experience, Hume points out, suggests that body and mind always accompany each other. The minimal theist hypothesis invites us to accept the existence of an invisible, active intelligent being that exists independent of body. Since that runs contrary to all our experience we have every reason to doubt it (D, 6.5, 8.11).

Given this, we must read Hume as a “hard skeptical atheist”, who (non-dogmatically) denies the existence of God, including minimal as well as robust conceptions.

It may be objected that the hard skeptical atheist account cannot be reconciled with Hume’s mitigated skeptical principles. As already noted, a hard skeptical attitude is not itself in conflict with the first principle of mitigated skepticism, so long as there is no claim to “absolute certainty” of any kind. On the other hand, there does exist a *prima facie* conflict between hard skeptical atheism and the second principle of mitigated skepticism, which prohibits investigations and conjectures relating to matters beyond the sphere of common life and human experience. To assess this matter we need to consider the central argumentative thread of the *Dialogues* – what may be described as “Philo’s dilemma”. This dilemma, as Hume presents it to the theist, is that either we are *permitted* to rely on our limited and narrow experience of the world and draw inferences on this basis or we are *prohibited* from doing so. If we are permitted to do this, then the conclusions that Hume draws are *hard* skeptical conclusions in respect of the religious hypothesis. If we are not prohibited from doing this, then the restriction applies equally to the theist, who will be denied any support for their hypothesis (and the *soft* skeptical conclusion applies). Hume plainly operates on *both* sides of this dilemma – both of which are evidently hostile to the religious hypothesis. Hume’s own position, as constructed around this core dilemma, oscillates between hard and soft skepticism. What needs emphasis is that it is not just a soft position that Hume endorses. On the contrary, Hume advances *hard* skeptical argument right across the spectrum of theism – covering minimal as well as robust conceptions. In light of this, we may conclude that Hume advanced and defended arguments for hard skeptical atheism and does not limit himself to soft skeptical arguments and conclusions.

The above summary of the hard skeptical atheist view overlaps, in some respects, with Fosl’s outline of his (alternative) reading of Hume as “a radical and comprehensive skeptic”. Both accounts present Hume as having irreligious commitments in respect of his skepticism (although Fosl does not say much about this as it concerns our understanding of the *Treatise*.) The irreligious account does not, however, accept the suggestion that Hume was a Pyrrhonian or should be understood as “a radical and comprehensive skeptic” (p.77). It may well be true that Hume is careful to limit our knowledge and understanding of the world as it is presented to us through experience and, related to this, he has no ambition to describe some sort of underlying metaphysical reality. This is, however, entirely consistent with rejecting extreme skepticism and following the principles of mitigated or academic skepticism.¹⁶ As already noted, Hume makes clear that the “excessive” skepticism of the Pyrrhonian is both unlivable and destructive in practice. So considered, it is a prime example of “extravagant” philosophy. There is, nevertheless, value to be found in it insofar as it leads us to the principles of mitigated skepticism (EU, 12.25). The particular significance of this is that, whereas Pyrrhonism would subvert “all science and philosophy” (T, 1.4.7.7; EU, 12.21-3; D, 1.9-17), the principles of mitigated skepticism are targeted more specifically at the ambitions and speculations of theology. On the irreligious reading, this irreligious motivation is the fundamental *driving force* behind Hume’s skepticism (as opposed to an incidental or secondary offshoot of his skepticism).

In the final analysis, in order to settle or decide these points of controversy, we need to consider both the details of the arguments under examination and the relevant

¹⁶ See, in particular, Hume’s remarks at T, 1.2.5.26: “I answer this objection...”

historical context in which these arguments and texts were written and acquired their meaning and significance. The irreligious interpretation begins with a detailed examination of Hume's *Treatise* and the relevant debates and controversies in which it was primarily engaged. From the perspective of the irreligious interpretation this should not be described in terms of "a struggle between skepticism and dogmatism" (p.89). Consider, for example, that thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza and Clarke were all dogmatists. Clarke stood, nevertheless, in direct opposition to the *atheism* of Hobbes, Spinoza and their followers. Hume's systematic opposition to Clarke's philosophy had religion as its primary target – not its (rationalist) dogmatism. Similarly, despite rejecting their (rationalist) dogmatism, Hume consistently sided with Hobbes and Spinoza and their "atheistic" program to separate both philosophy and morality from the corruptions and illusions of "superstition". In this way, the relevant debate that serves to structure Hume's philosophy, as suggested by Hume in his remarks in the last part of the last section of the first *Enquiry* (titled "Of the Academical or Skeptical Philosophy"), is that between "religious philosophers" and "speculative atheists" (EU, 12.24). The skeptical/ Pyrrhonist account, as Fosl outlines it in his critical remarks, fails, in my view, to do adequate justice to the significance and salience of irreligion throughout Hume's philosophy, beginning with the *Treatise*.¹⁷

Reply to Gautier

The focus of Claude Gautier's comments and criticisms are the two papers in the fifth and last part of *Recasting Hume*, both of which concern irreligion and the unity of Hume's thought. Gautier gives particular attention to "the methodological requirement for unity and coherence" that guides the irreligious interpretation. He presents some concerns about how this methodology may be construed in ways that limit or constrain our understanding of the significance of Hume's thought and its relevance to our (diverse) philosophical interests and concerns. On this basis, Gautier proposes to "reformulate the methodological requirement of the search for unity from a deflationary reading of the concept of unity and coherence which then authorizes a *certain pluralism* of interpretations." (p.101 – Gautier's emphasis) His remarks raise some interesting general questions about the significance of the unity and coherence that the irreligious interpretation attributes to Hume's thought and asks to what extent this "closes" or "blocks" a more "open" approach to our assessment of Hume's thought.

Gautier allows that the "Irreligious Hypothesis' and the research program that it defines constitute a major contribution to Humean studies in the history of philosophy" (p.111). The "irreligious hypothesis" has, he suggests a "double interest". First, it offers a more accurate account of "the historical context of the writing and reception of the *Treatise*", and second, "it gives coherence to the *Treatise* and to the whole of his writings". (p.103) While this approach is "fruitful", Gautier asks to what extent we should take it to rule out or eliminate alternative interpretations. Does the irreligious account presuppose "that there only one way to make 'unity' or 'coherence'?" (p.105) Gautier goes on to argue that the irreligious "scheme of historical interpretation" is "not incompatible with other ways of conceiving the justification of the general

¹⁷ I elaborate further on several of these points regarding the irreligious interpretation in my reply to Gautier.

coherence of the Humean work” (p.111). In other words, we can, we can, on this view, accept the irreligious interpretation and still “defend the idea of a *certain pluralism of interpretations* which, alone, allows us to take note of the complexity of a ‘work’ and of its posterities” (p.111)

I am, if I understand Gautier’s position properly, in broad agreement with his (pluralist) methodological claims. In order to explain this, I will elaborate in more detail on how the irreligious interpretation understands the question of “unity” as it relates to Hume’s thought. On this basis, I will say more about how the irreligious interpretation can accommodate requirements for “openness” and “pluralism” without compromising the claims that are essential to it. Let us begin with Gautier’s presentation of this issue:

“... does the unity in question allow us to take into account the totality of Hume’s philosophical work? Which totality is it or which unity and coherence is it?... can we affirm, once and for all, that this totality or this unity is exhaustive and that it definitely subsumes, under the hypothesis of the irreligious dimension, all of Hume’s philosophy?” (p.109)

In order to respond to this question, we need to distinguish the question of unity as it concerns specifically to the *Treatise* and the (related but distinct) question concerning the unity of Hume’s thought as a whole, which begins but does not end with the *Treatise*.

With regard to the unity of Hume’s *Treatise*, the right place to start is with Hume’s remarks in the *Abstract* that his work was written “upon the same plan” as several other works that were in “vogue” at that time (TA, 1). This general plan involves “the science of man”, which has been put “on a new footing” by philosophers (T, Intro, 7). Although Hume mentions by name several other philosophers, one author, who he does not mention but who enjoyed considerable reputation at this time, was Thomas Hobbes. There is a striking structural similarity between the general plan of Hume’s *Treatise* and Hobbes’s *The Elements of Law* and the first two parts of *Leviathan*.¹⁸ The significance of Hume’s Hobbist plan is two-sided and concerns the relationship between the (core) skeptical and naturalistic themes found in this work. On one side both Hume’s and Hobbes’s projects aim to develop a secular, scientific account of moral life, as grounded on their shared naturalistic and necessitarian conception of human nature. What is crucial to this project is the autonomy of morality from religion. On the other side of this “constructive” dimension of Hume’s thought, there is a critical or “destructive” dimension. The varied and seemingly unrelated skeptical arguments that Hume advances in the *Treatise* are motivated by the need to discredit and overturn the theological principles and doctrines that served as an obstacle to his (constructive, naturalistic) project of “a science of man”. Viewed this way, the critical side of Hume’s philosophy in the *Treatise* is simply the other side of the same anti-Christian coin that directs and shapes Hume’s core Hobbist program concerning the “science of man”. Putting these points together, what Hume aims to provide in the *Treatise* is a complete

¹⁸ Beyond this, the title “*A Treatise of Human Nature*” is the same title as the first two parts of Hobbes’s *Elements*, which had been published as a separate work under the title of *Human Nature* in 1650. For more detail on this see Russell, *Riddle*, Chp. 6.

system of irreligion or “atheism”. None of his later works possess this scope or scale of ambition.

The question regarding the unity and coherence of Hume’s (philosophical) thought taken as a whole presents us with different issues. There is, of course, no single “plan” or “model” to identify and articulate. The issue that we need to address is how the irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise* changes or affects our understanding of the development of Hume’s philosophy and any continuities – or discontinuities – that may exist among his various works. According to the orthodox interpretation, which presents Hume’s *Treatise* as largely stripped of any religious significance or content (i.e. as “castrated”), it was only in his later works, beginning with some sections of the first *Enquiry*, that Hume engages in any serious way with problems of religion. His views on this subject were further developed in the *Natural History of Religion* and in the (posthumous) *Dialogues*. In this way, the orthodox view suggests a sharp schism between Hume’s greatest and most substantial work, the *Treatise*, and his other later works that address matters of religion – and culminating in the *Dialogues*.

The irreligious interpretation *reverses* this situation. Whereas the established interpretations find discontinuity in the evolution of Hume’s philosophical thought and his central concerns in this regard, the irreligious interpretation finds continuity and consistency throughout. When Hume’s later works are considered in light of the irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise*, we can make better sense not only of their relations with each other but also of Hume’s philosophical development over the course of his life. The two *Enquiries*, on this view, are both efforts to “recast” the (paired) core components of the *Treatise*. The first *Enquiry* reflects Hume’s fundamental skeptical objective to show the limits and weakness of human understanding, particularly as it concerns the ambitions of religion (i.e. “superstition”). In the second *Enquiry* it is Hume’s particular concern to show the way in which our moral and social life is founded in the basic principles and operations of human nature or moral psychology. This is a project that is continuous with his “science of man” and serves the aim of separating morality from any supposed foundation or source in religion. Clearly, then, there is considerable continuity and consistency in respect of Hume’s irreligious aims and objectives as they stretch from the *Treatise* to the two *Enquiries*.

Hume’s preoccupation with irreligious themes and claims as found in his dissertation on the *Natural History of Religion* and in the *Dialogues* hardly needs comment or further elaboration. The *Dialogues* is generally presented as the fullest statement of Hume’s irreligious outlook, even though it is almost entirely devoted to the question of God’s existence (i.e. being and attributes) and heavily focused on the design argument. In respect of Hume’s entire set of irreligious concerns, however, the *Dialogues* does not take up issues such as those relating to the soul and a future state, free will and morality, and any number of other topics that were central to the “main debate” concerning religion and philosophy at this time. From the perspective of the irreligious interpretation, therefore, it is quite mistaken to take the *Dialogues* as a complete or comprehensive statement of Hume’s irreligious position, however important it may be. With respect to the position that Hume takes in the *Dialogues* there is, of course, considerable debate about his final conclusions and claims. With regard to Hume’s final position there is (as also discussed in my replies to Fosl) a broad spectrum of views, stretching from some form of (attenuated) deism, through agnosticism, and on to atheism. The term “irreligion” serves as a general enough label to cover the range of views that fall under this umbrella. The important point for our purposes is that, wherever Hume may fall on this spectrum, the guiding thread of the

Dialogues is plainly irreligious in character and is, as such, continuous with his earlier works, beginning with the *Treatise*, moving on to the *Enquiries* and terminating with the *Dialogues*.

This summary of the irreligious account of the unity and coherence of Hume's philosophy returns us to Gautier's methodological concerns about the significance of this interpretation for our assessment of alternative (or rival) interpretations and approaches to Hume's thought and works. While Gautier agrees that the irreligious interpretation enables us to "reconstruct a unity of meaning" that integrates Hume's works, he also expresses concern that this might encourage us to "close" or "block" off alternative interpretations and approaches. We need, Gautier argues, to remain "open" in how we read these texts and we should leave room for "pluralism" in respect of this.

With regard to these concerns, I would make the following observations. First, even if we remain "open" to alternative views and further revision and "improvements", this would not imply open-ended relativism about accuracy or adequacy of various proposed interpretations. Clearly if any interpretation is to have worth or value then we must presuppose some standard of interpretive accuracy and adequacy in relation to both the text and the context. At the very least, this suggests that some interpretations – including those that may enjoy wide acceptance and be well-established – *fail* these standards.¹⁹ This does not imply that there must be some unique or "correct" interpretation but it does insist that any proposed interpretation must satisfy these standards (however we may articulate them in detail). Pluralism, therefore, should not be confused with open-ended relativism in respect of (credible) interpretation.

From here we come to the question of the extent to which the irreligious interpretation "closes" down further debate or "blocks" alternative interpretations. The irreligious interpretation is committed to the view that alternative readings that fail to give due weight and prominence to Hume's concerns with problems of religion *throughout* his philosophy cannot be judged as complete or adequate. This leaves the irreligious interpretation still open to revision, refinement and further critique – both as an interpretation and in terms of critical responses to Hume's various (irreligious) arguments. In respect of these considerations nothing is "closed" off. The irreligious interpretation remains open to "improvement" and its arguments and claims open to questioning and challenge, to the extent that that these may be credibly advanced. (This is, indeed, the exercise that we are currently engaged in with this symposium on *Recasting Hume*.)

Beyond this, even within the constraints of accepting the framework and structure of the irreligious interpretation, there remains plenty of room for "pluralism" of a significant and substantial kind. Among other things, the irreligious interpretation places importance on the core themes of skepticism and naturalism as found in Hume's philosophy – it does not deny or downplay their importance since it takes both these

¹⁹ To cite just one example of this, consider the claim made by T.H. Grose in support of the skeptical interpretation, as presented in his introduction and commentary to the nineteenth century edition of Hume's *Essays*, which he edited with T.H. Green. According to Grose, Hume's *Treatise* "from beginning to end is the work of a solitary Scotchman, who has devoted himself to the critical study of Locke and Berkeley" (Grose, "History of the Editions", I, 40). This way of understanding and reading Hume continues to enjoy influence, even though no serious Hume scholar would now accept the claim being made.

themes to play a central and fundamental role in shaping and directing Hume's irreligious program. We may, moreover, place varying emphasis or priority on these themes, and the problems and arguments involved, depending our own particular interests and concerns. Nevertheless, whatever variations there may be in this respect, any credible account must still be informed by a proper and adequate appreciation of Hume's fundamental irreligious motivations and intentions (and certainly should not deny them). Similarly, we may pursue what Gautier describes as "more localized analyses", which focus on more specific or narrow problems and issues, without compromising the integrity of the irreligious interpretation. Gautier gives the example of personal identity as an instance of this and a number of other topics could be cited here as well (causation, the external world, free will, morals, etc.). Each of these may well serve as "a domain in its own right" for investigations and interpretations relating to Hume's philosophy.²⁰ The general point, as I express it in the closing remarks of my Introduction to *Recasting Hume*, is that "there remain many worthwhile and valuable points of entry and exit" when we approach and read Hume's works (RH, xxi). The only constraint that the irreligious interpretation imposes on approaches and analyses of this kind is that they should be adequately informed and cognizant of Hume's (fundamental) irreligious aims and motivations as they concern these (narrower) areas of investigation. For all these reasons I see no conflict between methodological requirements of "openness" and "pluralism", understood in these terms, and the irreligious interpretation.

It may be argued that this degree of openness and pluralism is still not sufficient for the purposes of appreciating Hume's philosophical legacy. If the irreligious interpretation is correct, then this legacy is deeply problematic, since it rests to a considerable extent on faulty and inadequate accounts of Hume's basic philosophical concerns and motivations – most notably with respect to the *Treatise*. This general concern, as Gautier notes, applies to both the (classic) "British empiricist" account of Hume, with its heavy and one-sided emphasis on epistemological issues, and to the "naturalistic" accounts, which suggest that greater attention should be placed on the constructive aspect of the "science of man" in Hume's philosophy. Readings of this kind, however partial and incomplete, have not only been enormously influential, they have also proved to be philosophically fertile and stimulating in respect of (our own) *critical* concerns. In "Hume's Legacy and the Idea of British Empiricism" (RH, Chp. 15) this issue is discussed at some length. Clearly the classical skeptical interpretation, as judged by the standards of historical and interpretive accuracy, is flawed and deeply unsatisfactory – despite its considerable influence and wide acceptance. On the other hand, faulty or not, the legacy of Hume's thought constructed around the idea of "British Empiricism" and the skepticism/naturalism divide associated with it, has undeniably proved to be of considerable value and interest. The appropriate response to this situation, I argue, is neither to capitulate to faulty interpretation nor dismiss the reality of Hume's established reputation understood in terms of the idea of "British Empiricism". We need, in other words, to find a balanced response to the demands of interpretive accuracy and adequacy, on one side, and recognition of a genuine

²⁰ With regard to my own work, my first book on Hume's philosophy, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, was a study of his "naturalism" in relation to his views on free will and moral responsibility. The penultimate chapter of that study is devoted to the irreligious significance of Hume's views but this is not the primary focus of this study.

philosophical legacy on the other – however much that legacy may be grounded in faulty and unconvincing claims and interpretative assumptions.

These observations regarding the gap between convincing or reliable interpretation and a critically valuable legacy may serve to highlight some of Gautier’s concerns about the irreligious interpretation closing off avenues of interpretation that have, over time, proved to be of philosophical interest and worth. There is, however, no inconsistency or conflict between aiming to satisfy both sides of the evolving relationship between interpretation and legacy. Hume’s established legacy may or may not be a reliable indicator of accurate interpretation. If the irreligious interpretation is correct, the established interpretations are, in fact, highly unreliable and Hume’s (deeply entrenched) legacy in relation to “British Empiricism” needs to be questioned and challenged. Granting this, however, does not require us to deny the worth and value of the responses that have been generated around the idea of “British Empiricism” and the associated skepticism/naturalism schism. On the contrary, as has been explained, the skepticism/naturalism split remains a central feature of the irreligious interpretation and of its effort to resolve the apparent schism in Hume’s philosophy that has puzzled and perplexed several generations of Hume scholars.

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