

# ATTENUATED DEISM AND HUME'S PROPENSITY TO BELIEVE

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I argue that a weak, attenuated belief in a deity is a natural belief for Hume, that is, a belief provided naturally rather than by reason. The main opposition to this reading comes from the fact that such belief is not universal, as is the case with other types of Humean natural belief. I therefore first engage the standard criteria for natural belief, showing that they are flawed in requiring universal instantiation of natural beliefs. Instead, I appeal to Hume's ethics to show that it is the propensity to believe rather than the belief itself that must be universal. Once this is realized, I show how a stripped down belief in a creator deity fulfills this weaker criterion, and how such an interpretation of Hume fits well with a holistic reading of his *Dialogues*.

**Keywords:** Hume, Natural Belief, Belief, Religion, Dialogues, Deism, Attenuated Deism

Maintaining that Hume holds some belief in a deity as natural is nothing novel. Ronald Butler attempted to establish the thesis as early as 1960. Against this position, J.C.A. Gaskin has argued that Humean natural belief has to meet four criteria. Because religious belief does not do so, such conviction could not be natural. As scholarship has progressed, Gaskin's criteria have seemingly attained the status of orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> However, I will argue that the criteria are too restrictive and that once this is realized, we should interpret Hume to hold as natural some belief in attenuated deism. First, I will show that the intension limned by Gaskin's criteria is too narrow. This becomes evident when read against the backdrop of Hume's second *Enquiry*. This work confirms the presence of universal natural *propensities* present in Hume's conception of natural belief, establishing a weaker source of potential natural belief that Gaskin fails to acknowledge. Once the criteria are revised accordingly, a general religious belief, the weak version of deism often attributed to Hume, should be counted as natural belief of this weaker sort.

## I

I take a *natural belief* to be any belief generated or justified independently of the rational faculties and whose fitness for belief is therefore independent of reason. While different scholars parse out Hume's non-rational belief mechanism in different

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ways, Kemp Smith provides the first explicit and thorough account,<sup>2</sup> taking it as vital to Hume's positive philosophy. Though others have followed Kemp Smith's lead, it is not the only account, so there are now many interpretations of such a mechanism. But what the varied accounts have in common is *how* Hume comes to employ natural belief. The pattern Hume sets is one of nature overcoming skepticism. Philosophy, when taken to its extreme but logical conclusions, would lead us to skepticism. But nature does not allow this, correcting our thought and preventing the skeptical beliefs from taking hold.

Consider Hume's remarks in the conclusion of Book One of the *Treatise*:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras....

Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life....I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles. But does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brains with subtilities and sophistries, at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty? Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest? No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable.... (T 1.4.7.9-10; SBN 269-270, emphasis his)<sup>3</sup>

Here, Hume sets the general pattern of nature defeating skepticism. While it is true that, "if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles," philosophy still has "nothing to oppose" these beliefs of common sense. (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) Note also that Hume believes he is under no obligation to fight against nature by trying to maintain his skepticism, and instead "blindly submits." Therefore, the move seems not only necessitated, but doxastically appropriate. At least some natural beliefs should not be resisted. In this way, Hume's conclusion of Book One sets the tone for doxastic naturalism overcoming skepticism.

If this is indeed the case, then nature herself has provided us the mechanism by which to surmount skepticism. To further develop this mechanism, a good place to begin is where Hume most explicitly raises a skeptical problem and its naturalistic solution, his resolution of the Problem of Induction in the first *Enquiry*. Hume states that, even though they are not supported by reason, causal inferences are "essential to the subsistence of all creatures," and that:

It is more comfortable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency, which may be infallible in its operations, may discover itself at the first appearance of life and thought, and may be independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding. As nature has taught us the use of our limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves, by which they are actuated; so she has implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects; though we are ignorant of those powers and forces, on which this course and succession of objects totally depends. (EHU 5.22; SBN 55)

In this passage, we find the suggestion of a non-rational belief justification mechanism attached to causal inference and explicitly tied to the instincts that nature has bestowed upon us. The mechanism carries forward our reasoning in a method analogous to the way our thought moves our limbs. It is simply completed without being contemplated or understood, and is therefore importantly disanalogous from the rationalist doctrine of innate ideas. It is not part of our rational nature, is independent of our “deductions of the understanding,” and is therefore not an object of innate knowledge.

But before further discussion, I would like to first defend Hume's solution against the worry of appearing *ad hoc*. Here is the concern: Hume doesn't want to give up causal judgments, even after he has vigorously argued that they cannot be products of reason. To assuage this difficulty, Hume maintains two appropriate justificational faculties, one of reason, and another entirely independent faculty which operates outside the bounds of reason; one that is given to us by nature and operates instinctually. Hume labors to show that reason cannot give us this knowledge, so he adds a form of non-reason that gives it to us, thereby masking a negative category as something affirmative. To blunt this worry, we must consider two points: First, even though our instinctual belief operates outside of reason for Hume, *reason does not operate outside of instinct*. He holds that, “...reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities....” (T 1.3.16.9; SBN 179) Thus, there are clear parallels between reason and natural belief. Both serve as justification mechanisms and both are utterly mysterious as to how and why they work.

The other point to be made, though not dwelled upon here, is that the admittance of doxastically appropriate natural belief fits well with other areas of Hume's philosophy. Hume denigrates any philosophy that forces us away from common sense beliefs and any philosophy that is unlivable, such as excessive skepticism.<sup>4</sup> Given that Hume considers such positions to be philosophically irresponsible, it would be strange indeed to find him endorsing just that type of view. We therefore ought to take Hume at his word; that he believes we indeed have such a mechanism providing beliefs that are doxastically appropriate. The burden of proof lies with those that would deny it and instead commit Hume to an unlivable

skepticism he denies in multiple works. Let us then consider the details of the natural beliefs that the mechanism provides.

In parsing out Hume's doxastic naturalism, Gaskin identifies four individually necessary (and presumably jointly sufficient) characteristics that guide his interpretation of Hume's natural beliefs. Considering these will serve as a helpful starting point for my modified conception. Gaskin says that Humean natural belief must meet the following:

- 1) "[T]hey are beliefs of naïve common sense." That is, they must reflect common life. (EPM 1.2; SBN 170, for instance)
- 2) They are beliefs without rational basis, i.e. they are not products of reason. (EHU 12.25; SBN 162, for instance)
- 3) They are necessary in the sense that we simply cannot act in the world if we are without such beliefs to guide us. (T 1.4.7.9-10; SBN 269-271, for instance)
- 4) They are held universally.<sup>5</sup>

Though it certainly points us in the right direction, I believe that this account fails to completely capture Humean natural belief. While this intension clearly secures the relevant beliefs that Gaskin himself isolates - belief in an external world, trust in the senses, and causation, his account, as it stands, is too restrictive. His criteria force us to jettison certain beliefs that should be included as natural for Hume.<sup>6</sup>

Though Gaskin's first two criteria seem correct, my concern is about (4), which also prevents me from assenting to (3). His fourth condition certainly seems the most vulnerable. It is not from an attempted straw man that I omit any textual reference supporting (4). Unlike the others, for which Gaskin provides the references I cite and more, he does not supply references in support for (4), instead simply pointing out that it is a consequence of (3). One might be tempted to appeal to T 1.4.4.1; SBN 225, where Hume discusses certain functions of the imagination as, "permanent, irresistible, and universal." However, this will not serve, as context makes clear that Hume is not speaking of *all* natural beliefs, but merely contrasting the doxastic appropriateness of his notion of natural belief rather than that of the ancient philosophers that defend "every trivial propensity of the imagination," (T 2.4.3.11; SBN 224) beliefs that are not useful in the conduct of life. Perhaps this lack of textual support for (4) is why others have denied that it is a necessary condition for natural belief.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this section, I will argue that we ought to form a broader and more accurate picture of Humean natural belief by qualifying (4) via a rejection of (3). Generally, I maintain that (1) through (4) hold for *some* natural beliefs (i.e. causation, an external world, and the reliability of the senses) but that there are potential natural beliefs in which only the *propensity* to believe is held universally. Of course, (3) would not obtain for this latter type, which means that their instantiation as beliefs would not be universal and hence, (4) need not obtain either. I therefore wish to establish that there are *two* levels of potential natural belief for Hume, those of a psychological necessity and those of mere psychological propensity, and that Gaskin's

account only adequately captures the former. However, the latter can be captured by modifying the account with analogous criteria. We will see that with the weaker level, the propensity, but not its instantiation, is still universal to human nature. The impetus to believe is urgent but defeasible. But because I take it that the stronger level has been sufficiently established by Gaskin and others, I will only argue for the existence of the weaker. In order to avoid begging any questions, however, I will refrain from using Hume's philosophy of religion to show this.

A worry may be raised here that Gaskin and I are just talking past one another; that his criteria are simply more stringent than mine. Were this the case, and I don't believe it is, then it would render Gaskin's criteria far from helpful philosophically. For Gaskin and others *apply* his criteria, for instance, in rejecting Butler's claim that Hume's religious belief is natural. It is unlikely that the basis for this rejection is simply having a narrower definition of natural belief than does Butler. I shall therefore continue under the assumption that there is a substantive philosophical difference between Gaskin's interpretation and my own.

To establish the propensity required for my account, we must find mechanisms for potential beliefs within Hume's corpus that, despite being provided by human nature or instinct, nevertheless are not necessitated and are therefore not universally instantiated. There seem to be clear passages indicating beliefs that meet these criteria found in his ethics, specifically, the second *Enquiry*. These aspects of Hume's moral theory are significant in that they fit the general picture of natural belief and thus, ought to be classified as such. First, for Hume, ethical beliefs clearly meet Gaskin's first two criteria. Most moral truths are quite obvious to the layman: "The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it," (EPM 9.5; SBN 272- note the universality clause as well), and Hume argues forcefully in the *Treatise* that reason is distinct from the passions (T 2.3.3.4-7; SBN 414-417) and that morality is derived from the passions, not reason. (T 3.1.1.5-9; SBN 457-458)<sup>8</sup> Further, our intuitions about morality are *certainly* belief-generating. Consider the animal capacity of sympathy Hume identifies. For instance, it might have us believe that it would be wrong to simply walk past an abandoned infant crying on the ground. Therefore, some general moral beliefs clearly meet Gaskin's (1) and (2).<sup>9</sup> If it can be established that they are tied to human nature, they would then meet my broad criterion for natural belief mentioned above, that of belief generated or justified via a non-rational mechanism,<sup>10</sup> and thereby show that Gaskin's account is too narrow and needs to be modified to accommodate the weaker level of natural belief.

One important place in the second *Enquiry* we need to consider is Part II of Section V, where we find Hume's refutation of the hedonists. There, Hume specifically grants that "Self-love is a principle in human nature" (EPM 5.16; SBN 218), but that the hedonist credo is nevertheless fundamentally flawed due to its ignoring our connection to society. This "humanity or a fellow-feeling" is also "experienced to be a principle in human nature" (EPM 5.17; SBN 219 fn), and for Hume, is a fundamental tenet of humanity, a point he emphasizes repeatedly. Nevertheless, the connection clearly is not held universally (consider, for instance,

sociopaths and those of generally low character), and Hume never intends it to be. Instead, Hume argues for a picture in which both feelings of “self-love” and “fellow-feeling” are principles of human nature. Both have deep roots in our instincts, but they sometimes conflict.<sup>11</sup> But since one will often win out against the other, it would be strange to think that we are psychologically necessitated to maintain beliefs generated by either. Instead, Hume discusses these conflicting principles as he would any empirical generalization. Linguistically, he qualifies claims with “in general” (EPM 5.23; SBN 221), discusses affectations “in many instances” (EPM 5.35; SBN 224), and explains the poet’s effect on us via a *disposition* in our minds, as everyone has “at least the seeds and first principles” of certain passions. (EPM 5.30; SBN 222-223)

The most important example of an exception to this general principle is when Hume hypothesizes a “man from a cold insensibility” who is “unaffected with the images of human happiness” (EPM 5.39; SBN 225), i.e. a person whose existence would provide a purported counterexample to his theory that we have some form of fellow-feeling by nature. Hume takes it as given that these people can still distinguish between good and evil. Given this, he asks,

How, indeed, can we suppose it possible in any one, who wears a human heart, that, if there be subjected to his censure, one character or system of conduct, which is beneficial, and another, which is pernicious, to his species or community, he will not so much as give a cool preference to the former, or ascribe to it the smallest merit or regard? Let us suppose such a person ever so selfish; let private interest have ingrossed ever so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he must unavoidably feel *some* propensity to the good of mankind, and make it an object of choice, if everything else be equal. (EPM 5.39; 225-226, emphasis his)

This passage is telling. First note that *Hume allows the thought experiment*. This undercuts the presumption that his beliefs from human nature are always psychologically necessary. The beliefs in causation and in an external world are presented as things we cannot help but believe. Here, however, Hume grants the absence of belief as a much more realistic possibility. Secondly, notice that even this purported counterexample still has the *propensity* toward fellow-feeling. He cannot be totally indifferent to the well-being of others. Hence, Hume allows that there *are* universal belief-generating propensities, such as fellow-feeling, that are part of human nature, whether or not they are actually instantiated.<sup>12</sup> But thirdly, in some cases, this propensity *is something we can choose to overcome*. It becomes a conscious “object of choice” to ignore the feelings that produce beliefs. Clearly then, Hume holds that there are belief-generating aspects of human nature which do not necessitate belief. Though the propensity is universally found, the instantiation is not. Specifically, when the universal principles of human nature come into conflict, such as our principles of self-love and of fellow-feeling, one need not be instantiated at a given time.

The conclusion of the second *Enquiry* re-emphasizes that moral sentiments fulfill Gaskin’s (1) and (2) in that they are common sense and distinct from reason, but that only a propensity is held universally. Hume asserts that morality, “...implies some

sentiment, so universal and extensive as to extend to all mankind..." (EPM 9.5; SBN 272), and relates to "...some universal principle of the human frame..." (EPM 9.6; SBN 272) In other words, there *is* something universal pertaining to moral belief, and it *is* tied to human nature. However, though the *tendency* toward fellow-feeling, for instance, is universal, Hume claims that there is "...scarce any philosophy" that can support indifference, thus re-emphasizing that the beliefs stemming from these principles are beliefs of common sense while still admitting that they can be overcome by (at least some) philosophies. This is later supported by Hume specifically calling this natural feeling toward "benevolence or humanity" an "original propensity." (EPM 9.20; SBN 281) It is mere propensity precisely because people can set themselves against this facet of their nature. Because of this, Hume continues to allow the possibility of those, "...that feel no reluctance to the thoughts of villainy and baseness..." (EPM 9.23; SBN283) More colloquially, we all know people who have been able to overcome their instinctual benevolent tendencies.

Gaskin's criteria for natural belief are therefore accurate in some cases, i.e. those that meet the level of psychological necessity, but they fail to capture the second level, psychological propensity, in which it is the propensity to believe, and not the belief itself, that is universal. We now see that, while Gaskin's first two criteria will still hold for them, we must reject (3) and qualify (4) so that it is only the *propensity* for their belief that is universal. Criterion (3) would then be replaced with something weaker, something to the effect that the beliefs are very important to living in the world, but not absolutely necessary in cases of mere propensity. This is not to say that it must inform our actions. Rather, it can also inform how we approach the world, our conception of it, etc. Thus qualifying (3) and (4) allows us to better capture Hume's account of natural belief by recognizing beliefs of both psychological necessity and mere propensity.

## II

In the previous section, the two levels of Hume's doxastic naturalism were developed. I will now argue that belief in a designing mind is a natural belief of the weaker sort, defending the following picture: We have a universal propensity to believe in an intelligent creator, and it is considering some version of the design argument that causes this propensity to become an actuality. We offer our doxastic assent to the argument, though not to its reasoning. Instead, the thoughts underlying the premises trigger our natural belief. It is non-inferential, and instead something that simply strikes us, akin to sensation. Our belief in the conclusion is made sufficiently vivid not by reason but instinct. Since it is non-inferential, rather than the product of reason, it counts as natural belief, but of the weaker sort. Like fellow-feeling, it is not universal. Not everyone contemplates the thoughts that trigger it, and we may set other parts of our nature (i.e. reason) against it. This reading fits well with the *Dialogues* as a holistic picture, overcoming the interpretive problems of other accounts and giving us *prima facie* reason to accept it. But setting aside the *Dialogues* for the moment, I will now argue that, according to Hume, some notion of a designer is natural belief of this sort. I will first establish the content of the belief before arguing for Hume's commitment to the universality and non-rationality criteria.

As the previous discussion on natural belief indicates, we are looking for evidence that Hume considers *some* inclination toward a belief in a designing mind universal to human nature. But as a propensity,<sup>13</sup> it need not be universally manifested. It will be helpful to first consider Hume's letter to Elliot on the *Dialogues*, which will frame the inquiry:

I cou'd wish that Cleanthes' [design] Argument could be so analys'd, as to be render'd quite formal & regular. The Propensity of the Mind towards it, unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Senses & Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem'd a suspicious Foundation. (L1, Letter 72)

This letter goes a long way toward establishing *some* belief in a designer as natural. It does not explicitly give content to the belief, but points us in the right direction.

First, the letter implies that Hume endorses some version of the design argument that is not "formal & regular." Following Pike and others, I take "formal & regular" arguments to be standard inferential arguments, interpreting Hume's irregular arguments as non-inferential.<sup>14</sup> But if this is correct, then the letter further confirms the thesis that there are *two* levels of natural belief, that of a mere propensity and that of necessity. The latter is how Hume once again categorizes belief in the external world of "Sense & Experience." He describes the belief as "strong & universal," and clearly more powerful than the propensity to believe in design. This gives a clue as to the content of the belief.

If the propensity is "toward" the design argument, then the content of the belief should be that which is concluded by both the *Dialogues'* "regular" and "irregular" design arguments, something like Philo's distillation of natural theology in Part XII, "...*that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence...*" (D 129, emphasis his) That is, something fairly general and independent of religious tradition. This distillation of universal religious belief is present early in Hume's thought, as Philo's comment echoes Hume's Early Memoranda: "The Center of Unity of all Men with Relation to Religion is, That there is a first Cause. As you augment the Propositions you find Non-conformists." (M II.8) If there is a religious belief that would count as natural, it would be the conclusion of a reasonable design argument, and this is the propensity Hume discusses with Elliot.<sup>15</sup>

This potential content of natural belief has two advantages: First, for Hume, it is the strongest conclusion that the design argument can hope to support. Philo gives many reasons to think that human-like intelligence of the deity is too strong and that, due to the Problem of Evil, any anthropomorphized morality is even more suspect. For Cleanthes' design argument to strike us as tenable and not be opposed by reason, it could not claim too much. But there is also a second, more important reason to think that this conclusion is a candidate for natural belief. It is more likely to have a claim on universality in human nature. Let us consider whether this condition can be met.

The previous section has already removed the major obstacle to interpreting attenuated deism as a natural belief for Hume by arguing that there are two levels. Butler argues that Humean religious belief is natural, but the rejection of this thesis, championed by Gaskin, is generally based on the fact that religious belief is not universal. Its impetus is therefore not strong enough to count as a natural belief for those that support the unmodified criteria.<sup>16</sup> However, when these criteria are augmented, we find evidence that the propensity toward attenuated deism is indeed universal, though the belief itself is not.

Consider Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, written roughly in tandem with the first draft of the *Dialogues*. In this work, Hume himself grants that religion does not attain universality. Unlike self-love and our natural drives, religion is not "an original instinct or primary impression of nature." (NHR 33) Religious belief fails Gaskin's third and fourth criteria (universality and necessity), a point Hume reaffirms in the letter. While this fact explains the existence of atheism and the general diffusion of religious beliefs, it tells us nothing of whether it may still be a natural belief of the weaker level that attains universal tendency rather than actualization. Once this is realized, the *Natural History* appears to support a designer's candidacy for a natural belief provided by the weaker mechanism.

In the *Natural History*, Hume again defends the qualification that only an attenuated deism could be universal: "The only point of theology, in which we shall find a consent of mankind almost universal, is, that there is an invisible, intelligent power in the world...." (NHR 44) This tells us two things: First, it is in accordance with Philo's distillation of religious belief in the *Dialogues* and the similar sentiment found in the Early Memoranda. Second, it goes a long way toward meeting the modified universality criterion. Hume does qualify the universality of religious sentiment with "almost," but this is to be expected, given that Hume is speaking not about the propensity toward religious belief but its *actualization*. But because it only discusses actualizations, this passage cannot confirm universality.

Later, however, Hume states, "The *universal propensity* to believe in [an] invisible intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp...." (NHR 86, emphasis mine) Here we have Hume explicitly identifying some form of deistic belief as a "universal propensity." This is clear enough from the passage, but the comments after require explanation. He states that the belief is not "original instinct" but is generally marked upon our nature. To make sense of this, it will help to reference similar usage of the term.

The phrase "original instinct" comes up often in Hume's discussion of morality in the *Treatise*, as something "implanted in our nature" (T 2.2.7.1; SBN 368-369) and present in our "first infancy." (T 3.1.2.6; SBN 473) Principles "inherent in the soul" are original instinct (T 3.3.6.3; SBN 619) and Hume implies that original instinct, unlike man's inventions, are part of "immutable" human nature. (T 3.3.6.5; SBN 620) From this, I would suggest that, when Hume states that belief in an intelligent author is not an "original instinct," he means only that it is not necessitated by our nature, and is therefore not always present. But if any beliefs can be said to be original instincts, only those of the strong level might qualify as present in early

childhood and immutable. Gaskin rejects this however, claiming that original instinct has a meaning distinct from natural belief. He says of original instincts that,

They are physical features, which as a matter of contingent fact, almost all human beings and many animals have. They are almost universal because of our species, the type of creature we are, not because they are philosophically vulnerable beliefs in the absence of which we could not function or make sense of the world.<sup>17</sup>

But this does not seem right. If Gaskin were correct that original instincts are of a category completely distinct from belief, then it would be rather perplexing that Hume would twice invoke this terminology in emphasizing that the belief in a creator is *not* an original instinct. If Gaskin were right, then it would be a category mistake to apply this term to *any* belief, and Hume's claim would amount to reminding his reader that he is not making such a mistake. It would therefore be strange indeed for Hume to see the need to repeatedly remind us of this. It makes much more sense to think Hume reminds us precisely because some beliefs *can* be from original instinct.

However, the passage goes further than Hume's similar statement of design and original instinct quoted above. Here, he also asserts that human nature has this propensity as a "mark or stamp." It is interesting that Hume's language mirrors Descartes' discussion following the argument for the existence of God in the *Meditations*: "...it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea in me to be, as it were, the *mark* of the craftsman *stamped* onto his work...." (AT VII 51: CSM II 35)<sup>18</sup> Descartes believed we could demonstrate the existence of a non-deceiving God *a priori* using only clear and distinct ideas. To do so was to discover God's mark or stamp. Though Hume would dismiss such a project (especially since it requires the false assumption that causal principles are known *a priori*), his use of "mark or stamp" seems similar to Descartes' in that the capacity to discover the existence of the deity is present as a potentiality imbedded in human nature. Belief is not inborn, but it is a mark that we can discover, though not through rational argument. This interpretation fits with Hume's statement that everyone, "...may see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature...yet it scarcely seems possible, that any one of good understanding should reject that idea, when once it is suggested to him." (NHR 85)

But in the *Natural History* and elsewhere, Hume's consideration of the design argument gives further reason to think that this mark is present. For Hume, "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." (NHR 33) This passage, echoing Philo's sentiments of Part XII, supports the standard interpretation of the "irregular arguments" of the *Dialogues*, which simply strike us with their veracity when considered. Further, this passage reveals that it is not a formal design argument that persuades us, but rather nature speaking directly to us. Notice that rationality is not appealed to in arriving at the conclusion, but only when we attempt to resist it. The upshot is that, as soon as one is confronted not necessarily with the design argument

but with the common experience that underlies its premises and inference, one gives assent. It therefore seems extremely plausible to grant a universal propensity for belief in a designer.

Before moving on to the rationality criterion, it is important to realize that there is a final consideration that speaks toward universality, the argument from silence. The only major argument in the literature *against* Humean attenuated deism counting as natural belief is its lack of universal actualization. But I grant, and Hume grants, that religious belief is not universal. But similarly, one would grant that nor are our beliefs of benevolence universal. But for Hume, this in no way precludes the fact that it is imbedded in human nature. The argument from silence, then, is that in Hume's corpus, there seems to be no obvious reason to think that the *propensity* toward religious belief is not universal and, without any such counter-evidence, we ought to conclude that Hume holds the tendency to be universal.

In making this claim, I will address one worry where it appears that Hume might imply that the propensity itself is not universal, the previously quoted letter to Elliot. Recall that Hume states, "The Propensity of the Mind towards it, unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Senses & Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem'd a suspicious Foundation." (L1, Letter 72) The concern is that the claim that the propensity is less "strong & universal" seems to imply that the propensity itself is not universal. However, this reading is inaccurate. First, Hume is comparing degrees of justification, noting that even though there are no good philosophical reasons to believe in an external world, the belief has a proper foundation precisely because it is "strong & universal." However, Hume does not say that the propensity toward design is neither as strong as nor as universal as belief in the external world. He just says that the propensity attains a lesser degree of justification. There is no negation involved in his claim at all. But if there *were* a negation, he would be negating a conjunction, implying he could be negating one, the other, or both. But I do not mean this to turn into a semantic quibble. Rather, there is something substantive in saying that Hume's "as strong & universal" comes together as a conjunctive package, and that this package admits of degrees. Hume gives us no reason to think that these two are separable criteria. This is evidenced by the fact that "Senses & Experience" is also presented as a conjunctive package, yet one cannot deny one without denying the other. Just as "Senses & Experience" constitutes one category, so does the other. "Strong & universal," then, simply represents the power of the belief.

Having secured the universality of the propensity of religious belief, let us briefly consider the question of rationality. If it is the case that the propensity for religious assent is a product of rational argument, then it cannot count as natural. Let us therefore return to the passage in the *Natural History* quoted above, where Hume speaks of both design and of a reflective act: "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." (NHR 33) It might be tempting to read this as Hume holding that rationality determines assent. The argument would be that, if rationality is used to resist the argument, it can be used for arriving at the conclusion as well. However,

there are no obvious grounds for making this claim. No mention is made of an argument being presented, only nature somehow conveying the requisite idea of design when we contemplate the world. Only after “nature bespeaks” does the serious reflection come in, serving in an evaluative role that determines whether the conclusion is to be resisted or not. But even this might grant too much, for Hume gives us no reason to think he is even talking about appropriate doxastic responses. No mention is made of whether we *should* accept or reject design. The question is rather whether we *can*. The proper conclusion to draw from this passage is that rationality cannot suspend the belief.

But there is another worry about rationality lurking here. Immediately preceding this statement, Hume claims that, regarding religion, one question is “concerning its foundation in *reason*” and that this question “which is most important, admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest solution.” (NHR 33, emphasis mine) It is, in fact, nature bespeaking an intelligent author that provides this answer. The challenge is that Hume seems to be tying this passage to reason, not instinct. This is the answer that reason gives. However, it is important to remember that the former cannot operate without the latter. Consider Hume’s normative epistemic principle that Don Garrett calls the Title Principle,<sup>19</sup> “Where reason is lively and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us.” (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) The interpretation I defend is that the reasoning of the design argument would not be sufficient to arrive at its conclusion via the rules of just reasoning, but that the propensity to accept a designer sufficiently increases the liveliness of the idea so as to push most of us into accepting the conclusion nonetheless. And this reading *is* compatible with the passage. The argument’s “foundation in reason” is that reasoning sets the stage for nature. We do not conclude a designer if we do not reason about the design argument in some fashion, if we do not consider the design inference itself, making the contemplation of a designer’s foundations in reason necessary but not sufficient for assent. When we reason about these matters, we present nature with the opportunity to speak up and she answers the question for us. This answer that nature provides is the “clearest” because it is non-inferential and on par with sensation. The important point is that, even if we are trying to arrive at an answer via reason, it is not reason that answers, but nature.

But Hume also gives a much stronger consideration to think that design is not a product of reason. In making the claim that the inference to a designer is a product of reason, we would be forced to ignore Parts II through XI of the *Dialogues*. It would be difficult after reading the *Dialogues* to think that Hume holds that the belief in an original author could be arrived at via the rules of just analogical inference. Cleanthes effectively dismantles the cosmological “argument *a priori*” and Philo does the same to the “regular” version of the design argument. The sheer power of the criticisms, combined with the lack of adequate non-doxastic naturalist responses to them, gives compelling reason to think that even attenuated deism, for Hume, lacks any objective rational basis.

Let us consider all these points together. At the start of the *Natural History*, Hume immediately indicates that there is some impetus to accept certain religious

beliefs. But the only content that would be universal is merely the belief in an intelligent creator. Such a claim is certainly at odds with the criticisms of the design argument in the *Dialogues*. However, Hume gives us cause to think that religious beliefs are not the product of reason, and we can explain the impetus to accept the design argument in terms of natural belief for several reasons: First, Hume indicates that there is a universal impetus to accept the argument. Second, it is not a product of reason, given the insurmountable (or at minimum, insurmounted) objections presented in the *Dialogues*. Finally, attenuated deism seems to be a belief of naïve common sense, not only because, according to Hume, it is present in every society, cultured and barbarous, but also because, as Philo said, “A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless stupid thinker.” (D 116) These considerations, as well as Hume’s talk about the propensity to believe, provide strong evidence toward religious belief as natural. It would be a product of the weaker level, as it is not an “original instinct” and is not psychologically necessitated. Nevertheless, it fulfills the modified criteria and is a product of a non-rational belief-generating mechanism, and thus, when instantiated, ought to be considered a natural belief, the propensity turning into belief when nature strikes us as we contemplate the thoughts underlying the design argument. This picture merits a few brief discussions.

First, a worry may be raised in considering the ramifications of religious belief. In the *Natural History* and the *History of England* especially, Hume often dwells on harms rendered by religion. Thus, there may be an important disanalogy between beliefs of religion and beliefs of ethics. In Hume’s naturalist ethics, the beneficial consequences of virtues give further, pragmatic justification for their adherence. It might therefore seem that something like Hume’s notion of religion, with its often pernicious and bloody consequences, could not be given via a doxastically appropriate justificatory system. To blunt this worry, however, we must remember that it is the *distillation* of religion that is a natural belief. This excludes sectarian outlooks that tend to cause the problems, what Hume frequently calls vulgar or false religion.

Briefly, false religions are the vulgar religions of superstition and enthusiasm, as well as the polytheistic religions. As Hume tells us in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” false religion has pernicious consequences (ES 73), and comes about due to fear and ignorance rather than any genuine pursuit of truth. Superstition comes from “Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance,” (ES 74) and Enthusiasm is born of “Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance.” (ES 74) We find similar sentiments in the *Natural History* about the genesis of polytheism: “The first ideas of religion arose...from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind,” (NHR 38) and similarly in the *Dialogues* “...both fear and hope enter into religion: because both these passions, at different times, agitate the human mind, and each of these forms a species of divinity...” (D 127) The upshot is that this type of religious belief is a product of the agitation of our “hopes and fears.”

In contrast, Hume discusses true religion (or “genuine theism,” “pure principles of theism,” etc.) in the *Dialogues* and the *Natural History*. Hume ties genuine theism to the design argument, claiming the belief that “[t]he whole frame of nature bespeaks of an intelligent author” is one of the “primary principles of genuine Theism

and Religion.” (NHR 33) Genuine theism is independent of tradition and does not advocate moral proscriptions. Instead, these are perversions wrought by superstition. (NHR 65-66) Genuine theism has meaning to the “true philosopher” but that “the terrors of religion commonly prevail above its comforts.” (D 127) Hence, Philo venerates true religion in equal proportion to his abhorrence of false religion. (D 121) Both Cleanthes and Philo agree that true religion “has no pernicious consequences,” (D125) but that it is much less common than its destructive counterparts. (Although in Section XI of the first *Enquiry*, Hume grants that it is not entirely destructive, that false religion can serve to restrain certain passions and therefore preserve society.)

True religion is thus the recognition of some impetus toward the design argument, and the recognition that this is as far as we should offer our assent.<sup>20</sup> Additions to this attenuated deism are what push true religion into false. In other words, Hume holds that false religion is born from mixing inappropriate passions with true religion. He tells us that “the corruption of the best things produces the worst” and that superstition and enthusiasm “are the corruption of true religion.” (ES 73) Hence, true religion is rare not because the impetus to accept its principles is rare but because the impetus to accept *only* its principles is rare.

Under this interpretation, despite the fact that “the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords us [a plausible design] argument,” the reason that this could not “have an influence on mankind when they formed their first rude notions of religion” (NHR 35), is because early mankind simply could not separate the corrupting passions from the idea of design. This could be for many reasons, but are best attributed to a lack of sophisticated thinking, especially in science. In the *Natural History*, Hume discusses the positing of deities as causes for various phenomena, stating, “Could men anatomize nature...they would find, that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects.” (NHR 140) Before man had any knowledge of science, the experience of unusual phenomena such as eclipses and earthquakes would be much more likely to excite the passions and incline us to attach extra attributes to the deity (such as anger), thereby corrupting religion. But as thought has progressed, it has become possible (though not common) to resist this temptation and maintain true religion. But this brings up the question of the need for true religion.

Though I have not dwelled on the commonsense and necessity for living criteria, it is important to consider how Hume’s natural religious belief fulfills them. As mentioned above, the existence of a designer is commonsense in that it is a standard pre-philosophical belief (or at least it was in Hume’s time). According to Hume, it is found in every society, and this seems sufficient to fulfill the first criterion. Though I reject (3) as stated, I suggested that we weaken the requisite into a claim that natural beliefs are very important to existing in the world, drastically affecting how we live in it and easing our passage through it. Consider what I take to be the paragon case of the weaker level, beliefs generated by our inherent fellow-feeling. Clearly, our natural impetus toward benevolence governs how we live, but Hume further implies that being moral helps us to interact with other humans. A similar case could be made for the impact of religion on common life. Here, however, we must be careful. It is true that in the *Dialogues* and the first *Enquiry*, Hume suggests that “true religion” is

not so far from atheism. This is because, for Hume, true religion loses its ability to guide morality. It simply does not direct our actions.

But this is not the only way religion impacts our lives. As Hume implies above, religion is manifested as a solution to fear and an affirmation of hope, preventing an existential crisis and bestowing some sort of meaning to it all. For instance, Loeb's account of doxastic naturalism focuses on the importance of stability of belief. Nature takes over in order to prevent discomfort and anxiety, for instance, in tensions between opposed beliefs.<sup>21</sup> If something like this is correct (and Loeb gives good reason to think it is), then we can see natural belief in religion as significantly affecting our lives without directly informing our actions. As Kail points out, "adopting that belief [of intelligent invisible powers] ameliorates the anxiety the thinkers feel prior to the belief. The disposition then is triggered and sustained because it removes psychological discomfort."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Hume's "true religion" does much to impact our outlook on life, though it is not especially action-guiding. Barring further arguments to the contrary then, I hold that, the distilled belief in some sort of designer should count as natural. Let us now consider how this informs our reading of the *Dialogues*.

If Hume maintains that belief in some sort of intelligent author is natural, but the mechanism supplying this belief attains only universal propensity, then this provides an extremely plausible interpretation of Philo's Reversal and fits well with the overall discussion of the *Dialogues*, as something like the following would happen: The analogical reasoning of the design argument itself is *not* inferentially justified for the myriad reasons Philo gives in the *Dialogues*. However, this in no way implies that Philo rejects the conclusion of the argument as a result; only its *rational* justification. (Note that this is different from the interpretation that Philo accepts one version of the argument but rejects another. I hold that Philo accepts no *inferential* design argument.) Instead, the thoughts underlying the argument trigger our instinctual propensity to believe. We have a tendency to believe that the order of the universe was intended, and this belief becomes manifest when we ponder the thoughts that amount to some version of the design argument. It is not an inference, but rather something that simply strikes us, as would sensation. Cleanthes makes comments similar to this in Part III to which Philo does not object. As something akin to sensation, the conclusion of a designer is non-inferential and therefore counts as a natural belief. If this picture is accurate, we now have a powerful interpretive tool for Philo's Reversal in Part XII. If Philo is a doxastic naturalist of the sort described, then of course he would reject the analogical design arguments of Cleanthes while still granting that "A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless stupid thinker." (D 116) We can explain the purported Reversal without his dissembling, as well as explain Philo's anti-skeptical assertions in Parts II and X of the *Dialogues*. Further, maintaining that Philo is a doxastic naturalist helps us understand his many appeals to causal knowledge, from his statements about the laws of nature to his endorsement of the Principle of Sufficient Reason to his ignoring the Problem of Induction in favor of analogical reasoning to his profession that custom allows us to go beyond constant conjunction. Most importantly, we can do all of this while taking Hume at his word

instead of opening Pandora's Box by appealing to Humean disingenuousness in the work.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that we must supplement the traditional criteria for Humean natural beliefs by acknowledging that they can be either the product of an irresistible urge motivated by psychological necessity or of an urgent but defeasible belief present in human nature as a mere psychological propensity to believe. Hence, it is the propensity to accept the belief that is universal, rather than its instantiation. Since the stronger criteria and resultant beliefs have been thoroughly explored in the literature, I have focused on the latter, showing that there are clear indications of psychological propensity without belief to be found in Hume's ethics, specifically, the universal principles of human nature Hume calls "fellow-feeling" and "self-love." In these cases, there is a tendency to believe, but not always an actualization. Once we recognize the existence of this weaker belief mechanism, it becomes apparent that a stripped down notion of a deity should count as one such belief the mechanism provides. The propensity to believe in a designer is instantiated when contemplating the design argument, but it is the natural propensity to believe, rather than the reasoning itself that causes us to accept the inference. This picture is rendered plausible first by the belief meeting the criteria set forth for the weaker mechanism. For Hume, actual belief in a bare designer is nearly ubiquitous, and the propensity itself is universal. But if too much content is added to this natural belief, then it may be opposed by reason, and may not be instantiated. It is instinct rather than the rules of analogical reasoning that cause us to accept the design inference, and hence the belief is not a product of reason. Further, the belief is common sense for Hume, and significantly impacts our worldview. Once we have accepted that this belief is natural, the view allows for an elegant reading of the *Dialogues*, giving further cause to accept that this weak deistic belief is natural within Hume's system.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> See, for instance, O'Connor, D., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hume on Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 87-93 or Kail, P.J.E., *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68-69.
- <sup>2</sup> Kemp Smith, N., *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).
- <sup>3</sup> I employ the following abbreviations for Hume's works: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in both Clarendon and Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 2007): T; *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in both Clarendon and Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 2000): EHU; *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, in both Clarendon and Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1998): EPM; *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in *David Hume - Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): D; Early Memoranda, compiled in Mossner, E. C., "Hume's Early Memoranda, 1729-1740: The Complete Text", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9/4 (1948): 492-518: M (following Mossner's numeration); *Natural History of Religion*, as reprinted in *A Dissertation on the Passions, The Natural History of Religion*, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007): NHR; *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E.F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty

Classics, 1987): ES; *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 2 vols.: L1-2.

<sup>4</sup> See Hume's discussion contrasting "mitigated" or "academic" skepticism and excessive "Pyrrhonian" skepticism in EHU 12.24; SBN 161-162. There, he states, "...philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflection of common life, methodized and corrected." This appeal to common life also appears in his criticisms of occasionalism in Section VII of the first *Enquiry* and Philo's criticisms of excessive, unlivable skepticism in Part I of the *Dialogues*.

<sup>5</sup> Gaskin, J.C.A., "God, Hume and Natural Belief," *Philosophy* 49/189 (1974): 281-294. See pages 285-286.

<sup>6</sup> Before criticizing the view, I wish to emphasize that Gaskin's work in Hume's philosophy of religion is some of the best there is, and that my dispute stems from a large-scale interpretative disagreement rather than any carelessness on his part.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Butler is committed to some form of deism as natural belief. However, he endorses something like Gaskin's (3) and (4), describing religious belief as "unavoidable" (Butler, R.J., "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 42/1 (1960): 73-100, pages 80 and 85). Nelson Pike, in his commentary on the *Dialogues* (Pike, N., *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 224-238) seems to implicitly reject Gaskin's third criterion for reasons more similar to my own. See also Penelhum, T., "Natural Belief and Religious Belief in Hume's Philosophy", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 33/131 (1983): 166-181. He argues that deistic belief is like a natural belief, but cannot be arrived at without reason.

<sup>8</sup> For a concise introduction to Hume's moral theory in historical context, see Schneewind, J.B., *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 17.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, he cites the second *Enquiry* as justification for (1). See Gaskin, J.C.A., (1974): 285.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Shaver, in Shaver, R., "Hume's Moral Theory?", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12 (1985): 317-331, argues a parallel between the way Hume justifies causal epistemic norms and the justification of moral norms.

<sup>11</sup> Hume tells us how to approach conflicting passions using probability in T 2.3.9. There, he also states, "...the direct passions frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable." (T 2.3.9.8; SBN 439)

<sup>12</sup> Robert Fogelin, in Fogelin, R.J., *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 125, rightly points out that Hume *must* hold that there is a sufficient degree of uniformity in human nature to allow for causal judgments involving agency as, "...the very possibility of the science of man depends upon this uniformity." Beauchamp, in Beauchamp, T., "Normativity in Hume's Moral Theory," in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. E.S. Radcliffe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 502, holds that human nature provides the "deepest explanation of the authority of morals for Hume." For Beauchamp though, the universality is restricted only to those who can be impartial in their moral judgments.

<sup>13</sup> Many scholars consider Hume to hold some propensity to believe in a designing mind. Gaskin, in Gaskin, J.C.A., *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 1988), 6-7, grants that there is a propensity to believe, but does not consider it a natural belief since it is resistible and therefore fails his universality criterion. Jeffery Wieand, in Wieand, J., "Pamphilus in Hume's *Dialogues*", *The Journal of Religion* 65/1 (1985): 37, thinks that it does pass this criterion, the belief resisting skepticism in the same way as belief in the external world. O'Higgins, J., "Hume and the Deists: a Contrast in Religious Approaches," *Journal of Theological Studies* 22/2 (1971): 72 and Yandell, K., *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery": His Views on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 215, hold something closer to my thesis, granting religion only as a natural propensity. Yandell, K., (1990), 221, claims that this takes the

form of assenting to some weak version of the design argument. O'Connor, D., (2001), 87-90 summarizes the main considerations for holding this position nicely.

<sup>14</sup> Pike, N., (1970), 232-235. See also Tweyman, S., *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (The Hague: Martinus Nyhoff, 1986), 50-51, Reich, L., *Hume's Religious Naturalism* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), and Logan, B., *A Religion Without Talking: Religious Belief and Natural Belief in Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (New York, P. Lang, 1993), 96-98. Logan, however, draws the distinction as between rational and non-rational arguments.

<sup>15</sup> Note that this is, in effect, Gaskin's "attenuated deism." See Gaskin, J.C.A., (1988): 223.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Gaskin, J.C.A., (1974): 289 and Gaskin, J.C.A., (1988), 120.

<sup>17</sup> Gaskin, J.C.A., Review of *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, eds. D.Z. Phillips and T. Tessin, *Hume Studies* 27/2 (2001): 346.

<sup>18</sup> Descartes, R., "Meditations on First Philosophy with Objections and Replies", in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), II, 35, emphasis mine (*Oeuvres De Descartes*, eds. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1983), VII, 51).

<sup>19</sup> Garrett, D., *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 234.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Yoder, in Yoder, T.S., *Hume on God: Irony, Deism and Genuine Theism* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 86-87, defends something similar to this. Yoder's thesis is importantly different, however, as he believes that true religion is a product of reason and that only the vulgar comes from nature. See pages 83-84.

<sup>21</sup> See Loeb, L.E., *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter one, especially page 8.

<sup>22</sup> Kail, P.J.E., (2007), 10. Though Kail himself does not believe that religious belief is natural (see page 71), he does believe that religion has this psychological effect for Hume.