

The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion
Oxford University Press: Forthcoming
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Introduction

The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery.

- David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*

A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40) is widely regarded as the greatest and most influential of David Hume's philosophical works and perhaps the greatest and most influential work in English speaking philosophy. Ironically enough, however, despite Hume's considerable reputation as one of the most important philosophical critics of religion, it is also generally agreed that the *Treatise* has little or nothing of a direct or substantial nature to do with problems of religion. According to the orthodox view, Hume originally intended to include some irreligious material in the *Treatise* but decided to "castrate" his work before it was published, removing a number of sections that might cause "offence". Hume's major contributions to issues of religion, it is said, are all to be found in his later writings – most notably his posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Contrary to this view, I argue in this book that it is irreligious aims and objectives that are fundamental to the *Treatise* and account for its underlying unity and coherence.

Almost all commentators over the past two and a half centuries have agreed that Hume's intentions in the *Treatise* should be interpreted in terms of two general themes: scepticism and naturalism. Although both these themes are relevant to issues of religion in ways that Hume subsequently developed and brought to light in his later works, neither the scepticism nor the naturalism of the *Treatise* are understood to have any particular relevance for issues of religion. In respect of scepticism, Hume is understood to advance a variety of radical, pyrrhonian principles and doctrines throughout his work. These are supposed to undermine and discredit systematically our common sense beliefs about the

world. On the other hand, in respect of naturalism, Hume is understood to aim at being “the Newton of the moral sciences” by way of introducing the “experimental method” to the study of human nature. It is evident, however, that although both these themes surface in various ways throughout the *Treatise*, they stand in considerable tension in relation to each other. More specifically, Hume’s strong sceptical commitments appear to discredit and undercut his naturalist ambitions in respect of the project of “the science of man”. This core tension constitutes a deep riddle lying at the heart of the *Treatise*. Any acceptable interpretation of this work must aim to solve it.

The key to solving the riddle of Hume’s *Treatise* rests with Hume’s fundamental irreligious aims and objectives. Contrary to the orthodox view, it is problems of religion, broadly conceived, that hold the contents of the *Treatise* together as a unified work. More specifically, the direction and structure of Hume’s thought in the *Treatise* is shaped, on one side, by his attack on the Christian metaphysics and morals and, on the other, by his efforts to construct in its place a secular, scientific account of morality. The constructive or positive side of Hume’s thought – his “science of man” – begins with a detailed examination of human thought and motivation based on a naturalistic and necessitarian conception of human kind. The model for this project - after which it was both planned and structured - was the work of Thomas Hobbes, the most infamous “atheist” thinker of the seventeenth century. The destructive or critical side of the philosophy of the *Treatise* is simply the other side of the same anti-Christian coin. That is to say, in order to clear the ground to build the edifice of a secular morality, Hume had to undertake a systematic sceptical attack on those theological doctrines and principles that threatened such a project. The varied and apparently disparate sceptical arguments that Hume advances in the *Treatise* are in fact very largely held together by his overarching concern to discredit and refute Christian metaphysics and morals. Among the most obvious and prominent of Hume’s sceptical targets in the *Treatise* was Samuel Clarke, an influential Christian rationalist who aimed to demonstratively refute the “atheistic” philosophy of Hobbes.

The irreligious account of Hume’s aims and objectives, I maintain, provides a framework for solving the most fundamental problems of interpretation throughout the *Treatise*. In the first place, it is only from within the framework of the irreligious interpretation that it is possible to understand the specific arguments and positions that

Hume takes up on a variety of particular issues and topics (e.g. causation, induction, external world, the soul, etc.). Moreover, the irreligious framework also provides us with a way of explaining how Hume's more radical sceptical arguments are supposed to cohere with his ambition to contribute to the "science of man" (i.e. it serves to solve the riddle). In this way, the irreligious interpretation enables us to account for both the unity and coherence of Hume's entire project in the *Treatise* – something that the traditional sceptical and naturalist interpretations have failed to achieve. Finally, with these irreligious elements of Hume's intentions properly in view, it is evident, from a philosophical perspective, that the *Treatise* makes a major contribution to the philosophy of religion – this being a core feature of this work that has been almost entirely overlooked. From a historical point of view the significance of the irreligious interpretation is that Hume's aims and objectives in the *Treatise* must be placed in the context of the battle between "religious philosophers" and "speculative atheists" – with Hume coming down decisively on the side of the latter. From this perspective *A Treatise of Human Nature* must be judged as one the great works of the Radical Enlightenment, deserving a prominent place within an anti-Christian philosophical tradition that includes works by Hobbes, Spinoza and their freethinking followers in early eighteenth-century Britain. In this way, from both a philosophical and historical perspective, the irreligious interpretation provides a fundamentally different account of the nature and character of Hume's aims and intentions in the *Treatise* and thereby alters our understanding the significance of this work for our own contemporaries.