

The Context, Aims, and Structure of Hume's First *Enquiry*

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1. Hume's Philosophical Targets

To interpret any philosopher's work appropriately, it is important to understand the concerns which motivate him: unless we have some appreciation of what views he is opposing, and thus what points he is most concerned to prove, it can be hard to distinguish between those claims that are central to his philosophy and those that he merely took for granted because they were not at the time significantly in dispute. A striking instance of the sort of anachronism that can result from a failure to see Hume in context was the tendency, common in the middle years of this century, to see his theory of meaning as the hub of his philosophy, when in fact it plays a fairly small role in most of his principal arguments (especially in his later works) and is anyway not particularly original. More recent work on Hume has moved away from this tendency to see him as a proto-linguistic philosopher, and it is no coincidence that his reputation as a thinker who deserves to be taken seriously in contemporary debate has correspondingly flourished. Hume's arguments indeed have considerable relevance for current discussion in many areas from epistemology to ethics, but we must beware of assuming that his central interests correspond with those of any particular group of twentieth-century philosophers, even when some of these philosophers (notably the logical positivists) have derived inspiration from him and claimed him as their spiritual father. One good way of avoiding such anachronistic assumptions is to see which thinkers Hume himself viewed as his principal targets.

Writing to Michael Ramsay in August 1737 while returning from France, where he had been working on his *Treatise of Human Nature* for three years, Hume offered his friend some advice on what he might usefully read in preparation for receiving the manuscript: 'le Recherche de la Verité of Pere Malebranche, the Principles of Human Knowledge by Dr Berkeley, some of the more metaphysical Articles of Bailes Dictionary; such as those [of] Zeno, & Spinoza. Des-Cartes Meditations would also be useful . . . These books will make you easily comprehend the metaphysical Parts of my Reasoning . . .'. Presumably Ramsay would already have been familiar with another work which provides the background both for George Berkeley's *Principles* and for a number of central arguments in the *Treatise*, namely John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* — indeed this had been mentioned by Hume in a letter to Ramsay written shortly after his arrival in France.¹ Thus we have five authors whose work is particularly valuable for setting Hume's 'metaphysical' philosophy in context, namely the 'empiricists' Locke and Berkeley, the 'rationalists' René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche, and the pious sceptic Pierre Bayle. The last of these we can here put on one side, because the undogmatic and unsystematic Bayle provided neither a stable target nor a solid base on which to build, and Hume used his famous *Dictionary* primarily as a secondary source (on the views of various sceptics, for example, and of Spinoza) and as a compendium of sceptical objections and paradoxes which could be used for attacking the dogmas of others.² As for Locke and Berkeley, there is truth in the traditional perception of Hume as their heir in the British empiricist tradition, most notably in that

¹ The relevant part of the earlier letter, dated 29 Sept. 1734, is reproduced in the Textual Supplements to E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 626. The quoted letter of 26 Aug. 1737 is reproduced in full by Mossner on pp. 626–7.

² App. C to ch. 14 of N. Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941) provides a useful first point of reference for the influence of Bayle on Hume, mentioning both of the specific articles (on Zeno of Elea and Spinoza) that Hume recommends in his letter to Ramsay.

he took over from them, relatively uncritically, the framework of the ‘theory of ideas’ within which many of the arguments in the *Treatise*, and some in the *Enquiry*, are situated. He proceeded to draw conclusions from that framework very different from those that his predecessors would have countenanced, but nevertheless his philosophy remains far more in the spirit of Locke and Berkeley than it is in the spirit of Descartes and his disciple Malebranche. Hence it is to these ‘rationalists’ that we must turn to get a clearer view of Hume’s primary targets.

Malebranche’s influence on Hume was immense, no doubt owing to his enduring reputation in France where so much of the *Treatise* was written. Unfortunately, however, his writings are relatively little known in the English-speaking world, so here I shall focus exclusively on his mentor Descartes, whose *Meditations* provides perhaps the best single yardstick against which to measure the significance of Hume’s work. There is insufficient space here for a detailed comparison of the two philosophers’ views, but it is highly illuminating to put side by side, in summary form, a list of Descartes’ principal claims in the *Meditations* and of Hume’s (explicit or implicit) responses to them. Such a contrast makes very clear how radical was Hume’s rejection of the whole Cartesian project, and sheds a great deal of light on his critical intentions. We can divide these claims and responses into three main groups:³

1.1 Hume versus Descartes on the Power of Reason

According to Descartes, (1) *we have an infallible faculty of clear and distinct perception* which, if properly exercised, (2) *is able to grasp various general causal principles a priori* and, moreover, (3) *can establish the essence of mind (namely, thinking) and of body (namely, extension) by pure intellectual insight*, yielding further and more specific (4) *a priori knowledge about the behaviour of minds and of physical things*. Through such clear and distinct perception our reason also (5) *can demonstrate from our ideas alone that God must exist*, and (6) *can prove with certainty the real existence of an external, physical world* consisting of extended objects. In all of these ways, (7) *reason can defeat scepticism*.

Hume totally disagrees: (1) *we cannot prove that any of our faculties is infallible*, while (2) *all of our knowledge of causation is based on experience and is therefore uncertain*. Also (3) *our understanding of the nature of mind and matter is entirely obscure*, providing no basis for inference about anything, and hence (4) *we can learn about the behaviour of mind and matter only through observation and experience*. Moreover (5) *neither God nor anything else can be proved to exist a priori*, from our ideas alone (indeed we have good empirical grounds to deny the existence of any benevolent deity), while (6) *we have no good argument of any sort, a priori or empirical, to justify our (purely instinctive) belief in an external world*. Taking these points together, it is clear that (7) *scepticism cannot be defeated by reason*.

1.2 Hume versus Descartes on Mind, Reason, and Imagination

Descartes argues that (8) *the mind consists of immaterial substance*, and so (9) *can survive the body’s death*. (10) *Pure reason is the mind’s primary function*, but as the mind is non-material, (11) *reason is outside the realm of causal determination* which governs purely physical things, being (12) *a faculty of intellectual insight which fundamentally distinguishes us from the (purely mechanistic) animals*. (13) *The faculty of imagination is distinct from reason*, since it depends on the body. Though many of our ideas are derived from the imagination and the senses, (14) *the mind contains some purely intellectual ‘innate’ ideas such as*

³ Most of these points are fully set out in the *Meditations* and the *Enquiry*, but there are a few exceptions. For the contrastive component of Descartes’ claim (12), concerning the mechanistic status of animals, see for example his *Discourse on Method*, part 5. For Hume’s responses (8) and (17), see the *Treatise of Human Nature* I. iv. 5 (‘Of the Immateriality of the Soul’) and I. iv. 6 (‘Of Personal Identity’) respectively, and for more on (8) and his response (9), see the posthumous essay ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’ (which probably originated as part of the manuscript of the *Treatise* though if so it was excised prior to publication).

those of God, mind and extension. (15) The workings of the intellect are transparent to introspection and so (16) the mind is better known than the body. (17) The 'self' revealed by introspection is an indivisible unity whose essence is simply to think.

Hume again differs on every point: (8) *the notion of substance, let alone that of an immaterial substance, is confused*, and (9) *the mind cannot survive the body's death. (10) Very little if any of the mind's activity is governed by 'reason' in the Cartesian sense*, while most of what we call (12) *'reason' is essentially an animal instinct* which like everything else that we do is (11) *subject to causal determination*. In fact (13) *most of our 'reasoning' is based on the imagination*, while (14) *all of our ideas are ultimately derived from the senses. (15) The operations of the mind are based on many hidden causal mechanisms*, far less familiar to us than some of the relatively obvious physical interactions of bodies, and so (16) *the workings of the mind are if anything less well known than those of physical things. (17) Introspection reveals no simple and indivisible 'self', but only a bundle of perceptions.*

1.3 Hume versus Descartes on Belief and Volition

In his quest for certainty Descartes claims that (18) *I should not accept anything which is at all uncertain*, and thus presupposes that (19) *belief is a voluntary activity*. More generally, he uses the principle that (20) *the operations of the intellect are subject to the will* both to claim that (21) *God is not responsible for my false beliefs*, and also to argue (22) *that involuntary ideas must have external causes*. He accepts that some beliefs, namely those that are clear and distinct, compel his assent, but sees this as no problem on the ground that such (23) *assent-compulsion is a guarantee of truth*.

Hume's attitude to belief is entirely different, since he claims that as a general rule, (20) *the operations of the mind are not subject to the will*, and, in particular, (19) *belief is involuntary*. It follows that (18) *I cannot avoid accepting many things that are uncertain*, and thus (23) *the fact that I am unable to doubt something is no guarantee of its truth*. As for ideas, (22) *an involuntary idea is no guarantee of an external cause*. But even if all belief and thought were entirely voluntary, still (21) *God could not escape responsibility for our cognitive (or indeed moral) errors*, since (11) *all that we do, and believe, is causally determined*.

1.4 The Core of Hume's Attack on Rationalism

If the central theme of Hume's attack on rationalism were to be encapsulated in one sentence it might be something like this: Hume, unlike Descartes and most of the other philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sees man as just a part of the natural world, rather than as a semi-divine being quite different in kind from the animals. Such a theme can be discerned in most of Hume's philosophical writings, but it is particularly prominent in his epistemology, where he consistently attacks the idea that we have a Cartesian faculty of 'reason' which gives us a transparent and Godlike insight into the essence of things, and he displaces this rationalist picture with a naturalistic account of human thinking based mainly on instinct and the 'imagination'.⁴

This interpretation of Hume is borne out by the catalogue of Cartesian claims and Humean responses listed above: in nearly every case Hume is either setting limits to our intellectual capabilities (implying in particular that we lack the sort of reliable 'clear and distinct perception' which Descartes presupposes), or else he is putting forward an account of man and his faculties which places them squarely within the natural

⁴ In the *Enquiry* Hume uses the faculty term 'imagination' relatively rarely, and focuses attention instead on 'custom', which he introduces in the *Treatise* as 'a principle of association . . . operating upon the imagination' (*T* 97, 102; cf. *E* 48). The crucial point emphasized in both works, however, is not custom's relationship to the *imagination*, but rather, that it is *not* a principle of *reason*.

world. For Hume, virtually all of our beliefs are based ultimately on irresistible animal instinct, which operates not on pure intellectual concepts but on the quasi-sensory impressions and ideas provided exclusively through experience by our physical organs. Our mind is not above nature but is part of it, being entirely dependent on our mortal body and causally determined like everything else, through many hidden mechanisms which again can be known only by experience. Of those instinctive mechanisms which supply our beliefs about the world, the most important is custom or habit, which leads us simple-mindedly to expect in the future patterns of events similar to those we have observed in the past, even though we can give no deeper rational account of those observations nor the slightest good reason for supposing that past correlations will continue. So our beliefs about both the behaviour of objects in the external world, and the operations of our own mind, are founded on a naive assumption of uniformity, a blind reliance on the past, rather than on any sort of supernatural insight into why things work as they do.

This, then, is the overall thrust of Hume's thought, with strong currents of anti-rationalism, naturalism, empiricism, and secularism very evident in most of his writings. But although this general picture is clear enough, the details of how his thought developed through his major philosophical works is far less clear and a source of significant controversy. So let us now turn to consider some of these works, and the relation between them.

2. *The Treatise of Human Nature*

Hume's assault on the rationalist view of man opened with his first, and certainly his most famous, work: the *Treatise of Human Nature*, published in 1739–40. But it perhaps reached its climax in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (initially published in 1748 under the title *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*), a 'recasting' of the first part of the *Treatise* which is, I shall argue, a far more reliable indicator of Hume's mature position. Although our main concern here is indeed with the *Enquiry*, it is nevertheless appropriate to make some general comments about the *Treatise*, not least because this is commonly assumed to be Hume's definitive statement, and most writers on Hume have accordingly taken it as their principal source.

As Hume recounts in 'My Own Life' (reprinted in this volume), most of the *Treatise* was written while he was on 'retreat' at La Fleche in Anjou, where Descartes had studied more than a century earlier. Hume returned to Britain in 1737, and in due course published the completed *Treatise* anonymously in two parts, Book I 'Of the Understanding' and Book II 'Of the Passions' in January 1739, and Book III 'Of Morals' nearly two years later in November 1740. The subtitle of the *Treatise* declares it to be 'an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects', but we should note that when Hume speaks of 'moral' subjects or 'moral' philosophy, he is using the word not in its restricted modern sense (meaning morality, or ethics), but in its far wider eighteenth-century sense, meaning the study of man in general, and including not only 'morals' but also 'logic' (consisting mainly of what we would now call epistemology and psychology), 'politics' (political theory, economics, history, sociology) and 'criticism' (aesthetics). As Hume makes clear in the Introduction to the *Treatise*, however, he hopes that his investigation will have still wider implications, because 'all the sciences . . . even *Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties' (*T* xv). Hume therefore aims, in 'explaining the principles of human nature', to 'propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new' (*T* xvi). This foundation has four principal elements:

The sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas: morals and criticism regard our tastes and sentiments: and politics consider men as united in society, and dependent on each other. In these four sciences of *Logic, Morals, Criticism, and Politics*,

is comprehended almost every thing, which it can any way import us to be acquainted with, or which can tend either to the improvement or ornament of the human mind. (*T* xv-xvi)

The three books of the *Treatise* are intended to lay the foundations for the first two of these pillars of knowledge, with criticism and politics to follow in due course — the youthful Hume was certainly not lacking in ambition!

Hume's new science of man was to be distinguished from most of its predecessors by being thoroughly empirical ('experimental') — based on 'experience and observation' (*T* xvi) rather than on metaphysical argument or speculations about the 'ultimate original qualities of human nature' (*T* xvii). Hume's dismissal of such 'conjectures and hypotheses' (*T* xviii) in favour of the empirical method clearly echoes Newton's famous dictum 'hypotheses non fingo' ('I feign no hypotheses'), and indeed the whole tenor of the Introduction to the *Treatise* suggests that Hume wishes to see himself as the Newton of the moral sciences.⁵ The *Treatise*, then, is intended to be an empirical investigation into the workings of the human mind: its cognitive faculty (or 'understanding') in Book I, its non-moral 'passions' in Book II, and its 'moral sense' in Book III.

In view of these stated aims, Hume's prodigious philosophical talents, and the primitive state of psychological theory, it is not at all surprising that the *Treatise* contains a liberal mixture of sophisticated philosophical argument and relatively crude psychological explanation. Most of Hume's accounts of human thinking revolve around the association of ideas, a grand unifying theme which was initially a source of pride but later perhaps a mild embarrassment. We can judge Hume's early high opinion of this aspect of his performance from the fascinating *Abstract* of the *Treatise* (reprinted in this volume), which he published anonymously in March 1740 in an attempt to provoke interest and boost sales: 'Thro' this whole book, there are great pretensions to new discoveries in philosophy; but if any thing can intitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an *inventor*, 'tis the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy' (*A* 661–2).⁶ Our opinion today is unlikely to tally with this — the psychological explanations in the *Treatise* are often just too crude to be convincing, while Hume's efforts to force others into the straitjacket of associationism makes them appear tortuous and contrived. By contrast Hume's philosophical arguments, many of which were to be repeated and developed in the *Enquiry* (and will therefore be discussed below), are highly original, deep, stimulating, and extremely wide-ranging, combining to make the *Treatise* a magnificent contribution to philosophy if not to psychology. In Book I alone Hume deals with the nature and origin of ideas in general and the ideas of space and time in particular, knowledge and belief, probability, causation, perception, personal identity, and several varieties of scepticism, while his discussions of many of these topics are more thorough and sophisticated than any that had previously been given. For all its flaws, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* is unquestionably a masterpiece.

⁵ For a discussion of the methodological principles that Hume may have drawn from his understanding of Newton, see J. Noxon, *Hume's Philosophical Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), which also contains a very interesting examination of the development of Hume's thought after the *Treatise*. For more recent scholarship on Hume's knowledge of the contemporary scientific culture, emphasizing influences other than Newton, see M. Barfoot, 'Hume and the Culture of Science in the Early Eighteenth Century', in M. A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1990), 151–90.

⁶ In a famous passage in the *Treatise* itself which again reveals his Newtonian ambitions, Hume compares the association of ideas with gravitation, suggesting a close analogy between his own theory of the mind and Newtonian physical science: 'Here is a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural . . .' (*T* 12–13; cf. *T* 289).

3. Hume and Religion

Although the *Treatise* contains a great deal, it was originally intended to contain yet more. Writing to his friend Henry Home, later Lord Kames, in December 1737, Hume states that ‘I am at present castrating my Work, that is, cutting off its nobler Parts, that is endeavouring it shall give as little Offence as possible, before which, I could not pretend to put it into the Doctor’s [Joseph Butler’s] hands.’ (*HL* i. 25). It is not known exactly which ‘nobler parts’ Hume removed from the *Treatise*, though these almost certainly included ‘some Reasonings concerning Miracles’ mentioned in the same letter (presumably an earlier version of Section X of the *Enquiry*), and probably also a sceptical discussion of the immortality of the soul (the topic of a 1755 essay which was prudently withdrawn from publication and eventually appeared posthumously).⁷ It seems that Hume, either in the hope of winning Butler’s good opinion or for other prudential reasons (e.g. to avoid the risk of prosecution for heresy or criminal blasphemy), removed those sections of the *Treatise* that were most explicitly sceptical about religious topics, but his interest in religion can still be discerned in what remains. In the Introduction (*T* xv), for example, Hume singles out ‘Natural Religion’ (the ‘science’ that aims to prove God’s existence from nature and reason alone, without resort to revelation) as a subject which might be particularly improved using the results of his science of man. And many later sections of the *Treatise* have very clear sceptical implications both for the traditional theistic arguments⁸ and for various Christian doctrines such as transubstantiation, the immortality of the soul, and the goodness of God.⁹

The anti-religious orientation of the *Treatise* was evident enough to Hume’s contemporaries,¹⁰ and was soon to deprive him of the chance to be appointed as professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh University (a controversy which provoked the writing of *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (1745) in his defence). But many commentators have neglected this aspect of Hume’s thought, partly no doubt because the philosophy of religion has been relatively unfashionable, but also because for many years it was commonly supposed that Hume’s writings on religion were published only for the sake of achieving fame

⁷ J. C. A. Gaskin (*Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1988), 170, 182) gives strong grounds for the conjecture that the manuscript of *Treatise* i. iv. 5, ‘Of the Immateriality of the Soul’, originally contained arguments that were to appear in the essay ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’.

⁸ *Treatise* i. ii. 6 and i. iii. 7 anticipate Kant’s famous objection to the Ontological Argument that ‘existence is not a predicate’. i. iii. 3 undercuts the Cosmological Argument by denying that the Causal Maxim is demonstratively certain. i. iii. 6 lays the foundation for Hume’s devastating critique of the Design Argument in *Enquiry* xi and in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, since it implies that causes (e.g. the cause of order in the universe) can be known only by experience.

⁹ *Treatise* i. iv. 3 attacks the theory of substance and accidents, the basis of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. i. iv. 5 and i. iv. 6 undermine the traditional notion of the soul, and thus the doctrine of its immortality. ii. iii. 1 and ii. iii. 2 have fatal consequences for the popular Free Will Defence to the Problem of Evil (as Hume later spells out in *Enquiry* viii). Finally the entire moral framework of Book III is naturalistically based on human ‘sentiment’, and as such repudiates the claim that morality is dependent upon God’s will, and also throws doubt on the very notion of a good God. (That Hume was well aware of the consequences of his moral theory is clear from a letter of 16 Mar. 1740 to Francis Hutcheson, in which he says that he feels forced to conclude ‘that since Morality, according to your Opinion as well as mine, is determin’d merely by Sentiment, it regards only human Nature & human Life’ (*HL* i. 40). He also in this letter alludes to Hutcheson’s prosecution for teaching heresy by the Glasgow Presbytery in 1737 for his own, relevantly similar, opinions on morality.)

¹⁰ P. Russell (‘Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume’s *Treatise*’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 49 (1988), 247–65) argues that attacks on John Locke’s and Samuel Clarke’s Christian rationalism in particular are clearly implicit in the arguments of the *Treatise*, and would have been recognized as such by Hume’s contemporaries.

and notoriety rather than for any serious philosophical purpose.¹¹ Such accusations were partly encouraged by what Hume himself says in ‘My Own Life’, where he admits to having being disappointed when the *Treatise* ‘fell *dead-born from the press* without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots’, and he also intimates that ‘love of literary fame’ has been his ‘ruling passion’ (‘Life’, pp. 000, 000). These quotations were taken by Hume’s critics, out of context, to suggest that he must have included the provocative Sections X and XI in the *Enquiry* in order to ensure that this time the ‘zealots’ would be suitably roused. Such accusations have long ago been very thoroughly answered,¹² but some of their influence still lingers. However the truth about Hume’s treatment of religion is almost exactly the reverse of what they allege. So far from being one of his peripheral interests, included in his later works solely to provoke controversy, religion was instead a lifelong concern informing much of his thought, and one whose relative absence from the *Treatise* was due entirely to the prudence of its author, who as we have seen reluctantly ‘castrated’ his work shortly before it was published.

It is important even when studying the relatively forthright *Enquiry* to appreciate how often Hume’s discussions of religion are influenced by the dictates of prudence. He does not feel able to state his sceptical views explicitly, so he frequently resorts to irony and other devices to get his message across. In Section VIII, for example, we are told that the difficulties of reconciling the existence of evil with the existence of a perfect God are ‘mysteries, which mere natural and unassisted reason is very unfit to handle; and whatever system she embraces, she must find herself involved in inextricable difficulties, and even contradictions, at every step which she takes with regard to such subjects.’ (E 103). Here Hume ironically uses the language of piety to convey to those who can discern it the message that God and evil are incompatible, but this language provides an excellent protection against possible accusations of blasphemy. Again, at the end of Section X Hume famously concludes

that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. (E 131)

Here too the sceptical message is clearly visible behind the pious talk: anyone who believes in miracle stories is entirely unreasonable, his ‘understanding’ having been subverted by faith.¹³ In Section XI Hume uses a different technique to cover his tracks — engaged on the dangerous project of criticizing the respected Design Argument for God’s existence, he resorts to a dialogue form, putting most of the objections into the mouth of ‘a friend who loves sceptical paradoxes’ of whose principles, Hume tells us, he ‘can by no means

¹¹ The 1893 introduction to Selby-Bigge’s standard edition of the *Enquiries* contains a strong attack on Hume along these lines. It is regrettable that this has been retained in the modern revisions without any editorial comment on its manifest unreliability.

¹² The two classic refutations of these charges are Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, ch. 24, and E. C. Mossner, ‘Philosophy and Biography: The Case of David Hume’, *Philosophical Review*, 59 (1950), 184–201; repr. in V. C. Chappell (ed.), *Hume* (London and Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968), 6–34.

¹³ Though as Kemp Smith points out in his edition of the *Dialogues* (D 47), Hume’s tongue-in-cheek description of the workings of faith is not so very different from the orthodox teaching of the reformed churches of his day!

approve' (*E* 132).¹⁴ This was a ploy Hume was later to use again in his celebrated *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, and to such good effect that there has even been a fair amount of dispute over which character in the *Dialogues* most represents his views. On the basis of the mixed evidence provided by his sceptical arguments on the one hand, and his protestations of faith on the other, some commentators maintain that Hume was unequivocally an atheist while others insist that he was merely opposed to abuses of religion and to religious metaphysics. The best extensive recent discussion of Hume's philosophy of religion charts a middle course, arguing that he was an 'attenuated deist' who believed only in some indeterminate 'ordering agent' behind the universe, an agent about which (or perhaps 'whom') nothing of any religious significance can be known.¹⁵

There is insufficient space here to do justice to the debate over Hume's personal attitude to religious beliefs and religious practices, but since both are of fundamental importance to the understanding of the aims of the *Enquiry*, and vital for situating it in the context of his later writings, I shall briefly record my own opinion and draw attention to some of the relevant evidence.¹⁶ Hume was, to all intents and purposes, an atheist, and he certainly did not believe in anything like the Christian God. Although he sometimes speaks approvingly of 'true religion', this does not correspond to any of the 'popular' religious systems, and indeed it seems that he attaches little content to the phrase other than at most a minimal metaphysical belief (that the cause of order in the universe probably bears 'some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature, and among the rest to the oeconomy of human mind and thought'; *D* 218) and an entirely non-theological moral commitment (to the sort of enlightened and secular morality which he himself endorses in his moral writings).¹⁷ His reason for using the phrase is largely prudential: by drawing a contrast between 'true' and 'popular' religion, he can freely attack the excesses of the latter without exposing himself as an atheist. The most notable example of this move is in the final section of the *Dialogues*, where Hume's principal spokesman, Philo, suddenly makes a volte-face and accepts the existence of God, having previously argued powerfully, throughout the *Dialogues*, that the arguments for God's existence which Cleanthes and Demea had proposed totally fail. This section is notoriously difficult to interpret, and has been the subject of much discussion, but I shall confine my comments to just two observations. First, it is Philo's acceptance of

¹⁴ A third tactic Hume uses to disguise his intentions is to attack the various pillars of religious orthodoxy one by one, while piously appealing to those that he is not currently disputing. Thus in the *Natural History of Religion* he compares monotheism unfavourably with polytheism on every count except its reasonableness in the light of the Design Argument (*NHR* II, IX-XV); in the *Dialogues* he then attacks the Design Argument, and this time relies on revelation to safeguard his orthodox credentials (*D* 227-8). Meanwhile *Enquiry* X has already indicated his negative view of revelation, but this does not prevent him appealing to it again in 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' (*Essays* 590, 598). All this illustrates how Hume's various statements on religion should not be naively taken at face value.

¹⁵ Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 219-23.

¹⁶ The importance of Hume's other religious writings to the interpretation of the *Enquiry* goes well beyond the obvious relevance of the *Dialogues* to *Enquiry* XI. For example the first section of the *Dialogues* (originally written about 1751) provides Hume's only direct critical discussion of the sort of mitigated scepticism that he had advocated in Section XII of the *Enquiry*, published only three years before (see n. 42 below). The other writings to be mentioned here not only have clear relevance to specific parts of the *Enquiry* (and of the companion *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, dating from 1751) but also more generally give substance to the claims of writers such as Stewart and Norton, who see the *Enquiry*'s principal theme (manifested most clearly in Sections I, V, and XI, but also in VIII, X, and XII) as being opposition to religious dogmatism.

¹⁷ In fact these two aspects of 'true religion' are in some tension, because Hume clearly does not believe that the cause or causes of order in the universe bear any analogy whatever to human moral qualities (*E* 138-9, 141-2, *D* 211-12, 219) and this suggests that (contrary to Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 187-8) Hume's references to 'true religion' do not identify any single coherent position, but are simply tactical devices.

‘true religion’ (*D* 219) which liberates him to launch a devastating attack on all ‘vulgar superstition’ (undoubtedly intended to include the various Christian denominations), without thereby contradicting his earlier pieties and expressions of faith. Secondly, Philo’s acknowledgement of the existence of God is so attenuated as to amount to virtually nothing at all. He suggests that ‘the whole of Natural Theology . . . resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*’ (*D* 227), and he indeed seems happy to endorse this. But we should read this passage together with an earlier one, where Philo remarks that ‘there [is] a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of Nature, in every situation and in every age; [that] the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought . . . probably bear some remote analogy to each other’ (*D* 218).¹⁸ Put crudely, Philo’s view (and hence presumably Hume’s) seems to be that the ultimate cause of order in the universe (call it ‘God’ if you will; *D* 142) probably bears as much analogy to human thought as does the rotting of a turnip!

Hume’s interest in, and antagonism towards, religion were both genuine and profound, and reveal themselves in many of his works. He thought of religion, at least in its ‘popular’ forms, as a thoroughly evil and pernicious influence, which is born out of superstitious fears (*NHR* II, III, and VI; ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’), corrupts morality in a variety of ways (*NHR* XIV, ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’, ‘Of Suicide’), and in particular recommends spurious ‘monkish virtues’ (*E* 270, *NHR* X), promotes intolerance (*NHR* IX), and encourages the vices of hypocrisy (‘Of National Characters’ 204¶n.), self-deception (*NHR* XIII), and simple-minded credulity (*E* 117–8, *NHR* XI–XII). Hume’s *History of England* is full of examples to bear out his suggestion that ‘if the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries, which attend it’ (*D* 220), and indeed it seems likely that his increasing antipathy towards organized religion during his life was fuelled by such historical discoveries.¹⁹ Hume’s objections to religion were ethical at least as much as they were philosophical, and it is moral repugnance rather than mischief which motivates his attacks.

Hume evidently believed that his assault on the intellectual foundations of religion could undermine its power over his discerning readers:²⁰

One considerable advantage that arises from philosophy, consists in the sovereign antidote which it affords to superstition and false religion. All other remedies against that pestilent distemper are vain, or at least uncertain. Plain good sense, and the practice of the world, which alone serve most purposes of life, are here found ineffectual: history, as well as daily experience, furnish instances of men endowed with the strongest capacity for business and affairs, who have all their lives crouched under slavery to the grossest superstition. . . . But when sound philosophy has once gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectually excluded; and one may fairly affirm, that her triumph over this enemy is more complete than over most of the vices and imperfections incident to human nature [because superstition is] founded on false opinion. (‘Of Suicide’, first paragraph)

But he is not at all optimistic about the prospects of ridding humanity in general of religion and superstition. At the beginning of *Enquiry* X (*E* 118), for example, he expresses the hope that his argument against the

¹⁸ The similarity in wording here is most unlikely to be coincidental: first, the paragraphs from which these two passages are quoted were both added (according to Kemp Smith, *D* 94) when Hume revised the *Dialogues* in the year of his death, at which time they were his only substantial additions; secondly, the phrase ‘remote analogy’ occurs nowhere else at all in the whole of Hume’s surviving philosophical writings, nor in his letters, nor in his *History of England*.

¹⁹ D. T. Siebert (*The Moral Animus of David Hume* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), ch. 2) provides an excellent discussion of the development of Hume’s attitude to religion in his *History of England*.

²⁰ Hume makes very similar remarks in Section I of the *Enquiry* (*E* 12–13).

credibility of miracles will help to protect ‘the wise and learned’ from ‘superstitious delusion’, but he simultaneously suggests that others will be beyond its help, since he feels sure that stories of miracles and prodigies will be propagated ‘as long as the world endures’. A similar anti-religious ambition, combined with pessimism, is revealed in the fascinating letter (reprinted in *D* 243–8; cf. *D* 2) from Hume’s close friend Adam Smith to William Strahan, his printer, which Smith wrote soon after Hume’s death in order to proclaim to the world the exemplary moral character of this notorious atheist.²¹ In this letter Smith recounts a deathbed conversation with Hume, where Hume jokingly speculates about the reasons he might offer to Charon, the boatman who ferries souls to Hades across the River Styx, for giving him longer to live:

But I might still urge, ‘Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the Public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition.’ But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. ‘You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy, loitering rogue.’

This letter suggests that Hume saw a major part of his life’s work as the undermining of ‘superstition’, and demonstrates that his antipathy to religion continued unabated until his death.²² The same message is conveyed by Hume’s anxious precautions, in the days before his death, to ensure that his anti-religious masterpiece, the *Dialogues*, would be published (see *D* 88–92). We can conclude that Hume’s writings on religion are anything but frivolous: they are motivated by his earnest desire to ‘open the eyes of the public’ to what in his view is, and has been historically, one of the world’s greatest evils.

4. Hume’s Intentions in the *Enquiry*, and its Relation to the *Treatise*

It should now be clear that at least as regards its concern with religion, the *Enquiry* is a far more faithful record of Hume’s thinking than is the ‘castrated’ *Treatise*. But this alone cannot explain why Hume in his later life disowned the *Treatise* and requested (through a letter to his printer William Strahan in October 1775, HL ii. 301) that an ‘Advertisement’ should be attached to the volume containing his two *Enquiries* (together with his *Dissertation on the Passions* and *The Natural History of Religion*), stating that these works should ‘alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles’ (*E* 2). Most writers on Hume have overlooked or systematically ignored this request, some no doubt simply because the *Treatise* contains a wealth of material which is far too interesting to pass over, but many because they have tended to look on the *Enquiry* as merely a watered-down version of Book I of the *Treatise*, a more elegant and less taxing easy-read edition for the general public, with the technical details omitted and a few controversial sections on religion added to whet their appetite and provoke the ‘zealots’. Quite apart from its misjudgement of the seriousness of Hume’s concern with religion, this traditional view of the two works — according to which the *Treatise* gives the more faithful picture of his central philosophical position, and the

²¹ It was then commonly taken for granted that moral behaviour depends on religious belief, and in particular the belief in divine reward and punishment, heaven and hell. Thus many people who knew Hume only for his sceptical religious views would have assumed that he was a rogue, and this misapprehension Smith is keen to remedy.

²² In his edition of the *Dialogues* (*D* 76–9) Kemp Smith also includes an interesting essay by James Boswell, describing his own deathbed interview with Hume, in which Hume is quoted as saying that ‘he never had entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke’, and that ‘the Morality of every Religion was bad’. Boswell was disappointed that Hume’s disbelief in the afterlife was maintained even as his death approached, and was deeply unsettled by Hume’s evident equanimity at the prospect of his total annihilation (see also Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 605–6).

Enquiry merely a more palatable selection — seems to me highly implausible.²³ The ‘Advertisement’ was written when Hume had already achieved great fame as a historian and essayist, and after some months of experiencing distressing symptoms from the cancer that would shortly kill him (‘Life’, p. 000). He was no longer a struggling author desperate for recognition but a respected man of letters mindful of how he wished to be remembered, and in an ideal position to promote the *Treatise* both to his contemporaries and to posterity had he wished to do so.²⁴ Hence his striking repudiation of it, as ‘a juvenile work’ which should not be taken to represent his philosophical principles, demands to be taken seriously. Nor can this be dismissed as the peevishness of an old man looking back at his unsuccessful first work from the perspective of later acclaim, because he had expressed very similar views in a letter written to Gilbert Elliot of Minto in spring 1751, nearly twenty-five years earlier:

I believe the philosophical Essays [i.e. the first *Enquiry*] contain every thing of consequence relating to the Understanding, which you would meet with in the *Treatise*; & I give you my Advice against reading the latter. By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete. *Addo dum minuo*. [‘I add by subtracting.’] The Philosophical Principles are the same in both: But I was carry’d away by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately. So vast an Undertaking, plan’d before I was one and twenty, & compos’d before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. I have repented my Haste a hundred, & a hundred times. (*HL* i. 158)

So we are left with the question why Hume thought the *Enquiry* superior to the *Treatise*, and whether this can be explained away as merely his judgement on their respective literary merits, or whether it reflects a substantial philosophical difference. The former might seem to be suggested by his comment to Elliot that ‘the Philosophical Principles are the same in both’, and also by a well-known passage from ‘My Own Life’ (‘Life’, p. 000): ‘I had always entertained a notion, that my want of success in publishing the *Treatise* of Human Nature, had proceeded more from the manner than the matter . . . I, therefore, cast the first part of that work anew in the *Enquiry* Concerning Human Understanding . . .’. On the other hand his letter to Elliot also makes points of philosophical substance, that the *Enquiry* contains ‘every thing of consequence relating to the Understanding’, and that his work is rendered ‘much more complete’ by being better focused. Moreover in the 1775 letter to Strahan which accompanied the advertisement Hume comments that ‘It is a compleat answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie.’ (*HL* ii. 301). Both Thomas Reid and James Beattie had criticized the *Treatise* primarily for its scepticism and implausible metaphysics, and very little for its literary style, so again Hume seems to be implying that the *Enquiry* differs significantly from the *Treatise* in content as well as in style. Let us now examine what these significant differences might be.

As we saw above, the *Treatise* is primarily an attempt to introduce ‘the experimental method of reasoning’ into the moral sciences, and to erect on that basis an associationist psychological theory. This is not to say, of course, that it contains only constructive ‘cognitive science’, and indeed there is famously a

²³ Many of the points summarized in the remainder of this paragraph are spelt out by J. O. Nelson (‘Two Main Questions concerning Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiry*’, *Philosophical Review*, 81 (1972), 333–7), who goes on to propose that it is the *Treatise*'s contamination with ‘metaphysics’, of the kind Hume would later condemn, which provides a genuine philosophical basis for his repudiation of it. I shall later (in n. 37) propose something in a similar spirit, concerning Hume's loss of confidence in his ‘Separability Principle’ and its implications. But this is not I think the whole story, and might not be even a principal theme. For criticism of Nelson's thesis, see P. D. Cummins, ‘Hume's Disavowal of the *Treatise*’, *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), 371–9.

²⁴ That Hume was seriously concerned about how he would be remembered and his work transmitted to posterity is very clear from the autobiographical ‘My Own Life’ (whose nuances are sensitively explored in Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume*, ch. 5), and also from the care that Hume took to revise his works during his final illness and to ensure that the *Dialogues* would be published (for which, see Kemp Smith's app. c: D 87–96).

great deal of virulent philosophical scepticism in the *Treatise*, particularly in Part iv of Book I. But the main use of this scepticism is in the service of Hume's science of man, as for example when the sceptical argument regarding induction is brought to bear in I. iii. 6 to dismiss the complacent presumption that factual beliefs are founded on insights of 'reason', only to be followed immediately in I. iii. 7 and I. iii. 8 by Hume's alternative, associationist, account of belief and factual inference which attributes them instead to 'the imagination' (this one central example of Hume's typical procedure in the *Treatise* is repeated in the *Enquiry*, Sections IV and V). The primary purpose of Hume's sceptical arguments in the *Treatise* is to clear away the rationalist view of man which he is attempting to displace, to make room for his own naturalistic accounts of human thinking. Thus critical philosophy is primarily the means rather than the end, for it is the construction of an associationist psychology which is Hume's ultimate goal.

There is evidence, however, that after the publication of the *Treatise* Hume quickly became increasingly dissatisfied with its psychological theories. Compare, for example, his enthusiastic remarks about the power and range of the principle of association, quoted earlier from the *Treatise* and the *Abstract*, with the first paragraph of his essay 'The Sceptic' (1742). It is hard to believe that the author of this paragraph, a philosopher noted for his reflexive thinking,²⁵ could have failed to have in mind its obvious relevance to the author of the *Treatise*:

I have long entertained a suspicion with regard to the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects, and found in myself a greater inclination to dispute than assent to their conclusions. There is one mistake to which they seem liable, almost without exception; they confine too much their principles, and make no account of that vast variety which nature has so much affected in all her operations. When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning. Our own mind being narrow and contracted, we cannot extend our conception to the variety and extent of nature, but imagine that she is as much bounded in her operations as we are in our speculation. (*Essays* 159–60)

There is also a brief but perhaps significant echo of this 'suspicion' in Section I of the *Enquiry*: 'Moralists . . . have sometimes carried the matter too far, by their passion for some one general principle' (*E* 15).²⁶ Neither of these passages makes any explicit reference to associationism in particular, and they are no doubt susceptible of alternative interpretation, but apart from their evident appropriateness to the *Treatise* a strong reason for reading them as in part self-directed is the independent evidence for Hume's general disillusionment with his early associationist psychology, namely, the surprisingly minor place which he gives to that theory in his later works and especially in the two *Enquiries*. Thus, for example, Section III of the *Enquiry*, 'Of the Association of Ideas', was reduced in the 1777 edition to only three paragraphs, and even before that pruning it contained in addition only a few pages of discussion on the relevance of associationism

²⁵ The theme of reflexivity in Hume's work has been particularly emphasized by Annette Baier, for example in her influential book *A Progress of Sentiments* which is appropriately subtitled 'Reflections on Hume's *Treatise*' (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).

²⁶ I do not wish to claim that Hume's criticism of this passion for single principles is *exclusively* self-directed, for at *E* 298 he attacks in similar terms philosophers who attempt to reduce all human motivation to selfishness: 'All attempts of this kind . . . seem to have proceeded entirely from that love of *simplicity* which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy.' Even here, however, there is a marked contrast with the tone of the *Treatise*, where he comments approvingly on 'that simplicity, which has been hitherto [my system's] principal force and beauty' (*T* 367).

to the understanding of literature, rather than any systematic analysis of the associationist theory.²⁷ The only significant applications of associationism later in the *Enquiry* appear in Part ii of Section v, where Hume presents his account of the mechanism of belief, and in Section VI, where he develops that account to deal with probability. But even in this central theory of belief, of which he had made so much in the *Treatise* and the *Abstract*, Hume's presentation seems lacking in confidence. He omits much of the detail of his earlier account, and repeatedly states that he is now doing no more than suggesting 'analogies' (E 47, 50, 54) or giving 'hints' to 'excite the curiosity of philosophers' (E 59). Moreover he tells the reader quite explicitly that his theory of belief is entirely inessential for the comprehension of the remaining sections of the book: 'the following enquiries may well be understood, though it be neglected' (E 47). In the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Hume's distancing from his former associationism goes even further, clearly implying that his former associationist account of his central notion of *sympathy* (e.g. in *Treatise* II. i. 11, II. ii. 9, and III. iii. 1) is not only irrelevant to the purpose at hand but probably false:

It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. . . . No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others. The first has a natural tendency to give pleasure; the second, pain. . . . *It is not probable, that these principles can be resolved into principles more simple and universal, whatever attempts may have been made to that purpose.* But if it were possible, it belongs not to the present subject . . . (E 220‡n., my emphasis)

Why might Hume have lost confidence in his associationist theory, and chosen to downplay it so much in his later work? One obvious possibility, suggested by the earlier quotation from 'The Sceptic', is that he began to see it as being unconvincingly 'violent and absurd' in its efforts to reduce all mental phenomena to one 'favourite principle'. But another major factor was probably the particular difficulties that he encountered in trying to build an associationist account of human thought that is even self-consistent, difficulties which are already very apparent in Part iv of Book I of the *Treatise*, and which become even more explicit in the Appendix to the *Treatise* (published with Book III).²⁸ Some of these again concern the details of his theory of belief. But even more threatening are the intractable paradoxes involving our beliefs in the external world and in our own self: in each case Hume sets out to explain an important aspect of our mental lives, but in both his analysis ultimately leaves us not with a benign psychological explanation of the belief concerned, but instead with a sceptical quandary that casts doubt on it.

To take the external world first, Hume begins *Treatise* I. iv. 2, entitled 'Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses', by posing the question 'What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?' and explicitly ruling out any sceptical doubts: 'tis vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings' (T 187). However by the end of this section the nature of Hume's explanation of our belief in body based on the apparently 'trivial' operations of the faculty of imagination ('the fancy') threatens to undermine that belief completely:

²⁷ Indeed the discussion is introduced with the dismissive comment that such an analysis 'would lead us into many useless subtilities', and ends by modestly disclaiming any systematic ambition for itself: 'these loose hints . . . thrown together in order to excite the curiosity of philosophers, and beget a suspicion . . . that many operations of the human mind depend on the connection or association of ideas which is here explained'. The entire discussion is omitted from the standard Selby-Bigge edition of the *Enquiry*, but can be found in paragraphs 3.4 to 3.18 of the recent student edition by T. L. Beauchamp, which is based on the 1772 text (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). The quotations in this note are from paragraphs 3.3 and 3.18 of the latter.

²⁸ Here I shall focus only on the more dramatic problems for Hume's associationism, but for an excellent more detailed account of some of Hume's other difficulties and his apparent progressive disillusionment, see J. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 3rd edn. (London: Duckworth, 1980), ch. 6.

I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses . . . But to be ingenuous, I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment . . . I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. . . 'Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. . . Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy. (T 217–18)

It is bad enough that our belief in the external world should be rationally indefensible, but two sections later (in *Treatise* I. iv. 4, 'Of the Modern Philosophy') Hume appears to go even further, concluding that causal reasoning shows the belief in body to be not merely groundless but fundamentally incoherent: 'Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body' (T 231).

Turning now from the external to the internal world, Hume begins the section 'Of Personal Identity' (I. iv. 6) with an attack on the supposed Cartesian concept of a perfectly simple, unified, and persisting self, quickly replacing it with his own famous 'bundle theory', according to which a person is 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement' (T 252). Most of the rest of this section is devoted to the diagnosis of an alleged pervasive cognitive error: how it is that through the association of ideas we commonly confuse the idea of genuine identity with the idea of 'a succession of related objects' (T 253), and the implications of this confusion for our concepts of identity in general and of personal identity in particular. Since the mind is constantly in flux rather than uniform over time, its supposed identity can only be 'fictitious' (T 259), but Hume identifies a variety of associative principles which seduce our imagination into making this fiction almost irresistible. Hume's alternative 'bundle' concept of the self initially appears to survive unscathed from his critique,²⁹ but in the Appendix he famously expresses despair even about that:

Upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent. (T 633)

There is a major interpretative puzzle here about just what the big problem with his theory is supposed to be,³⁰ but what is clear is that Hume has again found himself in an unpleasant and potentially embarrassing sceptical morass.

How embarrassing these problems are for Hume depends, however, on what he is up to. If, as critics from Reid and Beattie onwards have alleged, he is primarily an unsystematic 'careless [i.e. carefree] sceptic' in the style attributed to his character Philo in the *Dialogues* (D 128), then paradoxes and contradictions should be grist to his mill, serving to emphasize 'the whimsical condition of mankind' (E 160). Some sections of the *Treatise* (notably those already mentioned and I. iv. 1) may indeed lend themselves to such an interpretation, but thoroughgoing scepticism provides an unconvincing basis for any would-be science of man, and the supposition that sceptical bewilderment is Hume's objective seems hard to square with the apparently genuine dismay and concern for consistency evinced in the Appendix and in the Conclusion to

²⁹ At T 366 Hume contrasts conjectures about external bodies, which inevitably involve 'contradictions and absurdities', with conclusions about 'the perceptions of the mind', which being 'perfectly known' should provide the means to 'keep clear of . . . contradictions'.

³⁰ D. Garrett (*Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 8) gives a clear critical review of the various proposed solutions to this puzzle, before proffering an interesting solution of his own.

Book I (e.g. *T* 268).³¹ But whatever our view of the *Treatise*, it is clear that by the time he came to write the *Enquiry* Hume was very far from revelling in the excesses of scepticism — in this ‘recasting’ of his work he plays down the problem of the external world, he omits his previously all-embracing ‘scepticism with regard to reason’ of *Treatise* I. iv. 1 and summarily dismisses such ‘antecedent scepticism’ as futile and unreasonable (*E* 149–50), while he fails even to mention his labyrinthine problem of personal identity. Of course this is not to deny that much of the *Enquiry*, like Book I of the *Treatise*, is infused with sceptical thinking, but here, as a rule, the sceptical doubts are satisfactorily answered or at least supplied with a ‘sceptical solution’ that lays them to rest. So whatever Hume’s purposes in the *Enquiry* may be, they do not appear to harmonize well with the radical sceptical paradoxes of Book I Part iv of the *Treatise*, and presumably the prominence of these paradoxes in his earlier work provides at least a part of his motive for ‘recasting’ it.

All this still leaves us with the question of what Hume’s primary aim in the *Enquiry* might be, if it is neither to promote the associationist psychology of the *Treatise* nor to preach scepticism. The obvious place to look for an answer is Hume’s own introduction to the work, Section I, whose predominant flavour can be conveyed by the quotation of a few key passages:

we shall now proceed to consider what can reasonably be pleaded in [metaphysics’] behalf. (*E* 9)

Here indeed lies the justest and most plausible objection against a considerable part of metaphysics, that they are not properly a science; but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which, being unable to defend themselves on fair ground, raise these intangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness. . . . But is this a sufficient reason, why philosophers should desist from such researches, and leave superstition still in possession of her retreat? Is it not proper to draw an opposite conclusion, and perceive the necessity of carrying the war into the most secret recesses of the enemy? . . . The only method of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions, is to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects. We . . . must cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate. . . . Accurate and just reasoning is the only catholic remedy . . . and is alone able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition . . . gives it the air of science and wisdom. (*E* 11–12)

Besides this advantage of rejecting, after deliberate enquiry, the most uncertain and disagreeable part of learning, there are many positive advantages, which result from an accurate scrutiny into the powers and faculties of human nature. . . . may we not hope, that philosophy, if cultivated with care, . . . may . . . discover, at least in some degree, the secret springs and principles, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations? (*E* 13–14)

Happy, if we can [reconcile] profound enquiry with clearness . . . And still more happy, if . . . we can undermine the foundations of an abstruse philosophy, which seems to have hitherto served only as a shelter to superstition, and a cover to absurdity and error! (*E* 16)

Here we find a clear enough purpose, which harmonizes perfectly with the content of the later sections of the *Enquiry* and which moreover makes excellent sense of its differences from the *Treatise*. For if Hume’s primary aim is to attack ‘superstition’ and ‘false metaphysics’ to clear the way for properly empirical

³¹ The interpretation of the final section of Book I of the *Treatise* is notoriously difficult, and it would take us too far afield to explore it here. Two excellent but contrasting attempts to make good sense of it are those of Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, ch. 1, and Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, ch. 10.

science, then he is well advised to avoid giving hostages to fortune in the form of either unconvincingly convoluted associationist hypotheses or irresoluble sceptical conundrums. Strained reasoning of either sort would provide an obvious target for criticism from self-appointed defenders of ‘common sense’ such as Reid and Beattie, and it may be that part of Hume’s reason for describing the *Enquiry* as a ‘compleat answer’ to them is that in it his associationist theories are presented as inessential speculations, while his scepticism takes only a ‘mitigated’ form. Moderating his scepticism also usefully sidesteps a favourite tactic of fideists such as Bayle, who were fond of using paradoxes — notably those involving infinite divisibility — to subvert confidence in human reason and thus make room for faith. This was a tactic familiar to Hume, having been advocated also in the influential ‘Port Royal Logic’ (*The Art of Thinking*).³² And that Hume has it explicitly in mind is suggested by a footnote in the *Enquiry*, where he proposes a method of avoiding mathematical paradoxes using the theory of abstract ideas that he had developed in the *Treatise*:

It seems to me not impossible to avoid these absurdities and contradictions, if it be admitted, that there is no such thing as abstract or general ideas, properly speaking; but that all general ideas are, in reality, particular ones, attached to a general term . . . *It certainly concerns all lovers of science not to expose themselves to the ridicule and contempt of the ignorant by their conclusions*; and this seems the readiest solution of these difficulties.’ (E 158‡n., my emphasis)

In short the *Enquiry*, through its omission or at least parenthesizing of the details of Hume’s associationist theory, and through the significant mitigation of its scepticism, provides only minimal exposure to potential ‘ridicule and contempt’ from Hume’s opponents. By giving them so little scope for counter-attack, and in conspicuous contrast to the *Treatise*, it effectively forces them to look instead to their own defences.³³

5. Hume’s Intellectual Legacy: The *Treatise* or the *Enquiry*?

All this might prompt the question to what extent Hume’s changes in the *Enquiry* are *merely* strategic: might it be that his real philosophical commitments are unchanged from those of the *Treatise*, and that the sidelining of his associationism and the mitigation of his scepticism in the later work are only ploys to make it less vulnerable to attack? Might it be, in other words, that in assessing Hume’s primary philosophical legacy we should ignore his last-minute bequest of the *Enquiry* and focus on the *Treatise* instead?

This suggestion, though it has obvious attractions for anyone who is rightly fascinated by the intricate philosophy of the *Treatise*, seems implausible to me for at least four reasons. First, we have seen that there is clear evidence of Hume’s being genuinely dissatisfied with the *Treatise* and of various changes of mind, evidence provided most emphatically by the Appendix to the *Treatise* and by his letters, though there are

³² Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *L’Art de Penser* (1662), trans. as *The Art of Thinking* by J. Dickoff and P. James (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), which is explicitly mentioned by Hume in both the *Treatise* (T 43) and the *Abstract* (A 647), advises the reader to study paradoxes ‘since such efforts diminish his self-conceit and remove from him the impudence that makes him oppose — on the ground that he cannot understand them — truths propounded by the church’ (pt. iv ch. 1, p. 301).

³³ If it is so important to Hume’s purposes that his scepticism in the *Enquiry* is not too extreme or potentially ‘ridiculous’, then this raises the major question *whether he has any right*, on his own principles, to ‘mitigate’ the more radical scepticism of the *Treatise* (e.g. to advocate at E 162 a limitation of our enquiries to common life, when T 271 seems to imply that no such limitation is possible). If the *Enquiry* indeed provides a legitimate sanction for such mitigation, then this is of considerable philosophical significance, and might well provide a further explanation of Hume’s preference for the later work. Two possible mitigating factors are mentioned in the discussion below, first, his apparent dropping of the ‘Separability Principle’, which lay behind many of his more extravagant conclusions in the *Treatise*; and secondly, his emphasis on inductive systematization, which seems to provide a relatively solid and down-to-earth basis for theorizing about the world of common life without any dependence on — and even despite the ultimate incoherence of — our notion of matter (and perhaps of other metaphysical notions also).

plenty of corroborative hints in the body of the *Treatise* and in the two *Enquiries*. Secondly, Hume had very good reason to be dissatisfied with the *Treatise*, in respects which correspond well to his later self-criticisms — when he reformulates his theory of belief, for example, or attacks extreme ‘antecedent scepticism’ as futile, or expresses doubts about his account of personal identity, he seems indeed to have put his finger on seriously problematic areas of his earlier philosophy. Thirdly, and related to this, the judgement of history has broadly confirmed Hume’s implicit assessments of quality in selecting the individual essays which constitute the *Enquiry*. Thus, for example, his argument concerning the non-rational basis of induction (Sections IV and V), his analysis of causation (Section VII), his compatibilism (Section VIII) and his critique of natural theology (Sections X and XI) are all universally accepted as philosophical classics worthy of serious overall consideration on their own merits, whereas by contrast the detailed associative psychology of the *Treatise*, including Hume’s baroque explanations of our ideas of space and time and our beliefs in the external world and in the self, are generally taken seriously only by specialist scholars or by those (notably university teachers and their students) who are content to mine them for interesting philosophical nuggets. This correspondence is no coincidence, for Hume was a man of excellent philosophical judgement which not surprisingly matured over time.

My final point will take rather longer to develop, because it concerns Hume’s philosophy as a whole and the overall significance of the *Treatise* and of the *Enquiry*. Earlier we identified some of Hume’s main philosophical opponents, and looked in particular at a wide range of issues on which he argued comprehensively against the rationalist position of Descartes. From our own historical perspective this contest may look very one-sided, with Hume the obvious victor on most if not all points, but in the mid-eighteenth century things would have looked very different, for rationalistic doctrines were then still being confidently propagated and vigorously defended by many writers. Such doctrines, even if not explicitly concerned with the existence or nature of God, typically had a theological motivation — the intrinsic inertness of matter, for example, was a favourite topic not only of Berkeley and the continental occasionalists (following Malebranche),³⁴ but also of various English and Scottish philosophers concerned to prove the impossibility of thinking matter and hence to rule out any mechanistic conception of man.³⁵ Thus in opposing ‘abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon . . . mixed up with popular superstition’ (*E* 12) Hume is actively contributing to contemporary debates not only in natural theology but also in scientific metaphysics; that he has such debates in mind is made evident in a footnote on the inertness issue in Section VII of the *Enquiry*, where he bemoans the occasionalism ‘so prevalent among our modern metaphysicians’ (*E* 73). Now given this context it is pertinent to ask which aspects of his ‘metaphysical’ philosophy Hume himself would probably have considered most central and important, and which appear by contrast relatively peripheral; the answer, I suggest, corresponds quite closely with the distinction between what he included in the *Enquiry* and what he omitted. Again this suggestion can be backed up with our earlier list of Cartesian claims and Humean responses. Only with respect to the self, and perhaps the

³⁴ According to Malebranche God is the only true cause, and so for example when one billiard ball strikes another, it does not really *cause* the other to move; rather, the collision provides an *occasion* on which God exercises his power to make the balls move as though they had causally interacted. Hume elegantly summarizes this theory at *E* 70–1, before strongly criticizing it at *E* 71–3.

³⁵ See J. W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), ch. 5, for a useful discussion of such philosophers, notably Andrew Baxter, who in the 1720s lived near Hume and his friend Kames in the Scottish Borders, and who corresponded with Kames about the Newtonian concept of matter.

immateriality of the soul,³⁶ does the transition from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry* in any way dilute Hume's position, but the omission from the *Enquiry* of any direct reworking of *Treatise* I. iv. 5 and I. iv. 6 (presumably due to dissatisfaction with his account of personal identity) is more than compensated by the addition of a range of powerful arguments in Section VII (E 64–9), which emphasize — more explicitly than the *Treatise* ever had — the total impossibility of aprioristic knowledge of the mind's workings.

Although I have made this case in respect of Hume's disagreements with Descartes in particular, a similar conclusion could be drawn in respect of his disagreements with other rationalistic philosophers too. In all such debates, I suggest, the *Enquiry* is a far more potent weapon than Book I of the *Treatise*, owing to the greater focus of its sceptical attacks and the omission from it of unconvincing (albeit sometimes ingenious) psychological theorizing which has limited relevance to the task at hand. Most of the material that Hume deletes in moving from the earlier to the later work falls into one of three categories: (a) detailed taxonomy of our impressions and ideas (*Treatise* I. i. 2–6, I. iii. 5), (b) investigation of our ideas of space and time in particular (I. ii. 1–5), and (c) associationist explanations of cognitive errors, some of which have extreme sceptical implications (I. iii. 9, I. iii. 13, I. iv. 1–6). But none of this is of any central significance in Hume's attack on rationalism, some of it provides obvious and vulnerable targets for his opponents, and some of it — notably his discussion of space and time — even itself smacks of rationalistic metaphysics.³⁷ Thus if Hume's permanent philosophical importance lies overwhelmingly in his consummate defeat of rationalism, as I believe it does, rather than in his tortured attempts to construct an associationist cognitive science, and if Hume correctly perceived this, then his preference for the *Enquiry* is both understandable and fully vindicated. Not only do the sections of the *Enquiry*, taken individually, include Hume's best and most lasting contributions to 'metaphysical' philosophy, but also the *Enquiry* as a whole provides a brilliant synthesis of his primary objective in that philosophy, the refutation of rationalistic metaphysics.

None of this implies that the mature Hume has in any way lost his earlier commitment to the application of 'the experimental method of reasoning' to 'moral subjects' — far from it, for as he repeatedly emphasizes, his defeat of aprioristic metaphysics leaves empirical observation and experiment as the only legitimate basis of scientific investigation, and as we shall see shortly, the *Enquiry* has much to say about the principles which should properly govern such empirical research. Hume's apparent loss of confidence in the psychology of the *Treatise* does not even imply that he has begun to feel doubts about the prospects for a thoroughgoing *associationist* psychology, though it does suggest that he no longer sees himself as the

³⁶ Hume's arguments on immateriality are not forgotten, however, for they resurface in summary form at the beginning of the posthumous essay 'On the Immortality of the Soul' mentioned earlier. Moreover the main points of those arguments, that the notion of substance is confused and indeterminate, and that no causal principles can be known a priori, are very clearly present in the *Enquiry*, so that this part of the essay can be seen as merely spelling out fairly obvious corollaries of Hume's established principles.

³⁷ The most rationalistic parts of the *Treatise* are those where Hume argues from the nature of perceptions to the nature of objects by making use of his 'Separability Principle' (i.e. whatever is different is distinguishable and hence separable by thought) or its converse. So it is very noteworthy that in the *Enquiry*: (a) the Separability Principle makes no appearance; (b) there is no explicit discussion of the simple–complex distinction which is arguably the Separability Principle's foundation (Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, 68); and (c) as already mentioned, there is no developed theory of the structure of space and time, which in the *Treatise* is not only crucially based on the Separability Principle but also plays an important role in facilitating the simple–complex distinction by providing ultimate simples (ibid. 74). Given how neatly this links together some of the hitherto puzzling differences between the two works (differences which, in default of any more principled explanation, have generally been attributed to the 'shortening and simplifying' described by Hume to Elliot), it is tempting to speculate that *all* of Hume's major deletions between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* might be accounted for by a loss of confidence both in associationism (as discussed earlier) and in the Separability Principle. If so, this would I believe be a tribute to his good philosophical judgement, and would also be an additional nail in the coffin of the view of the *Enquiry* as merely a simplified *Treatise*.

Newton of the moral sciences, and has acquired a more realistic perspective on *his own* achievements in that area. In the *Enquiry* he accordingly retains his stake to a reputation as a psychologist only in a muted way, suggesting ‘explications and analogies’ which others might take further but without risking the credit of his philosophical work should his associationism fail to stand the test of time. It has not stood that test, and modern cognitive scientists pay no heed to it, though of course they do pursue their work in the thoroughly empirical way that he advocated. So again Hume’s judgement in distancing himself from his juvenile psychology has proved astute: his permanent contributions to the advancement of learning have indeed turned out to lie primarily in his philosophical assault on the heart of rationalism rather than in the associationism for which that assault was, in the *Treatise*, designed to clear the ground. And precisely because his appreciation of the relative merits of these aspects of his work was ultimately correct, it is clear that modern cognitive scientists, following him methodologically but not in his associationism, are unequivocally to be numbered among his true intellectual heirs. The foundation of modern, empirical, cognitive science is indeed part of the legacy of Hume the philosopher, but not of Hume the psychologist.

6. The Integrity and Structure of the First *Enquiry*

I have argued for a controversial conclusion: that Hume’s *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* was correctly judged by its author to be philosophically superior to Book I of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. Not all will be convinced, and indeed it would be unrealistic to suppose that a brief discussion such as this should persuade even a significant proportion of the great majority of philosophers and scholars who have taken a contrary view. However I trust that what has been said above has at least been sufficient to establish with confidence a more modest conclusion. Namely, that whatever the truth may be regarding Hume’s later rejection or continued acceptance of the distinctive philosophy and psychology of the *Treatise*, and whatever our judgement on which of these works is philosophically the more powerful, Hume’s first *Enquiry* deserves to be read and studied *on its own terms*, and not merely as an afterthought or addendum to his earlier masterpiece. For the *Enquiry* is a serious philosophical work in its own right, with a fundamentally different approach from the *Treatise* and a distinct — or at least a more focused — primary objective. It makes no attempt to establish an associationist science of man, but neither does it presuppose the details of any such science; instead, it presents an independent and integrated assault on the credentials of rationalistic metaphysics, with material chosen appropriately to that end. Thus although nearly all of the detailed psychological explanation from Book I of the *Treatise* is omitted, significantly reducing the bulk of the work as a whole, there are significant additions too. Prominent among these are not only the religious topics in Sections X and XI, and the discussion of mitigated scepticism in Section XII, but also major improvements and extensions to the arguments concerning induction, causation, and free will in Sections IV, VII, and VIII respectively. These three sections (together with Part i of Section V) constitute the theoretical heart of Hume’s anti-rationalist case, and the development of these central arguments, together with their streamlining and liberation from the psychologistic context of the *Treatise*, would alone be sufficient to make the *Enquiry* an indispensable source for the anti-rationalist theme in Hume’s philosophy even without the distinctive religious and other material which has no precedent in the *Treatise*.

The greater focus of the *Enquiry* is apparent not only in its content but also in its structure, which interestingly follows quite closely that of the ‘single and concise . . . chain of reasoning’ (A 643) which Hume presents in the earlier *Abstract*, and refers to in its subtitle as ‘The CHIEF ARGUMENT’ of the *Treatise*.

Since the *Abstract* seems to have been mostly written in October to November 1739,³⁸ this suggests that within barely nine months of publication of the first two books of the *Treatise* Hume was already rethinking the structure of his work and isolating its most important lines of argument in a way that would finally bear fruit in the *Enquiry*, and which (perhaps significantly) corresponds far less well with the distribution of material in the *Treatise* itself. For this reason the *Abstract* provides at least as good an introduction to the *Enquiry* as it does to the *Treatise*, and any student of Hume is well advised to read it for a general outline of his intentions before moving on to either of the larger works. Hence I shall end with an overview of the shared structure of the *Abstract* and the *Enquiry*, to help orientate such readers and to enable them to identify clearly the general thrust of Hume's 'chief argument'. Where the two works diverge significantly in their presentation of this argument, I shall follow the order of treatment in the *Enquiry*, taking care, however, to make reference to any corresponding passages in the *Abstract*. Indeed every section of the *Enquiry* will be mentioned below, albeit some only briefly, because as we shall see, nearly all of them have a significant part to play in the development of Hume's 'chief argument', making the *Enquiry* a far more integrated work than has usually been appreciated. The ultimate aim of this overview, therefore, is to show that the *Enquiry* is very far from being merely a collection of related essays or edited highlights from the *Treatise* — it can, and should, be read as a systematic exposition of Hume's mature anti-rationalist and thoroughly empiricist philosophy.

7. An Outline of Hume's 'Chief Argument' in the *Abstract* and the *Enquiry*

Hume begins both the *Abstract* and the *Enquiry* with introductory material contrasting two types of philosophy, which in Section I of the *Enquiry* he calls the 'easy' and the 'abstruse' respectively. He then explains his own commitment to the latter, a conception of philosophy which values scientific accuracy above popular eloquence. In Section II, as in the *Abstract*, he begins his 'abstruse' investigation with some definitions that provide the basis of his theory of ideas, but he draws attention to only one crucial result of that theory (A 647–8, E 19), the so-called 'Copy Principle' that all our 'ideas' (the materials of our thought) are copied from 'impressions' (sensations or feelings). Hume commends this as a tool for identifying bogus ideas that lack corresponding impressions (A 648–9, E 22), and in this capacity it is destined to play an important role within his analysis of causation in Section VII. Apart from this principle, however, and the observation that impressions are distinguished from ideas in having more 'force and vivacity' (A 647, E 17–18), his theory of ideas has little relevance to what follows, so in the *Abstract* he develops it no further, while in the *Enquiry* he completes his treatment with a cursory summary of the principles of association (in Section III) before quickly moving on to his main business, the investigation of causation and of reasoning 'concerning matter of fact' (i.e. what is now usually called 'induction').³⁹

³⁸ See Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 121–9, for a discussion of the *Abstract* in the context of the public reception of the *Treatise*. Although the 'chief argument' of the *Abstract* indeed provides the backbone of the *Enquiry*, there are also important relevant differences between the two works, yielding further evidence regarding the development of Hume's views. Thus in March 1740, when the *Abstract* appeared, it seems that Hume was not yet feeling the doubts about personal identity which, as we have seen, were manifested in the Appendix only eight months later. His theory of geometrical ideas is also singled out for special mention in the *Abstract*, whereas in the *Enquiry* what little remains of it is relegated to footnotes. Accordingly neither of these topics will be mentioned in the following overview.

³⁹ With the exception of the special case of 'custom', the *Abstract* does not even mention the principles of association until the final paragraph, where as we saw earlier they are emphasized quite strongly and rhetorically. The obvious explanation for this last-minute flourish is the *Abstract*'s intended role in promoting the *Treatise*, which is full of associationist psychology, but it is clear that already by late 1739 Hume had come to appreciate that his main philosophical results could be presented independently of this psychology.

In the *Treatise* the topics of causation and induction had been very closely intertwined, with Hume setting out (in *Treatise* I. iii. 2) to analyse our idea of cause and effect, then resolving this into its components, and eventually coming to consider induction only while ‘beating about . . . neighbouring fields’ (*T* 78) in the course of his search for the origin of the most perplexing of those components, the idea of necessary connexion. Given the *Abstract*’s role as a summary of the *Treatise* it not surprisingly follows the same general order of treatment, though now the discussions of causation and induction are far less entangled, and they already show clear signs of a shift in Hume’s thinking from an analytical to an epistemological perspective. These changes are completed in the *Enquiry*, where induction is introduced as a purely epistemological issue in Section IV and separated entirely from the analysis of causation, which is now treated in a single continuous discussion in Section VII (bringing the definition of ‘cause’ in terms of its components together with the search for the impression of necessity).⁴⁰ Moreover even the latter section, despite its declared purpose of clarifying ideas, is given an emphasis which is at least as much epistemological as analytical. Between Sections IV and VII are inserted discussions of belief and of probability: the theory of belief in Section V provides Hume’s ‘sceptical solution’ to the problem of induction raised in Section IV, while his treatment of probability in Section VI extends this theory to deal with cases of inference based on inconsistent experience. These topics also appear in the same order in the *Abstract* (albeit probability only very briefly), placed between the material on induction and the search for the impression of necessity.

Hume’s argument in Section IV and Section V Part i of the *Enquiry*, and in the corresponding paragraphs of the *Abstract*, starts from a fundamental question about the foundation of our ‘reasonings concerning matter of fact’ (*A* 649, *E* 26): ‘what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory?’ (*E* 26). Most of our knowledge, from history to the laws of physics, depends on such factual inference (for which Hume uses a variety of terms including ‘moral’ and ‘probable’ reasoning), and yet he observes that it has tended to be neglected by philosophers both ancient and modern (*A* 646–7, *E* 26). These philosophers have instead focused most of their attention on ‘demonstration’ — that is, on the sort of reasoning used in algebra, arithmetic, geometry or formal logic, whose validity is logically guaranteed because it depends only on ‘relations of ideas’ (*E* 25) and not at all on how things stand in the world. Factual reasoning clearly lacks this kind of security, because whatever evidence we might have for believing facts beyond our present experience (e.g. my beliefs that the sun will rise tomorrow, that my desk will not evaporate, or that my pen will fall if I throw it up in the air), it is always *conceivable* that such a belief should turn out to be mistaken: logic alone or ‘relations of ideas’ cannot guarantee its truth. So what basis do I have for making any factual inferences beyond my direct experience, and how can I ever have confidence in a belief thus inferred? Hume’s answer is that such inferences can never be based entirely on rational considerations, but always presuppose something which cannot be independently justified, namely, that the world’s ways of working are uniform and hence that correlations observed in the past will continue into the future. This assumption enters our factual reasonings through the operation of ‘custom’, a non-rational instinct which leads us to expect in the future what we have observed in the past, even though we cannot give the slightest good reason for such an expectation. The centrality of custom in our thoughts is easy to overlook precisely because it is so strong and immediate (*E* 28–9): it enters into our factual inferences without our ever being aware of it, and indeed in everyday life such inferences are characteristically immediate and unreflective, with custom

⁴⁰ The *Enquiry* also differs from the *Treatise* and *Abstract* in its detailed account of the components of the idea of ‘cause’, with contiguity no longer being considered as essential to it (compare *T* 75 and *A* 649 with *E* 76). One motive for this change might have been to accommodate the possibility of gravitational action at a distance (which at *E* 30 Hume seems to acknowledge as an ‘ultimate cause’), but another likely motive is to permit causal relations between ‘perceptions, which . . . exist no where’ (*T* 236).

acting quietly but irresistibly to extrapolate beliefs from past experience as soon as we make a relevant observation. Thus, for example, I have uniform experience that balls in the air fall to earth, and so as soon as I see a ball thrown above me, I immediately believe that it too will fall:

This belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or to prevent. (*E* 46–7)

But the importance of custom is not confined to these everyday inferences. Even our reflective scientific reasonings (for example when we infer a future eclipse from equations describing the motions of sun, earth, and moon) would be quite impossible without the presupposition of uniformity which custom provides.

Having established the role of custom in factual reasoning, Hume adds some ‘speculations’ (*E* 47) about the nature and causes of belief, which in the *Enquiry* are placed in Section V Part ii and thus separated from the main flow of his argument. He starts (*A* 652, *E* 47) by addressing a question which other philosophers have overlooked, namely, what is it that distinguishes the mere conception of some proposition (e.g. that the ball will fall) from belief that the proposition is true? His answer is that belief cannot arise merely from addition to, or rearrangement of, the ideas involved in such a conception (for if it did then we would be able to change our beliefs at will); instead it must involve a (typically involuntary) difference in the manner of conception: ‘belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain’ (*E* 49; cf. *A* 654). This characterization of the distinction between belief and mere conception, however, is highly reminiscent of that between impressions and ideas in terms of ‘force and vivacity’, and suggests some ‘analogies’ (*A* 655, *E* 50, 54) among the operations of the mind which in the *Enquiry* he goes on to explore, but in the *Abstract* only alludes to briefly (*A* 655). Again the contrast between both of these works and the *Treatise* is striking, because what he presents at this point even in the *Enquiry* is merely a faint echo of what initially (*Treatise* I. iii. 8–13) had been an explicit theory of belief formation. According to this theory (e.g. *T* 98, 122) belief comes about through the literal transfer of force and vivacity from a present impression (e.g. of a ball in the air) to an associated idea (e.g. that the ball will fall), with this force and vivacity being conveyed — in a way apparently directly analogous to the communication of impulse in a hydraulic system — along channels of association carved out by previous experience (e.g. observations of balls in the air subsequently falling), and thus converting the idea, through the resulting increase in its force and vivacity, from a mere conception into a belief. In the *Enquiry* Hume still evinces some lingering affection for this theory but far less confidence in it: not only does he take it less literally, as a speculative source of mere ‘explications and analogies’ rather than as a reliable account of genuine causal laws governing the transfer of force and vivacity, but also he states clearly that his philosophical conclusions are quite independent of it (*E* 47).

Hume’s account of ‘probability’ — reasoning in which we draw tentative conclusions from inconsistent past experience as opposed to firm conclusions from uniform past experience — is presented very briefly in Section VI of the *Enquiry*, and is given only one short paragraph in the *Abstract* (*A* 655). Hume’s main aim here seems to be to emphasize how comfortably his theory of belief can accommodate such reasoning: just as a uniform experience of *As* followed by *Bs* can lead us, on observing an *A*, to conceive *B* in a forceful manner (i.e. to believe that a *B* will occur), so an inconsistent experience of *As* followed sometimes by *Bs* and sometimes by *Cs* can lead us, on observing an *A*, to conceive both *B* and *C* with a force proportionate to their past frequency. Again, however, Hume avoids any commitment to the literal ‘hydraulic’ interpretation of this theory which had dominated in the *Treatise* (e.g. *T* 129–30, 134, 142), attributing probabilistic belief instead to ‘an inexplicable contrivance of nature’ (*E* 57). He also emphasizes again how peripheral such

details are to his main business, commenting that he will ‘think it sufficient, if the present hints excite the curiosity of philosophers’ (E 59).

The digressions on his theory of belief now completed, Hume in Section VII comes to the second central topic of his ‘chief argument’, namely the analysis of causation and of the idea of necessary connexion. Here a number of themes come together and are intermingled (arguably even confused). First, Hume announces his objective of clarifying the important idea of ‘power, force, energy or necessary connexion’ (E 62; cf. A 656) in accordance with his Copy Principle of Section II, by searching for an impression from which this idea might be derived.⁴¹ Then he examines various putative sources of such an impression (notably our external perception of causal interactions, our internal perception of the operations of our will, and our idea of God), dismissing each of these in turn on the ground that nothing we perceive in any of these cases can yield any a priori understanding of the causal sequences involved — we can know only from experience what causes what, in either the external or the internal arena, and this implies that power or necessary connexion is simply not something that we can perceive. The Copy Principle, however, tells us that all genuine ideas are copies of impressions, so in the apparent absence of any corresponding impression, ‘the necessary conclusion *seems* to be that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning’ (E 74). Hume, however, manages to avoid this sceptical result, for by turning his attention from passive perception to the active operation of the mind in factual reasoning, he after all succeeds in finding an impression to vindicate the crucial idea. As he has previously explained in Sections IV and V, after we have seen *As* repeatedly and reliably followed by *Bs* (what he calls a ‘constant conjunction’ between *A* and *B*), any subsequent observation of an *A* leads us by custom to expect a *B*. He now draws his conclusion: ‘This connexion, therefore, which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion.’ (E 75; cf. A 657). Hume rounds off this discussion in the *Enquiry* (but not in the *Abstract*) with two ‘definitions of cause’ (E 76–7) before a final ‘recapitulation’ (E 78–9). Such presenting of definitions accords well with the analytical objective announced at the beginning of the section, but nevertheless the real significance of most of the arguments that he has given in the meantime seems rather to be epistemological. Most of these arguments are focused on the impossibility of the sort of ‘understanding’ of causation that would yield causal knowledge independently of induction, and as such they serve primarily to reinforce the conclusions of Section IV. Even the most overtly analytical paragraphs of Section VII — where the genuine impression of necessity is finally identified and ‘cause’ defined (E 74–7) — have a similar epistemological tendency, for their central message is that we have absolutely no understanding of ‘power’ or ‘necessary connexion’ independently of our own inferential behaviour. When we try to contemplate any supposed connexion in nature, in the sense of an objective basis for causal inferences between events, not only do we lack any conception of such a connexion, but we lack ‘even any distinct notion what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it’ (E 77). One of Hume’s motives for emphasizing this total lack of understanding of any supposed necessity in nature is indeed thoroughly epistemological, to refute the claims to knowledge of those such as Cartesians and ‘modern metaphysicians’ (E 73‡n.) who claim to know by rational insight what types of thing can have which types of power. But Hume also has another motive which perhaps crucially accounts for the overt and otherwise puzzling analytical emphasis in Section VII: this motive becomes apparent only in Section VIII.

Hume’s own view of the significance of his account ‘of liberty and necessity’ can be gauged from the fact that in the *Abstract* this is the only topic from Book II of the *Treatise* (II. iii. 1–2) to merit more than a brief mention, and is given no less than four paragraphs, more than any other single topic except induction

⁴¹ Although at E 62 Hume initially makes reference to the ‘ideas’ of ‘power, force, energy or necessary connexion’, he then (E 63–4) seems to treat them as a single idea, as he had also in the *Treatise* on the grounds that they are ‘nearly synonymous’ (T 157).

(which is easily the longest) and belief. Likewise in the *Enquiry* it is the only Book II topic to find a place, with Hume astutely relocating it from its *Treatise* context within his treatment of the passions to a far more appropriate and conspicuous position immediately after his explication of the idea of necessary connexion. At the same time he considerably refines and extends his original discussion, whose limited main theme supporting the ‘doctrine of necessity’ is well summarized in the *Abstract* (A 660–1). In ‘recasting’ this for the *Enquiry* Hume redefines its objectives, modifies its terminology, improves its structure, strengthens its arguments, and incorporates within it observations regarding the use of inductive and probabilistic reasoning about both the physical world and human behaviour, in particular an important paragraph on scientific method and the search for hidden causes, copied verbatim from earlier in the *Treatise* (T 132, E 86–7). The section ‘Of Liberty and Necessity’ which results is not only the longest but one of the most philosophically important sections of the *Enquiry*, and one which accordingly deserves far more scholarly attention than it has hitherto been given. A striking instance of its relative neglect is the extent to which this section has been widely ignored in the recently fashionable debate over Hume’s alleged ‘causal realism’. And there is a major irony here, because if the suggestion at the end of my last paragraph is correct, then Hume’s overtly analytical emphasis in his discussion of the idea of necessity — an emphasis whose interpretation is at the very heart of the ‘causal realism’ debate — is motivated very largely, perhaps even predominantly, by his need to prepare the ground for his resolution of the free will issue in Section VIII.

The ancient problem of free will and determinism arises from a perceived conflict between, on the one hand, the common-sense supposition that some human actions are genuinely free (‘the doctrine of liberty’), and, on the other hand, the scientifically inspired belief that the world is governed by deterministic causal laws (‘the doctrine of necessity’). Hume ascribes the 2,000 years’ lack of progress on this issue to conceptual ambiguities (E 80), and accordingly sets out to remove these ambiguities, with the aim of showing ‘that all men have ever agreed in the doctrine both of necessity and of liberty, according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms’ (E 81). The first stage of this clarification appeals directly to the results of Section VII: our idea of necessity is derived only from the customary transition of thought which is conditioned in us by the observation of a constant conjunction, and so ‘Beyond the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexion.’ (E 82; cf. A 661). It follows that the doctrine of necessity, as it applies to human action, can amount to no more than the two claims that human actions follow consistent patterns, and that we draw inferences about them accordingly; both, Hume thinks, can be established beyond reasonable dispute (E 83–8 and 88–91 respectively). Turning now to the second stage of his ‘reconciling project’, Hume argues that ‘By liberty . . . we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*’ — a degree of freedom ‘universally allowed to belong to every one who is not a prisoner and in chains’ (E 95). Again Hume appeals to Section VII to back up his position, this time to dismiss as ‘unintelligible’ any rival conception of liberty which takes it to involve some form of non-necessitating causation (E 96). His own interpretations of the doctrines of ‘necessity’ and ‘liberty’ are, he concludes, the only ones that are tenable and coherent — and thus interpreted the two doctrines are not only manifestly consistent with each other, but true. This is not quite the end of the matter, however, because the doctrine of necessity in particular has traditionally been thought to be subversive of morality, and with this in mind Hume proceeds in Part ii of Section VIII to defend his account against any such accusation. So far from posing any danger to morality, he argues that both the doctrine of necessity and the doctrine of liberty, as he interprets them, are essential to it. Moreover the ‘moral sentiments’ (E 102) which lead us to ascribe blame and merit are left quite unaffected by any such metaphysical niceties. Hume carefully refrains, however, from stating that the doctrine of necessity is harmless to religion, and he is content to leave unstated what is by then the obvious negative consequence regarding God’s supposed goodness (E 103).

With Section IX of the *Enquiry* we move beyond the core of Hume's 'chief argument' to material which has no parallel in the *Abstract*, although it does correspond to a section in the *Treatise*, the identically named 'Of the Reason of Animals' (I. iii. 16). Despite its brevity this discussion has an obvious role in Hume's anti-rationalist campaign, firmly placing man's faculties within rather than above nature. But the paragraph with which it starts is also independently significant, making explicit an important general principle about analogical reasoning which has hitherto been at best implicit (cf. *E* 30–1, 72), and which will in due course be invoked within the argument of Section XI (*E* 143–6). This principle is, that since inductive inference involves the extrapolation of observed regularities — the prediction of similar effects from similar causes — it follows that the strength of such inference is crucially dependent on the degree of similarity involved. Thus where inferences are made regarding things that are not *exactly* similar to those previously observed, 'the analogy is less perfect, and the inference is less conclusive; though still it has some force, in proportion to the degree of similarity and resemblance' (*E* 104). This principle has a clear application to the reasoning of animals and of ourselves: animals are in many ways similar to us though not entirely, and so although it cannot be guaranteed that our cognitive processes will be the same as theirs, nevertheless an inference drawn from facts about animal reasoning to conclusions about human reasoning preserves enough analogy to have significant force. And this confirms Hume's account of induction, for animals, like us, clearly learn from experience, and since they evidently do not do this on the basis of abstruse arguments but through the operation of unreflective instinct — by simply taking for granted that past patterns will continue into the future — this strongly supports by analogy Hume's claim that the same is true of ourselves.

Sections X and XI have no parallel in the *Treatise* (or therefore in the *Abstract*), owing as we saw earlier to Hume's prudence in 'castrating' his first work through the removal of his most explicit attacks on religion. Both sections discuss popular arguments for God's existence, respectively the Argument from Miracles and the Design Argument, and the general philosophical theme which justifies their place in the *Enquiry* is common to both. Namely, that these revered arguments, though they (either implicitly or explicitly) depend on inductive reasoning, in fact violate the principles of that reasoning as established by the earlier analyses in Sections IV, V, VI, VIII and IX. However Sections X and XI should not be seen merely as applications of an already completed inductive 'theory'; rather, they serve as important illustrations of a general theoretical framework which at the same time provide Hume with the opportunity to develop that framework further, first in the direction of inferences involving conflicting probabilities, and then in the direction of inferences involving proportion and analogy. Hence these sections, though admittedly not part of the core of Hume's 'chief argument', are certainly more than mere appendices to it.

To take the case of miracles first, Hume has previously shown that induction, which is our only available method of 'reasoning concerning matter of fact', is founded on a basic simple assumption of uniformity. But this assumption does not imply that we should crudely extrapolate into the future those superficial and typically imperfect regularities which most immediately strike us. On the contrary, it should actively encourage a systematic search for initially less obvious, but more reliable, *underlying* regularities, so as to reveal more uniformity in the world's workings than is apparent at first glance (here the important paragraph at *E* 86–7, mentioned earlier, is particularly pertinent). Where we are unable to trace inconsistent phenomena to fully uniform underlying regularities, however, we have to make do with merely probable inferences drawn from this experience in the manner explained in Section VI: the wise man accordingly 'considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments' (*E* 111) and 'proportions his belief to the evidence' (*E* 110). If we apply these principles to reports of miracles, we shall find that the most consistent regularities, and those therefore that merit most inferential weight, are not those that tell in favour of the truthfulness of such reports but quite the reverse. For although we indeed have experience of a general correlation between reports of events and the truth of those reports, nevertheless this experience is by no means uniform and is subject to all sorts of familiar distortions (particularly when religious belief is

involved), while on the other hand we inevitably have much more consistent experience that miraculous events — events contrary to the generally observed course of nature — just do not happen (or if they do, happen so rarely that any particular miracle report will always be far more likely to be false than true).

Hume's treatment of the Design Argument in Section XI draws attention in turn to three respects in which that argument violates the principles of inductive reasoning. The first, to which the majority of the section is devoted, involves a principle of proportionality: 'When we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect.' (E 136). This clearly rules out the traditional theologian's trick of first inferring the existence of a designer from the perceived order of nature, and then immediately arguing back from the inferred qualities of this designer (e.g. perfect goodness and justice) to draw new conclusions about nature (e.g. that the world must be better and more just than it appears). However the principle does not rule out bringing additional evidence to bear, and so is not insurmountable except in cases where a cause is known *only* by the effect in question. In common life this will not usually be a problem, because the causes we infer are typically similar to others that we have previously experienced, enabling us at the very least to reason by analogy as discussed in Section IX. But the second difficulty with the Design Argument (E 143–6) is that in this case the analogy is just too distant to carry any force — indeed the remoteness of the analogy between man and God suggests a third and even more radical difficulty (E 148). For God is understood as being entirely unique, falling under no known species, and we have seen (from Sections IV and VII) that causal laws can be learned only through the observation of constant conjunctions between species of objects. Hence it follows that inductive causal inference, the only type of reasoning available for drawing any conclusions beyond mere 'relations of ideas', can have no legitimate application in attempting to prove God's existence.

The final section of the *Enquiry*, 'Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy', is the most difficult to interpret, presenting a wide variety of sceptical arguments whose ultimate purpose is sometimes hard to discern, and with subject-matter that goes well beyond the scope of Hume's 'chief argument' concerning induction and causal reasoning. There is nevertheless a corresponding passage in the *Abstract*, one which usefully highlights the three major themes of *scepticism*, *empiricism*, and *naturalism* which run through Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise*:

By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience . . . Our author . . . concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy wou'd render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it. (A 657)

'The strange infirmities of human understanding' (E 161) also provide the first and most prominent theme of Section XII of the *Enquiry*, with Hume drawing the moral that we should be cautious and undogmatic in our reasoning and should confine 'our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to [our] narrow capacity' (E 150, 161–2). The naturalistic theme mentioned in the *Abstract* also plays a significant role throughout Section XII, for what saves us from Pyrrhonism (i.e. extreme scepticism) is not intellectual reflection but natural instinct, which determines us both to reason inductively despite the absence of any rational basis for so doing (E 159) and to believe in an external world even though that belief is groundless and dubiously coherent (E 151–5). Hume does not spell out exactly how all this scepticism is supposed to mesh with the generally scientific and constructive spirit of his 'chief argument' (represented by the empiricist theme in the quotation from the *Abstract* above), and he has thus left his interpreters with a difficult puzzle. But a personal view of what I take to be Hume's overall position would go roughly as follows.

Natural instinct gives us a belief in inductive uniformity which we find irresistible however strong the sceptical objections to it might be, so any attempt to displace or to doubt it would be quite futile. This being so, the wise response is simply to accept it and to reason accordingly, systematically following out its logical implications such as those revealed by the explorations in Sections VIII to XI — notably the principles of reasoning concerning hidden uniformities (*E* 86–7), analogy (*E* 104), conflicting evidence (*E* 110–11), proportionality (*E* 136), and unique causes (*E* 148). These provide a sufficient basis not only for everyday reasoning but also for empirical science, which indeed is ‘nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected’ (*E* 162) and whose only proper aspiration is ‘to reduce the principles, productive of natural phenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation’ (*E* 30). Any more profound scientific ambition would be misguided because no form of rationalistic understanding of the world appears to be possible, and anyway the frailty of our faculties gives no ground for confidence when they attempt to draw conclusions beyond the range of the natural beliefs over which we have no choice. Even our fundamental belief in matter cannot provide any basis for a non-inductive science (although it is just as instinctive and irresistible as our belief in uniformity and therefore equally worthy of unquestioned acceptance), for it is far too confused, indeterminate, and even paradoxical to enable any deeper conclusions about the nature of things to be drawn from it with any security.

Thus inductive reasoning, founded on natural instinct, is vindicated as our only possible means of scientific progress, but appreciation of its relatively lowly foundation should inspire us with due humility in applying it: ‘there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner’ (*E* 162). An even more significant moral is ‘the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding’ (*E* 162), a limitation whose basis is left rather unclear in the *Enquiry*, but is spelt out much more fully in Part I of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, in a long speech by Philo:

when we look beyond human affairs and the properties of the surrounding bodies: When we carry our speculations . . . into the creation and formation of the universe; the existence and properties of spirits . . . We must be far removed from the smallest tendency to scepticism not to be apprehensive, that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties. So long as we confine our speculations to trade, or morals, or politics, or criticism, we make appeals, every moment, to common sense and experience, which strengthen our philosophical conclusions, and remove (at least, in part) the suspicion, which we so justly entertain with regard to every reasoning that is very subtile and refined. But in theological reasonings, we have not this advantage; while at the same time we are employed upon objects, which, we must be sensible, are too large for our grasp, and of all others, require most to be familiarised to our apprehension. We are like foreigners in a strange country, to whom everything must seem suspicious . . . We know not how far we ought to trust our vulgar methods of reasoning in such a subject; since, even in common life and in that province which is peculiarly appropriated to them, we cannot account for them, and are entirely guided by a kind of instinct or necessity in employing them.

All sceptics pretend [i.e. claim], that . . . we could never retain any conviction or assurance, on any subject, were not the sceptical reasonings so refined and subtile, that they are not able to counterpoise the more solid and more natural arguments, derived from the senses and experience. But it is evident, whenever our arguments lose this advantage, and run wide of common life, that the most refined scepticism comes to be on a footing with them, and is able to oppose and counterbalance them. The one has no more weight than the other. The mind must remain in suspense between them; and it is that very suspense or balance, which is the triumph of scepticism. (*D* 134–6)

Philo's position here seems to be identical with that taken by Hume in the *Enquiry*, but provides a much clearer rationale of the recommended limitation of our epistemic ambitions.⁴²

The *Enquiry* itself draws to a close with a brief discussion of the appropriate limits. First, the scope of demonstrative methods is severely restricted, *except* in mathematics, by the lack of clear and precise relationships between our ideas — hence as far as reasonings of any significant intricacy are concerned, ‘the only objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number’ (*E* 163). But induction from experience is the only other type of reasoning available, and thus it follows that the ‘proper subjects of science and enquiry’ (*E* 163) reduce to only those involving either ‘abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number’ or ‘experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence’. Anything else, such as ‘divinity or school metaphysics, for instance’, must be fanciful and fallacious, and so the *Enquiry* ends with Hume's famous verdict on the work of his theological and rationalist opponents: ‘Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion’ (*E* 165)!

⁴² However it is intriguing that Cleanthes' response to Philo (*D* 136–7) then raises serious questions about the adequacy of this rationale, indicating that Hume himself may ultimately have found it less than convincing. Certainly in the *Dialogues* he does not rely on it, but rejects the arguments of natural theology by showing in detail how they fail on their own terms to establish their conclusion, rather than on the general ground that they run wide of common life. A letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto dated 18 Feb. 1751, just when the *Dialogues* were being composed, suggests that this may represent a conscious shift of principle: ‘in Metaphysics or Theology . . . Nothing . . . can correct bad Reasoning but good Reasoning: and Sophistry must be oppos'd by Syllogism’. Hume then mentions various religions, and comments that ‘no thinking man can implicitly assent to any of them; but from the general Principle, that as the Truth in these Subjects is beyond human Capacity, & that as for one's own Ease he must adopt some Tenets, there is more Satisfaction & Convenience in holding to the Catechism we have been first taught. Now this I have nothing to say against. I woud only observe, that such a Conduct is founded on the most universal & determin'd Scepticism, join'd to a little indolence. For more Curiosity & Research gives a direct opposite Turn from the same Principles.’ (*HL* i. 151–2). The first draft of the *Dialogues* is explicitly discussed in Hume's next letter to Elliot, dated only twenty days later (*HL* i. 153–7).