

# Humanities 4: Lectures 5-6

David Hume:

*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

# Biographical Information



- \* (1711-1776)
- \* Politician, Historian, Author, Philosopher
- \* No academic position
- \* Empiricist, Newton of the mind

# Bibliography

- \* *A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40)*
- \* *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (1748)*
- \* *An Enquiry concerning Morals (1751)*
- \* *A History of England [6 vols.] (1754-1762)*
- \* *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779)*

# Hume's First Enquiry

- \* Empiricism (following and extending Newton)
  - All ideas are copies of sensory impressions. (§2)
  - Knowledge should be based on empirical evidence.
- \* The meaning of causality (§§4 & 5)
  - What impression of causality do we have?
  - “constant conjunction” + subjective expectation
- \* Causal Reasoning (§7)
  - No rational justification
  - Based on experience, i.e., habit

# Hume's Attack on Religion

\*§ 10 attacks the argument of revealed religion.

\*§ 11 attacks one prominent argument from natural religion.

\**Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* attacks several other arguments from natural religion.

# The Argument of Revealed Religion

- \* God revealed himself by taking human form and by then performing a series of miracles.
- \* Those who witnessed these miracles wrote them down.
- \* The testimony of these witnesses was passed down from generation to generation in a book (the Bible) or through a social institution (the church).
- \* Humans are justified in believing in God's existence because they have testimony of the miracles that prove God's divine status.

# Hume's Argument Against RR

## \* Principle of Belief

- One should proportion one's belief to the quality and quantity of available evidence.

## \* Definition of a Law of Nature

- A Law of Nature is that which has the best possible empirical evidence in its favor -- both in terms of quantity and quality.

## \* Definition of a Miracle

- A miracle is a violation of a law of nature.

# Hume's Argument, cont.

- \* Claim: It is never rational to believe that a miracle has occurred.
  - Note: Miracles are possible. The question is whether *to believe* that they actually occur.
- \* Basic Argument: Evidence in favor of laws of nature is, by definition, better than evidence in favor of miracle (a violation of the laws of nature).



# Observations

- \* No miracles have been attested to by a sufficient number of reliable witnesses.
- \* In ‘miraculous’ circumstances, one may be led to disregard rational principles. (gossip & exaggerate)
- \* Miracles are typically attested to by people in “ignorant and barbarous nations” (not today).
- \* The conflict between different religious systems destroys the credibility of the miracles they are based on.

# Two Qualifications

\*Hume limits the scope of his argument to those miracles that would be used to support religion.

- “[A] no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and [B] make it a just foundation for any such system of religion”

- “there may possibly be miracles ... of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony” [ $\sim$ A]

- “though perhaps it be impossible to find any such in all the records of history.”

# Two Qualifications, cont.

\* Hume's conclusion:

- not that we should not believe in miracles
- rather only that such belief would be irrational.
- “We may conclude 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.”

# Hume on Natural Religion, §11

## I. Preliminaries

A. Topic: Natural Religion

B. Title: “Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State”

C. Structure of the Position of Natural Religion:

1. First infer that God exists (via Argument from Design)
2. Then determine the future rewards/punishments for our actions.

D. Rhetorical Device: In the Mouth of Epicurus

# Hume on Natural Religion, §11

## II. The Argument from Design

- A. There is order/beauty/etc. in the world.
- B. If there is order/beauty/etc. in the world, a being must exist that is able to cause it.
- C. Only God is able to cause the order/beauty/etc. in the world.
- D. Therefore, God exists.

# Hume's Analysis of the Argument

1. The argument infers from an *observed* effect to an *unobserved* cause.
2. With such inferences, the cause must be proportionate to the effect:
  - a) Specifically, we have no reason to assume anything *more* about the cause than is minimally sufficient to bring about the observed effect.

# Hume's Objections

## III. Hume's Objections

A. No reason to attribute infinite properties to God.

1. smart, but omniscient?

2. cause of evil?

3. creation committee?

B. Even if one were to concede God's existence, one would have no reason to infer further unobserved effects from God.

# Hume's Objections, cont.

1. Reply: footprint and architecture analogies
    - a) In such cases, one *can* infer from unobserved cause to future effects
  2. Hume's reply: Analogy is too weak
    - a) finitude vs. infinitude
    - b) observable vs. unobservable
- C. Given disanalogies, no inference to cause at all.



# Summary

- \* Hume is critical of revealed religion, since the testimony of the miracles on which its argument is based is inadequate for us to be justified in belief in God's existence.
- \* Hume is critical of natural religion, since its argument to an unobserved cause and to further unobserved effects is inconsistent with his empiricist analysis of causation.
- \* So, is Hume an atheist? Probably, but not necessarily...

# Hume and the Enlightenment

- \* Hume is an empiricist proponent of the new sciences,
  - but now applied to man (and his ideas).
- \* Hume is critical of the rational foundations of traditional religious belief,
  - but he does so on the basis of arguments deriving from natural religion.