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ARTICLE

Between Relativism and Design: The Limits of Hume's Secularity

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Challenging the common image of Hume as a thoroughly secular philosopher, I argue that Hume occasionally relied on the design argument to defend the objectivity of values. Hume acknowledged that rejecting design might open the door to aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic relativism. To avoid this prospect, he allowed himself to repurpose the language of providential naturalists like Hutcheson and claim that "nature," rather than God, has attuned our faculties to objective standards of morals, beauty, and truth. Historians of philosophy have treated such passages as merely figurative, as they conflict with fundamental principles in Hume's philosophy. I argue instead, from an intellectual historical perspective, that Hume nonetheless expects the passages to be read literally, since only the literal reading helps his case against relativism. Rather than recasting Hume as a defender of design, however, I argue that his appeals to design were less an integral part of his philosophy than a provisional compromise, a response to intractable tensions in the history of secularism.

The familiar picture of the Enlightenment as an anticlerical movement has lost ground in recent decades. Reassessments by scholars including J. G. A. Pocock, B. W. Young, and Thomas Ahnert have shown it to be too narrowly modeled on the French *philosophes*, downplaying significant connections between religion and Enlightenment.[1] This is in keeping with a broader tendency, in eighteenth-century studies, to challenge the secularization thesis and reconsider the role of religion in intellectual domains often taken to be secular. The examples are many: Courtney Weiss Smith has argued for a "devotional" empiricism in British natural philosophy and imaginative literature, Anton Matytsin has integrated religious thinkers into the history of probabilistic knowledge in francophone Europe, and Karen O'Brien has made the case for an Anglican Enlightenment sustaining the rise of feminist politics in England.[2] And yet one figure has remained immune to this kind of "post-secular" reading: David Hume. As Jeffrey Suderman recently noted,

[1]J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge, 1999); B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1998); Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1690–1805* (New Haven, 2014). For a concise survey see Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003), 1061–80.

[2]Courtney Weiss Smith, *Empiricist Devotions: Science, Religion, and Poetry in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville, 2016); Anton Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment*

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"the Enlightenment in Scotland was a fundamentally Christian Enlightenment," in which "only Hume's philosophy managed without a benevolent guarantor God."[3] This statement expresses a prevailing view among Hume scholars, one most famously articulated in J.C.A. Gaskin's classic study of Hume and religion: skeptical not only of revealed and rational theism, but also of attempts to defend religion on empirical grounds, Hume developed the Enlightenment's strongest refutation of the design argument and dismissed faith as a regrettable byproduct of our psychological processes.[4] Consistent with his skeptical principles, Gaskin adds, Hume allowed for the theoretical possibility that God exists, but denied that it provides a foundation for a system of religion or philosophy. Despite disagreements about the details, Hume scholars have largely endorsed the implication of this view—that Hume was the one major thinker in the Scottish Enlightenment to have altogether dispensed with religious presuppositions.[5]

In recent years the anti-religious reading has gained renewed expression in studies by Paul Russell and Thomas Holden.[6] An important innovation of Russell's approach, in particular, is that he moves the conversation beyond Hume's explicit writings on religion to a text long taken to be unconcerned with that topic: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. He demonstrates that many aspects of Hume's philosophy that seem neutral towards religion have ties to theological debates and carry strong irreligious implications. In zooming out of the usual few key texts to consider Hume's philosophy more broadly, Russell provides a much-needed approach for advancing the debate on Hume and religion. But this approach also raises questions that the irreligious reading, for all its merits, has tended to sidestep. Eighteenth-century secularism, as Charles Taylor has extensively documented, was very much a work in progress; even the thinkers most responsible for piecing together the secular worldview were unable to fully discard the theological assumptions of the recent past. On Taylor's account, the fact that a philosopher is professedly critical of religion does not automatically mean that his or her philosophy has no dependence on (often unacknowledged) religious premises.[7]

Would this apply to Hume? Interestingly enough, the book most responsible for establishing Hume's reputation as a naturalist suggests that it does. Norman Kemp Smith closes his classic *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941) by asserting the continuity between Hume's naturalism and Francis Hutcheson's providential ethics. For Hutcheson and other proponents of what is now called providential naturalism, nature had "a theistic foundation, [and] was, as it were, a deputy Providence";

(Baltimore, 2016); Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2009).

[3]Jeffrey Suderman, "Religion and Philosophy," in Aaron Garrett and James A. Harris, eds., *Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century: Morals, Politics, Art, Religion* (Oxford, 2015), 196–238, at 235.

[4]J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn (Atlantic Highlands, 1988), 6.

[5]Those who attribute to Hume more than a minimal theism have remained a minority. Examples include William Lad Sessions, *Reading Hume's* Dialogues: *A Veneration for True Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2002); and Tim Black and Robert Gressis, "True Religion in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25/2 (2017), 244–64.

[6]Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's* Treatise*: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (Oxford, 2008); Thomas Holden, *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism* (Oxford, 2012).

[7]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, 2007). See especially Part II.

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human nature, in particular, was "providentially ordered" for its role within God's benevolent plan.[8] According to Kemp Smith, Hume regarded such assumptions as "incapable either of proof or disproof," but allowed them to inform his philosophical outlook nonetheless. "In the *Treatise*," Kemp Smith writes, "Hume … is still maintaining, though in a half-hearted manner, a theistic view of Nature"; even in later years "the prevailing view of Nature as man's predestined monitor and guide was so congenial to [Hume's] social … temperament, that he continued to hold to it, no less unquestioningly than had Shaftesbury or Hutcheson."[9] Influential though his book was, this aspect of Kemp Smith's reading has found little favor in subsequent scholarship. David Fate Norton spoke for many in deciding that "by no stretch of the imagination can Hume be supposed to have borrowed this providential aspect of Hutcheson's thought, not even in morals."[10] Russell's interpretation of the *Treatise* constitutes a sophisticated rejection precisely of the type of reading proposed by Kemp Smith.

Is the providential reading defensible at all? My goal in this article is to show that it is, at least as far as the design argument is concerned. But its relevance can only be appreciated if we approach Hume from a different angle than do most commentators. Studies of Hume's work, by and large, have been committed to a project of internal reconstruction: the project of working out the correct expression of Hume's philosophy, often for the purposes of evaluating the extent to which it retains its purchase. In an earlier book on Hume, for example, Russell noted that "the historian of philosophy, unlike the historian of ideas," is concerned above all "with the *critical* study of the work at hand." Even as "the history of philosophy must *begin* as a disciplined historical study," Russell finds that "its final objective must be to shed light on contemporary philosophical problems."[11] A consequence of this method is that those passages in Hume that seem out of keeping with the general tenor of his philosophy either receive little attention or are dismissed as ironic or figurative. My approach in this article will be the opposite. I will be taking seriously those familiar passages in which Hume speaks of nature as a designer—the nature that "implants" instincts into us or directs us to make moral judgments—even as I grant that the design argument does not "make it" into the final expression of Hume's philosophy. Such passages, I suggest, reveal the legacy of providential naturalism subtly at work in Hume's thought. While seemingly rhetorical, Hume's appeals to a provident nature accomplish something of philosophical significance: they shore up his case against various types of relativism, even as they contradict other aspects of his philosophy—not least his sophisticated arguments *against* design.

Such passages, while of minor interest to historians of philosophy concerned with Hume's enduring legacy, provide valuable insight into the intellectual history of the eighteenth century. Intellectual historians, Jessica Riskin recently noted, "catch at the very things that philosophers try to eliminate: anything that seems unfamiliar, contradictory or inconsistent"; these are "the jagged edges and fault

[8]Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (Basingstoke, 2005), 564, 45.

[9]Ibid., 564.

[10]David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, 1982), 54, original emphasis.

[11]Paul Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility* (Oxford, 1993), 7.

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lines that reveal the contours of the original context."[12] A key assumption behind Riskin's method is that not everything that gets said in a philosophical treatise enjoys full authorial endorsement; sometimes obsolescent ways of thinking find their way into texts less because the author embraces them than because they are still figuring out an adequate replacement. Hume's lapses into providential thinking, I will argue, are of this sort. They do not mean that Hume was ultimately a crypto-religious philosopher (in fact, I think the irreligious reading is essentially correct), but they reveal how difficult it was, for Enlightenment thinkers of Hume's generation, to develop an account of values that fully discarded the logic of design.

My argument will unfold in several stages, and a road map may be helpful at this point. My first step is to consider the role of the design argument in Hume's philosophy. There is a long-standing critical disagreement on whether Hume endorsed the belief in design, but commentators generally concur that, regardless of his opinion on the matter, Hume did not *use* the design argument. I proceed to question this view, and I begin by proposing that Hume was worried about the implications of an undesigned cosmos for normativity. He acknowledged the common concern that a world without design might seem devoid of objective values, and he tried to assuage it by showing that human nature offers all the resources we need for salvaging value distinctions. Part of Hume's program in "Of the Standard of Taste" and the second *Enquiry* is to counter aesthetic and ethical relativism, and I argue that his case against relativism involves subtle redeployments of the design argument, in passages that seem figurative but are nonetheless philosophically operative. I proceed to argue that the same concern and the same procedure play out in a third domain of values: Hume's epistemology. Having made the case for the residual presence of design in Hume's key texts, I then conclude by looking at the broader historical context that helps to explain such anomalies. Hume is writing at a fraught moment in the Enlightenment's debate on values, and his philosophy, precisely because it was more secular than that of most of his contemporaries, illustrates like few others the challenges and limits of the nascent secular worldview.

Design and relativism

Hume's views on the design argument are notoriously ambiguous. His most important pronouncements on the topic feature in the posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779; drafted 1751), followed closely by *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), and these two works are ostensibly at odds with one another. The *Dialogues* supply a clear articulation of the argument through Cleanthes, the speaker entrusted with defending natural theology:

> Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it … The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble

[12]Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick* (Chicago, 2016), 406 n. 79.

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> each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed.[13]

What the ensuing conversation does is to bring this argument under severe stress, with the skeptic Philo rigorously questioning its premises and alleged consequences. But if the *Dialogues* work out a systematic rejection of design, the *Natural History* takes the argument to be unassailable: "The whole frame of nature," Hume says right away, "bespeaks an intelligent author," so that "a purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing."[14] To make things worse, the *Dialogues* are internally troubled by the same inconsistency, as Philo undergoes an apparent conversion to design in the last section: "No one," he tells Cleanthes, "pays more profound adoration to the divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of Nature. A purpose, an intention, a design strikes every where the most careless, the most stupid thinker."[15] We can summarize the problem by saying that for the skeptical Philo, the appearance of order and purpose in nature does not imply the existence of a designer; but for the converted Philo, as for the Hume of the *Natural History*, it very much does.

Scholarship on Hume and design has mainly been geared towards solving this conundrum. While commentators have also considered Hume's other statements on the topic—such as Section 11 of the first *Enquiry* and Hume's posthumous essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (1777)—the *Dialogues* and the *Natural History* have provided the main arena for the debate, whose guiding concerns have been to explain Philo's apparent U-turn at the end of the *Dialogues*, to reconcile the *Dialogues* with the *Natural History*, and to derive from both a position that can be consistently identified as Hume's. A number of Hume scholars offered what may be called "compatibilist" solutions for these issues, finding that the major inconsistencies are more apparent than real. For Robert Hurlbutt and David O'Connor, Philo's concession at the end is so minimal that there simply is no inconsistency between it and the preceding critique of design.[16] Conversely, J. C. A. Gaskin argues that Philo's critique was less than decisive, allowing room for his concession without self-contradiction.[17] A third compatibilist reading asserts instead that Hume, through Philo, is attacking the design *argument* but not the *belief* in design. For commentators including Keith Yandell and Terence Penelhum, belief in design is a "natural belief" akin to the beliefs in causation

[13]David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *Natural History of Religion*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford, 1993), 2.5, 45. Henceforth *DNR* and *NHR*.

[14]Hume, *NHR*, 134, 183.

[15]Hume, *NHR*, 116.

[16]Robert H. Hurlbutt III, *Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument* (Lincoln, 1985), 167–8; David O'Connor, *Hume on Religion* (London, 2001), 197–201. See also Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's* Treatise, 282.

[17]Philo's view, in the gloss of Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 6, is that "a vestigial design argument establishes a weak probability that natural order originates in the activity of something with intelligence remotely analogous to our own." Thus Philo can affirm design towards the end without insincerity, staking out a position Gaskin calls "attenuated deism." Ibid., 7.

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and the existence of the external world, and can accordingly be sustained even in the absence of any arguments to support it.[18] In Yandell's reading, for example, the *Natural History* accepts design as a belief rather than an argument, whereas Philo in the *Dialogues* alternates between critiquing the argument and affirming the belief.[19] Over and against these compatibilist interpretations lie a range of incompatibilist readings that view a genuine conflict between Philo's critique and defense of design and between the *Dialogues* and the *Natural History*. For commentators including Peter Millican and Andrew Pyle, compatibilists fail to consider that Hume's statements in support of design may be ironic or disingenuous, examples of the common practice of "theological lying."[20] By contrast, the critique of design, for these readers, is fully serious. On Pyle's interpretation, Philo "can be regarded as a sceptic with a definite leaning towards naturalism and atheism," and his attack on design is also Hume's.[21] Under the incompatibilist reading, both Philo and Hume believe that any apparent evidence of design can be explained more plausibly through naturalistic than religious hypotheses.

While I lean towards the incompatibilist reading myself, what matters for my purposes here is that both readings agree on one crucial point: they find that Hume rejects design as a philosophical *argument*. Even those who view Hume as justifying the *belief* in design deny that he finds any explanatory value in it. Implicitly, for both readings, the assumption that the world is designed plays no role in Hume's own philosophy. This rules out, without examination, Kemp Smith's suggestion that the providential outlook retained some kind of role in Hume's writings. To decide whether it does, we should follow Russell's example and pursue the issue beyond those few texts in which Hume explicitly discusses design. This has rarely been done, and it will be my main procedure in what follows. I will be showing that the design hypothesis makes occasional but philosophically relevant appearances in the *Treatise*, the two *Enquiries*, and the *Essays*. Before turning to these texts, however, let us pause for a moment where Hume ends—with the *Dialogues*, and specifically the sections in which he considers potential alternatives to design.

In these sections Hume is grappling with an unavoidable question for his times: if the universe has not been designed by a creator, how can we account for its

[18]K. E. Yandell, "Hume on Religious Belief," in Donald W. Livingston and James T. King, eds., *Hume: A Re-evaluation* (New York, 1976), 109–25; Terence Penelhum, "Natural Belief and Religious Belief in Hume's Philosophy," *Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1983), 266–82.

[19]There is a form of compatibilist reading that affirms that the design argument is valid as an "irregular" argument—that is, one that does not play by the rules of logic yet proves persuasive for reasons that are hard to specify. Examples of this reading include Nelson Pike's "Hume on the Argument from Design," in Pike, ed., *David Hume: Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis, 1970), 125–238; and most recently Don Garret in *Hume* (New York, 2015), 291–2. But even these readings do not treat the design argument as one that plays a role in Hume's own philosophy.

[20]Peter Millican, "Critical Survey of the Literature on Hume and the First *Enquiry*," in Millican, ed., *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First* Enquiry (Oxford, 2003), 413–74, at 457; Andrew Pyle, "David Hume and the Argument to Design," in Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien (eds.), *The Continuum Companion to Hume* (London, 2015), 245–64; David Berman, "Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying," in J. A. Leo Lemay (ed.), *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment* (London, 1987), 61–78.

[21]Pyle, "David Hume and the Argument to Design," 258.

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existence and for the fact that it *seems* designed? For most thinkers in the early eighteenth century, the only conceivable alternative to creation was chance, but such a hypothesis seemed unacceptable. As Newton puts it in the *Opticks*, "it's unphilosophical to seek for any other Origin of the World, or to pretend that it might arise out of a Chaos by the mere Laws of Nature."[22] Hume was cautious about this sort of question, which he found to exceed the reach of our faculties. As Philo stresses in the *Dialogues*, "we have no *data* to establish any system of cosmogony."[23] And yet Philo allows himself to advance a few hypotheses that account naturalistically for the appearance of design. He first suggests that the universe, rather than being the product of intelligence, may be like a vegetable or animal, both of which come into being through blind natural processes (the principles of "vegetation" and "generation"). Demea objects that such processes imply a designer, but Philo retorts that this is begging the question: the design argument only gets off the ground should the empirical evidence warrant it, but the evidence shows that organisms displaying order and purpose can emerge from a preexisting state of the material world without any intervention of design.[24] Having gone this far, Philo then takes a step further and offers to revive "the old EPICUREAN hypothesis" with "a few alterations": "Instead of supposing matter infinite, as Epicurus did; let us suppose it finite. A finite number of particles is only susceptible of finite transpositions: and it must happen, in an eternal duration, that every possible order or position must be tried an infinite number of times."[25] Under this hypothesis, the current state of the world is just one of the possible finite permutations of particles endowed with motion, and it would inevitably occur given infinite time. This, Philo argues, would account for the "economy or order" we observe around us:

> The continual motion of matter … in less than infinite transpositions, must produce this œconomy or order; and by its very nature, that order, when once established, supports itself, for many ages, if not to eternity. But wherever matter is so poised, arranged, and adjusted as to continue in perpetual motion, and yet preserve a constancy in the forms, its situation must, of necessity, have all the same appearance of art and contrivance, which we observe at present.[26]

Here, then, is a naturalistic cosmogony in which the appearance of design is explained away as a mirage, the macroscopic effect of interactions between fundamental particles. Objects as well as living beings are contingent aggregates of particles that emerge over time and remain stable for a while through the laws of motion.

It is not clear whether Hume endorsed this hypothesis. James Harris has convincingly shown that the common association between Hume and Epicurus loses sight

[22]Isaac Newton, *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*, 4th edn (London, 1730), 378.

[23]Hume, *DNR*, 7.8, 79, original emphasis.

[24]Ibid., 7.12–13, 81.

[25]Ibid., 8.2, 84.

[26]Ibid., 8.6, 85.

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of substantial divergences between the two philosophies. In particular, Harris claims, "Epicurean materialism went along with the supposition that there is some kind of principle of change inherent in matter, such that there is no need of divine providence as an explanation of the natural order of things … Hume maintains the sceptic's agnosticism about what is responsible for the ordered complexity discovered by scientific investigation."[27] This is substantiated by Philo's provisional conclusion, in Part 8 of the *Dialogues*, that "no system ought ever to be embraced with regard to such subjects … A total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource."[28] Philo's statement suggests that Hume is offering the Epicurean hypothesis just as a competitor against design, a way of showing that the empirical evidence allows for multiple explanations, none of which is conclusive.

This is, I think, a plausible reading of the *Dialogues*. It is accordingly intriguing that elsewhere in his works Hume should have worried about the perceived implications of Epicureanism and even attempted to assuage common worries about it—especially the worry that Epicureanism, by rejecting design, undermines morals. In Section 11 of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, for example, Hume imagines a dialogue between himself and "a friend" who "loves sceptical paradoxes" and provides an "apology for Epicurus."[29] The "Hume" of this dialogue insists that philosophical doctrines have consequences for the way people live: "A wise magistrate can justly be jealous of certain tenets of philosophy, such as those of EPICURUS, which, denying a divine existence … seem to loosen … the ties of morality, and may be supposed, for that reason, pernicious to the peace of civil society."[30] The Epicurean apologist sees no reason to worry. While he denies a providence, he notes, "I deny not the course itself of events," in which "virtue is attended with more peace of mind than vice"; whether or not this "disposition of things proceeds from intelligence and design," "the disposition itself, on which depends … our conduct and deportment in life, is still the same."[31] The denial of design, for Epicurus's apologist, makes no difference for morals, since the human mind, as well as the world, is so structured as to make virtue naturally preferable to vice. "Hume" still objects that the belief in Providence is a better rein on the crowds, but he grants that his friend's apology is theoretically sound: Epicureanism does not annul moral values.

This apology essentially rehearses some basic principles of Hume's ethics, and we can say that the Epicurean friend is Hume himself speaking through a persona. And this raises a question that Harris does not consider: why should Hume worry about the ethical consequences of Epicureanism if he did not endorse the system? The answer, I think, is that regardless of the differences highlighted by Harris, Hume recognized that the usual objections against "Epicurus" applied as well to any deniers of design, including himself. His critique of design—first expressed

[27]James A. Harris, "The Epicurean in Hume," in Neven Leddy and Avi S. Lifschitz, eds., *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2009), 169.

[28]Hume, *DNR*, 8.12, 88.

[29]David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford, 2007), 96, 107. Henceforth *EHU*.

[30]Hume, *EHU*, 11.4, 97.

[31]Ibid., 11.20, 102.

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by this very Epicurean persona—had enough in common with the eighteenth-century image of Epicurus to be vulnerable to the same charges. As Harris recognizes and Russell stresses even more strongly, Hume's critics were quick to point this out. For Thomas Reid, for example, "the Epicureans denied that there is any such thing as *honestum*, or moral worth, distinct from pleasure. In this Mr. HUME's system agrees with theirs."[32] The parallel, as Harris shows, is far from perfect; but Hume had heard similar accusations before and even responded to them in *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh* (1745). Regardless of whether he endorsed Philo's Epicurean cosmogony, Hume felt the need to show that an undesigned cosmos would not entail the immorality commonly attributed to Epicureanism. According to his apologist, the regular association between virtue and peace of mind, or between vice and misery, serves as a foundation for morals even without a divine designer.

In his other writings on ethics and aesthetics, however, Hume acknowledges that such a naturalist account has its limits. It raises the problem of what to do when individuals acting out of the same natural impulses make wildly disparate value judgments. In order to address this problem, he occasionally avails himself, albeit ambivalently, of the conceptual apparatus of design, in ways I discuss in the next section.

Relativism in Hume's ethics and aesthetics

Hume's preoccupation with aesthetic and moral relativism has been stressed before.[33] In his insightful study of relativism in the British tradition, Daniel Carey argues that Hume's generation inherited a set of intractable problems from Locke—especially the problem of how to deal with the diversity of moral judgments obtaining in different societies across time and place. For Carey, Hume's solution for this issue ultimately relied on a stadial theory of history. For Hume, as for Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Lord Kames, "human nature possessed the same moral content, but historical situation affected its expression"; consequently, the fact that earlier and distant societies had different values "merely indicated a failure to progress to a higher level of politeness which would allow their true natures to flourish."[34] As far as Hume's ethics is concerned, there is much to be said for Carey's interpretation. The "diversity" challenge is explicitly raised by Palamedes, Hume's imaginary interlocutor in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). After stressing the "wide difference … in the sentiments of morals" between different nations, Palamedes asks, "How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature?"[35] Denying that this can be done, he

[32]Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (London, 1843), 339.

[33]See, for example, David W. Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason: Recovering the Human Sciences* (New Haven, 1990), chap. 6; Thomas W. Merrill, *Hume and the Politics of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2015), chaps. 4–5. Merrill, in particular, writes against the view that Hume was a relativist, a view defended among others by Peter Gay in *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Science of Freedom* (New York, 1969), 448–65.

[34]Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Oxford, 2006), 11.

[35]David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, 1998), D.25, 116. Henceforth *EPM*.

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contends that "fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the cheif foundation of all moral determinations."[36] Hume rejects this view, contending that moral judgments, for all their superficial variety, are ultimately triggered by the same underlying stimuli: "There never was any quality recommended by any one, as a virtue or moral excellence, but on account of its being *useful* , or *agreeable* to a man *himself*, or to *others.*"[37] All moral judgments share the same basis, and eventual disagreements can be adjudicated by determining the real tendencies of qualities and actions. One may, for example, reject the Greek approval of tyrannicide by showing that its alleged utility (the promotion of public liberty) is more than counterweighed by "the great inconveniences of assassination."[38] Hume's conclusion is that "the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same," and "erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning and a larger experience."[39] Reflecting Carey's thesis, Hume asserts the existence of a moral standard which individuals and societies can become better attuned to through practice or the slow civilizing process.

It would seem that the undesigned cosmos allows room for objective moral values after all; there is no indication, in the account above, that the divine designer is in control of history. The reason Kemp Smith nonetheless finds that Hume retained Hutcheson's providential framework is that Hume occasionally writes as if our moral faculties were designed to work in the particular ways they do. Hume says, for example, that our moral sense, "arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence."[40] This is a recognizable echo of providential naturalism, and it is an unusual one for Hume, who tends to attribute our faculties to nature rather than God. What should we make of this passage? The reference to the "Supreme Will," I think, can be dismissed as disingenuous. Even Howard Caygill, who believes that Hume "follows Hutcheson in relating pleasure to the principle of utility," concurs in this regard.[41] But as far as the moral sense is concerned, Caygill shares Kemp Smith's intuition that Hume does not fully do away with providential thinking. Although Hume rejects religious speculation, Caygill argues, "he favours a form of teleological argument which maintains the *effect* of providence in utility while overlooking what the tradition saw as the *source* of utility in the providential being … or will … of God."[42] In Caygill's uncharacteristic reading, Hume retains the principle that our moral faculties are designed to function the way they do, even as he declines to explain where the design comes from.

Is this plausible? It is hard to find much evidence for Caygill's reading in Hume's writings on ethics, but things look different if we turn to aesthetics. In his *Inquiry into Beauty and Virtue* (1725), Hutcheson had claimed that beauty is evidence of design, since our pleasure in contemplating beautiful things can only be explained

[36]Ibid., D.25, 191.
[37]Ibid., D.37, 194, original emphasis.
[38]Ibid., D.31, 193.
[39]Ibid., D.36, 193.
[40]Ibid., Appx. 1, 163.
[41]Howard Caygill, *The Art of Judgment* (Oxford, 1989), 71.
[42]Ibid., original emphasis.

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by assuming that a benevolent designer has equipped us to enjoy his creation. For Hutcheson, judgments of beauty are subjective and may vary by person, but the inner sense triggering them responds to the same objective features of the world. This served as a counter to aesthetic relativism, which Hutcheson takes pains to dismiss.[43] Under providential naturalism, there is a divinely ordained "fit" between our inner sense and an outer "uniformity amidst variety" in objects, and this fit makes judgments of beauty at once subjective and universal.[44] Philosophers who rejected the divine designer could not be equally sure. In his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), Hume follows Hutcheson in saying that aesthetic judgments are subjective, since the beauty of objects "exists merely in the mind which contemplates them."[45] But because Hume refrains from saying that God is attuning our minds to proper objects, he runs into relativistic possibilities he is happy to acknowledge: "A thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object."[46] And yet Hume does not stop here. He asks whether there may not be "a *Standard of Taste* … confirming one sentiment, and condemning another," and then argues that there is: it is "the joint verdict" of critics endowed with "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice."[47] The purpose of this argument is to provide a secular counter to relativism, one that achieves the same result as Hutcheson's providential aesthetics without assuming that God designed objects to look beautiful. As Peter Kivy explains, Hume is deriving a basis for *value* judgments from ascertainable *facts* about the operations of taste.[48] And if this is all, then it would seem that Hume avoids the teleology attributed to him by Kemp Smith and Caygill.

As it turns out, however, every now and then Hume will speak of objects as being "fitted" to elicit certain kinds of response. He says, for example, that "there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature" to be seen as beautiful.[49] Commentators usually treat (or ignore) these passages as figurative, reconstructing Hume's theory without the appeals to nature's purposiveness. The rationale, again, is that Hume achieves his goal without the providential trappings, which can accordingly be dismissed without loss. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, for example, explains that Hume's procedure in ethics and aesthetics is simply to stipulate the specific conditions under which value judgments should be treated as authoritative.[50] Under this reading, the standards of taste and morals are analogous to

[43]For an evaluation of his attempt see Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Relativism and Hutcheson's Aesthetic Theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36/2 (1975), 319–30.

[44]Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis, 2004), 28.

[45]David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, (Indianapolis, 1987). Henceforth *E*.

[46]Ibid., 230.

[47]Ibid., 229, original emphasis, 241.

[48]In Kivy's words, "The Humean program in aesthetics is the translation of value judgments into factual judgments." Peter Kivy, "Hume's Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle," in Babette Babich, ed., *Reading David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste"* (Berlin, 2019), 57–66, at 65.

[49]Hume, *E*, 235.

[50]Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Introduction" to David Hume, *Moral Philosophy* (Indianapolis, 2006), x–xxxiii.

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our judgments concerning colors. Hume grants that the same object may display varying shades of color depending on lighting conditions and on the observer's eyesight, but he adds that "the appearance of objects in day-light, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real colour."[51] Once we have agreed on the proper conditions for observation, differences in perception cease to matter. Analogously, for Sayre-McCord, Hume considers a moral judgment to be valid whenever "a person whose sympathetic capacities are in good order would respond with approbation" to an action or character.[52] A moral or aesthetic sense "in good order" functions like good eyesight: under the proper stipulated conditions, these faculties yield judgments (about virtue, beauty, or color) that we can agree to treat as a standard, without assuming that nature "fitted" objects to elicit predetermined judgments.

The analogy with eyesight, however, underestimates the problem Hume is dealing with. It is easy to reach an agreement on colors because Hume can assume that everyone already agrees on the relevant stipulations. Even if eyes were not designed to enable vision, we commonly speak of them as having that particular function, on conventional rather than teleological grounds. In addition, there is a pragmatic consensus on when our eyesight works best (with good lighting) and on what colors objects display under those conditions. This tacit consensus makes it unproblematic to say that emeralds are green and that whoever disagrees either has poor vision or needs more light. Most crucially, people with poor eyesight are the first to grant that their vision is not to be trusted. These conditions are lacking when it comes to taste. Hume is seeking a standard of taste precisely in recognition that people judge beauty from different standpoints and yet all think that their own judgments are sound. In order to raise some judgments above others, he suggests that the aesthetic sense, like eyes, can be in or out of order: "In each creature," his argument goes, "there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment."[53] This statement seems unproblematic until we realize that a "defective" taste is not as straightforward as bad eyesight. There is no pragmatic agreement on what taste does when it functions well, and accordingly it is not clear how we can speak of its deliverances as being healthy or infirm. Why is the knowledgeable critic who prefers Addison over Bunyan healthy while the reader who disagrees is like "a man in a fever" deciding "concerning flavours"?[54] Hutcheson would have answered this question by appealing to the predesigned fit between objects and our faculties. But from the standpoint of a secular naturalism, these two reactions are equal: they are different examples of how the human constitution responds to stimuli, physiological processes that are neither more nor less legitimate than any others. Hume knows this, which is why he says that "a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right."[55] Whereas in the case of eyesight the distinction between healthy and unhealthy

[51]David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in Hume, *E*, 226–50, at 234.
[52]Sayre-McCord, "Introduction," xxvi.
[53]Hume, *E*, 233.
[54]Ibid.
[55]Ibid., 230.

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may be treated as given, when it comes to taste we need additional grounds for dismissing certain aesthetic judgments as infirm. And Hume offers them.

This is where the language of fitness comes in. According to Hume, "there are certain qualities in objects which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings"[56]—i.e. judgments of beauty. What makes an object beautiful is not simply a brute perceptual response, since not all perceptual responses are warranted: "Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ."[57] Not everything that seems beautiful truly is, since there is such a thing as uncalibrated taste. Beyond sentiment or human psychology, there lies a set of "forms or qualities" in objects that align with our "internal fabric" to produce favorable aesthetic judgments; if they fail to do so, it is not because different observers have different yet equally legitimate tastes; it is, instead, because the detractor's faculties are obstructed. "When these obstructions are removed," Hume concludes, "the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men."[58] Even though Hume begins by saying that "no sentiment *represents* what is really in the object" (my emphasis), these passages suggest that sentiment nonetheless *responds* to external "beauties," features of objects that are "naturally fitted" to command aesthetic approval as long as the observer's taste is working as it should.

In these passages we find the analogy with eyesight being complemented by an argument of an entirely different order. This, I think, is the "teleological argument" Caygill has in mind. It suggests that not all interactions between the senses and objects are authoritative. Taste can be healthy or unhealthy because its operations are not contingent. Taste, Hume implies, has a purpose. In its healthy state, when it is performing its function well, it generates appropriate responses to the qualities of objects; divergent responses, in turn, are merely a matter of malfunctioning, regardless of whether the observer realizes it. This resembles the language of providential naturalism, but with a crucial difference. Only two years before Hume's essay, the minor poet John Gilbert Cooper wrote an oft-reprinted treatise arguing that in matters of beauty "the ALMIGHTY has … so *attuned* our Minds to Truth, that all Beauty from without should make a responsive Harmony vibrate within."[59] Hume has no truck with the Almighty, but the logic of attunement persists in his essay, now clothed in a naturalistic idiom. Some objects are designed (or "fitted") to look beautiful, and it is "nature" that makes the fit.

Such passages raise a problem for Hume's interpreters. It would seem misguided to speak of Hume as asserting nature's purposiveness. After all, he writes unambiguously against the tendency of certain philosophers to personify nature or assign it agency.[60] From this perspective, one could read his references to a purposive nature as figurative

[56]Ibid., 235.
[57]Ibid., 233.
[58]Ibid.
[59]John Gilbert Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 2nd edn (London, 1755), 7–8.
[60]For Hume, those who wrote of nature's sympathies and antipathies or believed that nature abhors a vacuum "were guided," like children and poets, "by every trivial propensity of the imagination." Hume, *T* 1.4.3.11; see also *NHR*, 3.2.

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and parse them out in terms of efficient causation. Thus, when Hume says that objects are "fitted by nature" to elicit certain responses, he may be merely saying that we are so constituted that we respond in certain ways to given features of objects. However, as should be clear by now, this non-teleological gloss lacks the implications that matter for the essay's argument. To speak of aesthetic judgments solely in terms of efficient causation—as the effects of interactions between our constitution and the environment—is to concede that the human constitution gives rise to a variety of discordant responses, all of which are equally natural. Hume acknowledges as much, but he is unwilling to say that these responses all count just because they have been observed to emerge from the operations of human nature. This is where the literal reading makes a difference. If read literally, the teleological passages take care of the issue by distinguishing between fit and unfit responses; they go beyond the mere fact of empirical occurrence and establish an extra-perceptual standard of taste that disqualifies the preference for Bunyan over Addison as anomalous. In short, dismissing the teleology compromises Hume's case against the relativity of taste, while accepting it goes against fundamental principles of Hume's philosophy.

Either reading, in other words, seems inadequate. Here the methodological distinction I discussed in the introduction proves helpful. The historian of philosophy seeking the most coherent articulation of Hume's thought would have to decide whether the teleological passages should be a part of it, which means determining whether to read them as asserted or figurative. By contrast, the intellectual historian seeking to understand the context of the times may treat these passages as neither fully asserted nor merely figurative, but as a compromise exacted by contemporary pressures. Going with the second approach, I believe that these passages invite a literal reading even though Hume would most likely disown them. The reason for this is that Hume was caught in a double bind. On the one hand, he was convinced that certain tastes have to be unnatural; on the other, he lacked a non-teleological way of speaking of tastes as such. One solution for this dilemma would be to give up on the whole notion of a natural hierarchy between tastes. Two years after "Of the Standard of Taste," Sir Joshua Reynolds argued in *The Idler* that opinions on beauty are governed by "habit and custom," no criterion remaining to adjudicate between culturally conditioned preferences.[61] Hume sometimes speaks like Reynolds, as when he notes, in *The Natural History of Religion*, that "there is no beating it into [mankind's] heads, that the turban of the African is not just as good or as bad a fashion as the cowl of the European."[62] But in "Of the Standard of Taste," published the same year (1757), Hume insists that aesthetic distinctions are as objective as distinctions in plain matters of fact, and that those who allege "an equality of genius between Ogilby or Milton" are as wrongheaded as if they asserted "a mole-hill to be as high as Tenerife."[63] Hume avoids the relativistic route soon to be taken by Reynolds, but only by striking an unstable compromise. He retains a key principle of providential aesthetics (that there is a fit between objects and aesthetic judgments) even as he has

[61]Joshua Reynolds, "The True Idea of Beauty," *The Idler* 82 (1759). Reproduced in Scott Elledge, *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*, vol. 2 (Ithaca, 1961), 836.

[62]Hume, *NHR*, 168.

[63]Hume, *E*, 231.

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jettisoned the religious scaffolding that principle used to stand on. To go back to Caygill's terms, Hume retains the effect of fitness without trying to account for its source. Lacking a naturalistic justification for that principle, he allows the language of design to stay and do its traditional philosophical work, in a seemingly noncommittal manner. Read in this light, Hume's echoes of providentialism prove to be partly figurative but also partly in earnest. It is as if Hume sensed that Hutcheson had gotten something right about aesthetics, although on dubious grounds—ones he found easier to reject than to replace.

Rather than the definitive expression of Hume's views, these passages show him grappling with a difficult problem, thinking his way to an aesthetic objectivism that proved increasingly elusive the more one distanced oneself from the design hypothesis. Nature the designer stands here both as a holdover from providentialism and as a placeholder for something to come. As a philosophical principle, it justifies Hume's distinction between healthy and diseased tastes, even if—or precisely because—Hume does not offer to flesh out what it would mean for something called "nature" to design our faculties. We will find the same dynamic at play, with similar readmissions of design, if we turn from aesthetics to another domain of values: Hume's epistemology.

Relativism and design in Hume's epistemology

The looming problem for Hume's epistemology is not relativism but skepticism. It may even seem that relativism has little to do with it. Hume sometimes writes as if the domain of knowledge is qualitatively different from the domains of beauty and virtue,[64] and interpreters like David Fate Norton have shown that in many ways the distinction is real.[65] There are, nevertheless, significant similarities between the operations of judgment in all three spheres of value. As Hume notes in the *Treatise*, "all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. 'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy."[66] In other words, judgments of (empirical) truth are affective responses that resemble our judgments of beauty or virtue. "When I am convinc'd of any principle," Hume explains, "'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence."[67] Because the procedures are so similar, the problem of relativism is not entirely foreign to Hume's theory of knowledge.

Our empirical beliefs emerge not from direct insight into the objects of our knowledge but from a natural propensity of the human mind—custom. And Hume recognizes that custom is not the only propensity of this type. There is also "the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvelous,"[68] which generates its own class of empirical beliefs—such as the beliefs in ghosts and

[64]See, for example, Hume, *E*, 14 and *EHU*, 12.33, 120.

[65]Norton, *David Hume*.

[66]David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Mary J. Norton and David Fate Norton (Oxford, 2001), 1.3.8.12. Henceforth *T*.

[67]Ibid., 1.3.8.12, 72.

[68]Hume, *EHU*, 10.19, 85.

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in miracles. Hume describes its operation as follows: "When any thing is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, [the mind] rather the more readily admits of such a fact," as "the passion of *surprize* and *wonder* … being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived."[69] Hume's usual name for this propensity is "superstition." For the Hume of the first *Enquiry* there is no question that custom is the more reliable principle: "None but a fool or madman will ever pretend to dispute the authority of experience"—i.e. that of custom.[70] In the *Treatise*, by contrast, Hume sometimes writes as if there is a genuine competition between custom and superstition as alternative sources of belief. Pointing out that the core beliefs arising from custom—the beliefs in causation and in the existence of the external world—are mutually contradictory, he concludes that even those who follow the authority of experience are foolish: "If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable."[71] On Hume's own account, however, the beliefs generated by superstition *are* both natural and agreeable. Which of these two principles should then govern our beliefs? Towards the end of Book 1, Hume finds himself having to choose between "philosophy" (i.e. empirical enquiry guided by custom) and "superstition" (broadly understood as religion) as guides to life. He comes down on the side of philosophy, but not because philosophical beliefs are more valid than religious ones. Instead, Hume advises that, of the available guides, we choose "that which is safest and most agreeable," and it is philosophy. After all, "the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous."[72] At least in this passage Hume seems to think that the choice cannot be made on epistemic grounds. Beliefs arising from custom and superstition are equally natural and frequently incompatible, and there is no standard of truth to determine that the former are valid while the latter are not.

As in the realms of ethics and aesthetics, however, Hume does not embrace the relativism implicit in this position. He makes a distinction, already in the *Treatise*, between different principles of the imagination: those that are "permanent, irresistable, and universal" (such as custom) and those that are "changeable, weak, and irregular," and he determines that "the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected," on the ground that the irregular principles of the imagination, unlike custom, are "neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life."[73] This distinction is reflected in Hume's later choice of philosophy as the "safest and most agreeable" guide to life. But something is still lacking. That a mental propensity happens to be unavoidable, universal, or harmless does not necessarily make it epistemically reliable. Hume accordingly equips his account with an additional argument that should sound familiar by now:

> One who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons justly and naturally; tho' that conclusion be deriv'd

[69]Ibid., 10.16, 84.
[70]Ibid., 4.20, 26.
[71]Hume, *T*, 1.4.7.10, 175.
[72]Ibid., 1.4.7.13, 177.
[73]Ibid., 1.4.4.1, 148.

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> from nothing but custom … But one, who is tormented he knows not why, with the apprehension of spectres in the dark, may, perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too: But then it must be in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, tho' it be contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of man.[74]

This is the same logic we found in Hume's aesthetics: custom and superstition are both natural operations, but some natural operations are more natural than others. Superstition is equivalent to a "malady," a state that is natural in a trivial sense of the word but not in Hume's specialized sense—"natural" as pertaining to "the most natural situation of man." Here, again, the relevant principle to keep in mind is that talk of health inevitably involves assumptions about purposes. To speak of malfunctioning is to imply a function. When the imagination acts on its "permanent, irresistable, and universal" properties, it is working as it is supposed to; conversely, when it relies on its "changeable, weak, and irregular" properties, it is out of order. What gives custom its epistemic authority, in short, is not simply that inferences from custom are safe or useful; it is the assumption that custom constitutes the imagination in its proper functioning.

This is not Hume's last word, of course. In one of those volte-faces characteristic of the *Treatise*, he concludes that even the resolution of following custom "wou'd be dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences … [T]he understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life."[75] According to Book 1 of the *Treatise*, we only avoid this dilemma through the mind's tendency to suspend reflection and reengage with the affairs of common life. When we get to the first *Enquiry* (1748), however, things have changed. Hume still grants, towards the end of the book, that custom lacks a cognitive foundation, but for most of the *Enquiry* he assigns it undisputed authority as a source of empirical knowledge.[76] To the extent that Hume is skeptical about anything, it is not custom or induction, but the view that inductive reasoning is based on arguments; he famously denies that it is, but insists that it is nonetheless based on a reliable alternative principle. From this new standpoint, the misgivings of the *Treatise* lie far out of sight.

What has gained custom such credit? This is one of the most debated issues in scholarship on the *Enquiry*.[77] Hume offers a number of mutually complementary arguments in defense of custom, sometimes recapitulating points already made in the *Treatise*. Nature, he says, is "too strong for principle," so that custom will always prevail in the end, whereas skepticism offers nothing that is durable and useful.[78] Attending to passages like these, Hume scholars have argued that the *Enquiry*

[74]Ibid., 1.4.4.1, 149.

[75]Ibid., 1.4.7.7, 174.

[76]For a reading of the *Enquiry* as a rigorous defense of inductive reasoning see Peter Millican, "Hume's 'Scepticism' about Induction," in Bailey and O'Brien, *The Continuum Companion to Hume*, 57–103.

[77]For an overview of these debates see Millican, "Critical Survey of the Literature on Hume."

[78]Hume, *EHU*, 12.23, 116.

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offers a pragmatic rather than epistemic defense of custom.[79] I think this is right, but it is not the whole story. In the sections of the *Enquiry* containing Hume's most sustained defense of custom, the argument on offer is one that seldom features in these debates: custom is epistemically reliable because being epistemically reliable is what it is *for*.

In the passages in question, the *Enquiry* vastly elaborates on the *Treatise*'s passing appeal to the purposes of our faculties. For example, in Section 9, "Of the Reason of Animals," Hume speaks of custom as fundamental to the survival of sentient creatures. It not only "teaches a man to avoid the fire" but also "teaches a bird … the art of incubation, and the whole œconomy and order of its nursery."[80] Since animals cannot learn any of this through reason, Hume notes, "nature must have provided some other principle, of more ready, and more general use and application; nor can an operation of such immense consequence in life, as that of inferring effects from causes, be trusted to the uncertain process of reasoning and argumentation."[81] This applies not only to animals, but also to "children," "the generality of mankind," and even "philosophers themselves."[82] The language of this chapter is insistently teleological; custom, whether in animals or humans, is not a contingent feature of cognition, a propensity we merely happen to have; instead, it has been supplied by nature to allow us to reliably read the empirical world.

Such passages pose the same problem as Hume's discussion of beauty. Should we read them literally or treat them as figurative? Here, again, either option runs into problems. To begin with the literal reading, the same objections still apply. Because Hume is critical of philosophers who personify nature, his descriptions of nature as a provident mother may be no more than elegant variations on a statement made by Philo in the *Dialogues*: "I would fain know," Philo notes, "how an animal could subsist, unless its parts were so adjusted?"[83] On Philo's Epicurean hypothesis, animals that have happened to survive must necessarily be equipped for survival; the fact that their faculties promote survival is accordingly trivial, providing no evidence of purposiveness. Recast in this way, Hume's account of custom sounds proto-evolutionary rather than teleological. Indeed, secularist interpretations of Hume have often stressed his status as a stepping stone towards Darwin. For Gaskin, Hume's position, "when fleshed out by Darwin's observations, vastly devalues the teleological argument" for design.[84] Robert Hurlbutt analogously finds that "the doctrine of evolution provided precisely the filling for [Hume's] pie."[85] More recently, David O'Connor has read Philo's Epicurean hypothesis as "an anticipation … of an evolution-by-natural-selection theory such as Darwin's," which serves "to undercut the theistic supposition that order in nature, whether in living or non-living things, is a wonder and a marvel demanding special

[79]For a particularly sophisticated defense of this view see Millican, "Hume's 'Scepticism' about Induction."

[80]Hume, *EHU*, 9.6, 78.

[81]Ibid., 9.5, 77.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Hume, *DNR*, 8.9.

[84]Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 328.

[85]Hurlbutt III, *Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument*, 151.

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explanation."[86] Hume, on this reading, has explained away the appearance of purpose in nature. His position, allegedly, amounts to modern science minus evolution, in that Hume has put together an unfinished puzzle to which Darwin would add the crucial missing pieces.

I will have more to say about the proto-Darwinian reading in a moment. For now, let me add another reason for avoiding a literal reading of the passages in question: the fact that Hume frequently dismisses appeals to final causes,[87] not only in his other writings, but even in the *Enquiry* itself, where he makes fun of the apparent similarity between his account of custom and Leibniz's preestablished harmony. Having explained that custom aligns our ideas with the course of events, he writes, "Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas … Those, who delight in the discovery and contemplation of *final causes*, have here ample subject to employ their wonder and admiration."[88] The irony is unmistakable: attributing purposiveness to nature is silly, a pastime for philosophers whose fancy has taken the better of their judgment. Hume's program, as commentators have frequently stressed, was precisely to replace teleological accounts of this sort with explanations in terms of efficient causation. As Knud Haakonssen puts it when discussing Hume's political theory, "social utility, or public good, is merely the outcome of individual actions, but it appears as though it were the result of a shared design."[89] Here, again, the appearance of purpose is dispelled as a mirage.

For all these reasons, it would be problematic to regard Hume's teleological language as anything other than rhetorical embellishment. And yet the antiteleological reading also has its problems. In its proto-Darwinian versions it is anachronistic, as it exaggerates Hume's continuity with modern science by mistaking for anticipations of the future what were in fact echoes from the past. Hume's remarks about custom, proto-evolutionary though they sound, are recognizable reworkings of statements previously made by providential naturalists. Two decades before Hume's *Enquiry*, Hutcheson argued that "notwithstanding the mighty Reason we boast of above other Animals, its Processes are too slow, too full of doubt and hesitation, to serve us in every Exigency, either for our own Preservation."[90] Instead, Hutcheson finds, God gave us faculties that enable us to track the order of natural events and act prudently by means of causal reasoning.[91] These were standard principles in Scottish philosophy both before and after Hume, reappearing in Adam Smith and in Kames's later works to become a pillar of the common-sense school. On this view, as Thomas Ahnert sums it up, humans trust causal reasoning because of "an instinct, placed in them by God, as a guide in temporal life, to expect the continuation of the same patterns that had been observed in natural phenomena in the past."[92] Hume's

[86]O'Connor, *Hume on Religion*, 142.

[87]Hume, *T*, 1.3.14.32 and 1.3.16.9. See also Hume's letters to Hutcheson of 17 Sept. 1739 and to Gilbert Elliot of Feb. 1751.

[88]Hume, *EHU*, 5.21, 40.

[89]Knud Haakonssen, "The Structure of Hume's Political Theory," in David Fate Norton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge, 1993), 182–221, at 190.

[90]Hutcheson, *An Inquiry*, 180.

[91]Ibid., 81.

[92]Ahnert, *Moral Culture*, 88.

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defense of custom is steeped in this tradition even as he drops the references to God: "Nature has … implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects."[93] Rather than anticipating evolution, Hume's discussion of custom is a holdover from providential naturalism; and contrary to the proto-Darwinian reading, Hume phrases this familiar argument without discarding the teleological wrapping. On the surface of his prose, nature remains active as a designer.

More importantly, dismissing the surface as mere embellishment has consequences as far as relativism is concerned. The appeal to purpose allows Hume to adjudicate between custom and superstition by treating the former as human nature in its proper state and the latter as akin to a malady. A nonteleological paraphrase would leave these passages with no resources to accredit custom. The reason for this is that Hume's empiricism rules out some seemingly obvious ways of doing so. One could presumably argue, without any talk of purposes, that inferences from custom match the course of actual events (just test them!); alternatively, one could argue that success at survival demonstrates that custom has proven reliable. But Hume precludes both procedures. He does not allow for the possibility of testing inferences from custom against the course of actual events, since his theory of perception denies that we can compare the two chains. "The mind," Hume says in the *Enquiry*, "has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects."[94] Neither could he argue, in a Darwinian or externalist way, that custom is reliable because of its demonstrable success at cognizing the environment. Such an argument takes custom's inductive procedure for granted—it infers, from the fact that custom has worked in observed cases, that it also works in unobserved cases, and thus falls into the inductive defense of induction that Hume alerts us against.[95] Even Hume's critique of miracles requires the presumption that custom works. It is custom that prompts us to see universal laws in the operations of nature and accordingly doubt that such laws are ever broken. Once custom is called into question, there is no way of showing, on efficient grounds alone, that the belief in the regularity of nature is more justifiable than a belief in miracles. For all these reasons, if we rephrase Hume's references to nature in the idiom of efficient causation, we are back to the dilemma of the *Treatise*: human nature generates beliefs through different mechanisms, the resulting beliefs are equally natural yet incompatible, and there is no obvious standard to show that some are valid and some are not.

Here, again, I propose a reading that treats these passages as neither fully asserted nor merely figurative. Hume dismisses the ontological commitments of providential naturalism, but he remains invested in some of its consequences. He believes, as he puts it in the *Treatise*, that there is such a thing as "the most natural situation of man,"[96] which is instantiated by custom. Human nature can pull in a number of other ways, but such operations are deviations from a norm. As Hume said in the *Treatise* and would say again in his *Essays*, superstition is natural only in the sense

[93]Hume, *EHU*, 5.22, 40.
[94]Ibid., 12.12, 112; see also *T*, 1.3.5.2 and 1.2.6.7; *EHU*, 5.6, 32–3.
[95]Hume, *EHU*, 4.21, 27–8.
[96]Hume, *T*, 1.4.4.1, 148.

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that a pathology is natural.[97] Believers in miracles are not acting on an alternative but equally legitimate principle of judgment; instead, their imagination is out of order: "If the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense … What judgment [religionists] have, they renounce by principle … Or if they were ever so willing to employ it, passion and a heated imagination disturb the regularity of its operations."[98] Hume, in short, maintains that there is a distinction between the regular and the anomalous operations of the mind, even as he has no replacement for the providentialist way of drawing that distinction.

Rather than developing a naturalistic alternative, Hume presses into service an available idiom that had long favored the same conclusion. Immediately after joking about Leibniz, he proceeds to speak of custom, with no obvious signs of irony, as fundamental for survival in a hostile world: "Had not the presence of an object instantly excited the idea of those objects, commonly conjoined with it … we should never have been able to adjust means to ends, or employ our natural powers, either to the producing of good, or avoiding of evil."[99] This scary scenario, rather than mere embellishment, is at the service of persuasion. It impresses on us the fact that life without custom would have been unsustainable. Hume flips this around to his advantage by adding that custom was devised to prevent this scenario: "Custom is that principle, by which this correspondence [between the mind and the world] has been effected; so necessary to the subsistence of our species, and the regulation of our conduct, in every circumstance and occurrence of human life."[100] Custom, again, is able to track the empirical world because this is its assigned function. And lest any doubts remain about custom's reliability, Hume stresses that nature could not have made a better choice:

> As this operation of the mind, by which we infer like effects from like causes, and *vice versa*, is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures, it is not probable, that it could be trusted to the fallacious deductions of our reason, which is … extremely liable to error and mistake. It is more conformable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency, which may be infallible in its operations, may discover itself at the first appearance of life and thought, and may be independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding.[101]

Such echoes of providential language dominate the last two paragraphs of chapter 5, where Hume is closing his case for custom as a guide to life. The whole purpose of these passages is to reassure readers that empirical beliefs, if not based on reason, are nonetheless based on "some other principle of equal weight and authority."[102] But they can only perform their philosophical function if read literally. My argument is that Hume is indeed inviting, without fully endorsing, the literal reading. He

[97]Superstition arises "from the unhappy situation of private or public affairs, from ill health, from a gloomy and melancholy disposition, or from the concurrence of all these circumstances" (Hume, *E*, 73–4).
[98]Hume, *EHU*, 10.17, 84.
[99]Ibid., 5.21, 40.
[100]Ibid.
[101]Ibid., 5.22, 40.
[102]Ibid., 5.2, 31.

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was not ready to defend "nature" as an alternative source of design; but neither was he ready to abandon the notion that our faculties have healthy and unhealthy states, which implies assumptions about their purposes. Recruited into Hume's system, the language of purposes seems merely rhetorical, but it does the main work of supporting Hume's distinction between the normative operations of custom and the anomalous effects of superstition. The design argument thus enjoys an ambiguous afterlife in the *Enquiry*, lending force to Hume's case for custom as long as it is left unquestioned, while ready to collapse into figurativeness if confronted too closely.

Nature personified: design without a designer?

Hume's references to nature as a designer are at best occasional, but in their strategic occurrences they make a substantive difference for his case against relativism.[103] My argument in this article has been that such passages invite a literal reading even if they conflict with Hume's fundamental premises. Hume does not hold back from critiquing design, even in the *Enquiry*. But when dealing with matters of value—with the qualitative distinctions between right and wrong, true and false, and beautiful and otherwise—his approach becomes more circumspect. He allows the notion of nature as a designer to fill those blanks in philosophical argument left by the eviction of religion.

One might question whether he needed to; after all, commentators have long construed Hume's principles into secular systems of value that require no providential plastering. But such reconstructive readings, while valuable from an internalist standpoint, entail a loss in historical understanding. From the point of view of method, I am proposing that we distinguish between what Hume needed to have said for the sake of philosophical cogency and what he actually did say as a living figure responding to the exigencies of his time. In the eighteenth century, the dismissal of design left an explanatory vacuum waiting to be filled, but no obvious naturalistic filling. In the interest of reaffirming aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic distinctions, Hume allowed the design argument to remain operative at key moments, albeit in a more secular register—the blank left by God being filled with the placeholder "nature." He does not clarify what "nature" would mean within a system that is neither providential nor admits strong ontological claims about a new kind of entity. Instead, he speaks of nature the designer with the same noncommittal attitude with which he occasionally praised faith, except that such appeals to design, unlike his mimicries of piety, serve a philosophical need. The reading I'm proposing reveals Hume working at the outer edges of his system, grappling with issues that admitted of no fully satisfactory solution at the time; it also alerts us to broader tensions in the history of eighteenth-century secularism, which I'll briefly sketch before bringing this essay to a close.

In a recent study of theories of self-organization, Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman trace "how eighteenth-century Europeans learned to imagine an order that moved beyond both the mechanical worldview and traditional providence."[104]

[103]Examples not mentioned in this paper include Hume, *T*, 1.4.1.7, 1.4.2.1, 2.1.5.6, 2.1.5.10, 2.2.6.6; *EHU*, 8.35; *EPM*, 1.9; and *E*, 131, 132, 162.

[104]Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2015), x.

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Committing to what Sheehan calls "quasi-teleology," a number of natural philosophers "described their object of study *as if* it were a purposive thing and put these purposes into the service of empirical scientific research, even as they (unlike Aristotle) often refused to specify how these purposes might align with other explanatory commitments."[105] Rather than a theory of final causes, this was a "heuristic," a way of warranting further scientific enquiry even in the absence of a fully worked out theoretical foundation. Wahrman reads Hume into this tradition as a theorist of self-organization, especially in his writings on history and economics.[106] I want to conclude by suggesting that Hume fits this tradition in a broader sense, through his ambivalent references to nature as a designer.

The eighteenth century witnessed an epochal transition in ways of talking about nature. Attributions of agency to nature date back all the way to Aristotelian natural philosophy, and its echoes in seventeenth-century vitalism were common enough to have elicited a book-length rebuttal from Robert Boyle. "Many atheists," Boyle writes, "ascribe so much to nature that they think it needless to have recourse to a deity for the giving an account of the phenomena of the universe."[107] Authors who heeded Boyle's complaint often clarified that in speaking of "nature" they were actually speaking of God. Ephraim Chambers, for example, explains that "*nature* is nothing else but God, acting himself, and according to certain laws he himself has fixed."[108] Later in the century, Buffon notes that "Nature is the system of laws drawn up by the Creator for the existence of things and the inheritance of human beings … Nature is not a being, for that being would be God."[109] This figure of speech, whereby "nature" is another name for God, is widespread in eighteenth-century theology, philosophy, and even imaginative literature. We find it, most notably, in providential accounts of ethics. "A man has fingers," according to Kames, "because he is a social animal made to procure food by art not by force. It is thus we discover for what end we were designed by nature, or the Author of nature. And the same chain of reasoning points out to us the laws by which we ought to regulate our actions."[110] Working without coordination, authors practicing a wide variety of genres put into circulation the image of a wise nature making optimal decisions for its creatures, even as the wisdom and agency properly belonged to God.

The crucial transition happened when this trope started taking hold among religious skeptics.[111] Diderot, for example, opens his *Pensées sur l'interpretation de la nature* by stating, "Nature isn't God," but still speaks of nature everywhere as a designer making

[105]Ibid., 148, original emphasis.

[106]Ibid., 262.

[107]Robert Boyle, *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, ed. Edward B. Davis and Michael Hunter (Cambridge, 2012), 3.

[108]Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia: or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 2nd edn (London, 1738), II, 7B, original emphasis.

[109]Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, "First View on Nature," quoted by Louis Châtelier in "Christianity and the Rise of Science, 1660–1815," in Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 7 (Cambridge, 2006), 251–64, at 259.

[110]Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh, 1779), 28.

[111]Dwight Codr has traced a similar transition in the role of "nature" in the domain of political economy. See his "Money, Reason, and Religion: A Secularization Story," in Christine Desan, ed., *A Cultural History of Money in the Age of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 75–94.

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decisions.[112] At this juncture, such references to "nature," like the ones we find in Hume, are deliberately vague. Nature is no longer another designation for Providence, but it is unclear what else it could mean. Eventually, in the hands of more radical thinkers, the trope came to be thoroughly literalized, with "nature" emerging as an autonomous entity endowed with wisdom and foresight. Writing in 1732, the Piedmontese philosopher Alberto Radicati defines nature not as God but as "*Matter* , modified by *Motion* into an infinite Number of various Forms," and he claims that nature "has always been able to form whatsoever she pleased" thanks to her "*Power, Wisdom,* and *Perfection*."[113] Reimagined this way, nature would become not only the source of order but also the source of our duties. "Do not derive from a God the rules of your duty," wrote the atheist Jacques-André Naigeon in 1770, "which are clear, precise, and evidently pointed out by nature."[114] For the English atheist Matthew Turner, the mere fact that "there is no God" does not entail "that the world in which man inhabits is either fatherless or deserted. The wisdom of nature supplies in reality what is only hoped for from the protection of the Deity. If the world has so good a mother, a father may well be spared."[115] Thanks to Mother Nature, Turner thinks, "it is far from being a necessary part of the atheist's creed to exclude design from the universe. He places that design in the energy of nature."[116]

As Turner's argument reveals, the notion of a provident nature remained appealing among religious skeptics as a safeguard for values, a way of defusing the prospect of a blind universe that doesn't care about us. Such a prospect had featured as a bugbear in anti-Epicurean tracts since the mid-seventeenth century. Speaking for many to come, Richard Bentley accused atheists of thinking "that the whole Universe is meer bungling and blundering … nothing effected for any purpose and design; but all ill-favouredly cobled and jumbled together by the unguided agitation and rude shuffles of Matter"; whoever believes this, Bentley adds, "allows no Natural Morality, nor any other distinction of Good and Evil, Just and Unjust: than as Human Institution and the modes and fashions of various Countries do denominate them."[117] To deny design, for Bentley and numerous later commentators, is to deny all value distinctions. Hume's philosophy was often accused of having precisely these consequences. A posthumous review of the *Dialogues* alleges that in Hume's system "the wicked are set free from every restraint but that of the laws," and "the world we live in is a fatherless world."[118] The rare eighteenth-century thinkers who fully embraced the hypothesis of a blind nature—such as Julien Offray de la Mettrie and the Marquis de Sade—confirmed these fears, coupling the denial of design with radical forms of relativism.[119]

[112]Dennis Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interpretation de la nature*, ed. Colas Duflo (Paris, 2005), 59.

[113]Alberto Radicati, *A phliosophical* [*sic*] *dissertation upon death* (London, 1732), 10, original emphasis.

[114]Jacques-André Naigeon, "Discours préliminaire" to Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la nature* (Paris, 1990), 19.

[115]Matthew Turner, *Answer to Dr. Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (London, 1782), 47.

[116]Ibid., 28.

[117]Richard Bentley, *The Folly of Atheism, and (what is now called) Deism* (London, 1692), 27, 3.

[118]William Rose, review of Hume's *Dialogues* in *Monthly Review*, Nov. 1779. Reproduced in James Fieser, *Early Responses to Hume's Writings on Religion*, vol. 2 (Bristol, 2001), 221.

[119]The relevant text for La Mettrie is not *L'homme machine* (1747), but the more radical *Discours sur le bonheur, ou Anti-Sénèque* (1748).

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Hume never went this far. Like the defenders of quasi-teleology discussed by Sheehan and Wahrman, he stood in a grey area between these possibilities. He avoided committing to either God or nature as sources of design, but he also avoided the relativism that seemed to follow from a rejection of both. Instead, Hume built an account of values on the assumption that our faculties have designated functions, repurposing to that end the familiar trope of nature the designer. The meaning of "nature," however, he left unspecified. In Hume's hands it is neither an elegant designation for God nor the name of something else.

This brings us back to Charles Taylor's picture of the Enlightenment as a transitional phase in Western intellectual history, when rising forms of exclusive humanism maintained their links to earlier ways of thinking. Hume, in this respect, is a child of his age. He continues to think that value judgments emerge from purposive human faculties, even as he refrains from specifying the source of such purposes. Jessica Riskin recently argued, in her compelling study of notions of agency, that Hume took sides with the vitalists who viewed nature as an active force.[120] I am proposing a somewhat different view. When talking of the sources of agency, Hume dismisses both those philosophers who "consider [God] as the only active being in the universe" and those who "attribute a derivative, but a real power and energy to matter," concluding that the whole debate is meaningless.[121] In spite of that, Hume does not adopt the view that value judgments are all equal because they equally happen in an indifferent mechanical cosmos. He adopts a provisional compromise that Riskin calls "Design without the Designer,"[122] a stance that was more secular than most contemporary views but remained invested in some of the consequences of providentialism. As Riskin shows, even Darwin, writing a century later, remained torn between the inner agency of naturalists and the outer agency of the design argument: "The ghost of the divine Engineer," she concludes, "haunted the age of evolutionism: too connected with particular contrivances to be the full-fledged God of old, yet too ingrained in the development of the passive-mechanist physiological model from which Darwinism departed to be well and truly gone."[123] This eloquent summary, I think, applies equally well to Hume.

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[120]Riskin, *The Restless Clock*.

[121]Hume, *T*, 1.3.14.9–11, 107–8. See also David Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price (Edinburgh, 1967).

[122]Riskin, *The Restless Clock*, 238.

[123]Ibid., 248.

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