Hume's Fundamental Problem of Evil

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Abstract
The problem of evil for theists was how to reconcile suffering with a benevolent God. Hume solved the problem of evil by claiming that the divine was amoral but not by denying God's existence which he needed in order to advocate his favoured notion of a general providence. Indeed, Hume's treatment of the problem of evil showed that his quarrel in the *Natural History of Religion*[1] and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*,[2] *Section XI*, was with a particular providence rather than the possibility of a divine orderer. The fundamental problem of evil for Hume, was evil's potential to drive people to the notion of a particular providence with its attendant damaging passions. In considering his alternative of the general providence Hume is shown to be closer to theism than has often been thought.

1. Introduction

The position maintained here understands Hume's treatment of the problem of evil as a challenge to belief in the **moral** nature of the divine being rather than an assault on the same *tout court*. He did not use the existence of evil to deny the possibility of a divine orderer. By demonstrating that God was not moral – albeit at the cost of divine simplicity[3] Hume was able to dissolve the problem of evil. However, the fundamental concern about evil, for Hume, was that it drove people towards the notion of a particular providence, which encouraged superstition, fanaticism and the violent passions: love, hatred, grief, joy, pride and humility. By a particular providence, Hume refers to a situation in which a deity, responding to intercessions or otherwise, intervenes in the course of this life and the next to provide for and judge his human creatures. Hume finds no

[1] D. Hume, *Principal Writings on Religion including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion* (ed.) J.C.A. Gaskin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993/1757, 1779), abbreviated *NHR* in the text.

[2] D. Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning The Principles of Morals* (ed.) L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975/1777), abbreviated *EHU* in the text.

[3] I am grateful to Mr T. Miles for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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evidence for this because of the imperfect state of distributive justice, the lack of justification of a future life, the existence of disasters in the world and the sheer impossibility of inferring from the mixed fortunes of the world to a beneficent divinity. Indeed, for Hume: 'All types of theism, which views God as a capricious Being who is influenced by sacrifices or prayers, are always in danger of weakening or destroying the sound principles of common life, such as secular morality, in so far as they permit God's providence or intervention in response to man's religious devotion'.[4]

What Hume believed was desirable in terms of religion for the support of a sound common life was a general providence, a situation associated with calm passions – a sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition and external objects – in which God had established unalterable universal laws to govern nature and thereafter he did not interfere by particular acts of providence. Yet, Hume admitted that this could never have the mass appeal needed to support a desirable common life.

If Hume is successful in his aim of showing that God is amoral then he is successful both in dissolving the problem of evil and in nullifying the notion of a particular providence. But by the same token, he violates the notion of divine simplicity and thus invites adverse judgement on any attempt to credit him with the position of a theist.

2. The Challenge to divine morality in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*[5]

In order to dissolve the conventional problem of evil, clearing the way for an attack on the credibility of a particular providence, Hume needed to show that God was not moral. Hume did not need to go so far as to show God's non-existence in order to threaten the credibility of a particular providence. Hume's permitting the deity's existence, albeit in a modified form, allowed him the option of arguing for a general providence, with its attendant calm passions. His arguments on this topic were mainly in the *EHU*, and the *DNR*.

In the *DNR* Hume presented the traditional dilemma of whether God's goodness and omnipotence were consistent with the

[4] L. Tai Ha, 'Was Hume an Atheist? A Reconsideration' *Filozofia*, **66** (2011), 240–257, 248.

[5] D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed.) N.K. Smith, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1947/1779), abbreviated *DNR* in the text.

abundance of suffering in the world. Hume aimed to show that if an *a posteriori* argument is employed to arrive at God's nature, and it is the issue of God's nature, not his existence that is being disputed in the *DNR*, then the abundance of evil in the world counts for the conclusion that God is amoral. The contrary view, championed by Cleanthes in the *DNR*, used items in the material world as evidence of design, but this empirical appeal allowed Philo in the same work to raise the issue of misery and suffering. Philo here demolishes natural religion, not by disproving God's existence, but by invalidating the argument to God's moral attributes.

Since Cleanthes argues from the experience of the world, then Philo, arguing that such experience is one of suffering as much or more than joy gives the conclusion of at best a morally indifferent Deity. Philo is challenging how the divine benevolence manifests itself. Where there is contentment and beauty these are surely exceeded by sickness and misery. There appears to be no provision of pure joy, no machinery to give pleasure. A comparison between misery and contentment in life gives a net return of misery. Cleanthes concedes the importance of the point and the gravity of his situation: 'If you can make out the present point, and prove mankind to be unhappy or corrupted, there is an end at once of all religion. For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the Deity, while the moral are still doubtful or uncertain?'[6]

Cleanthes has here acknowledged that the existence of evil, if sustained, is fatal for his *a posteriori* attempts to arrive at the nature of the Deity. One suspects that Cleanthes, with his conventional notion of theism, recognises its collapse at the idea that God is not a moral agent and what then of piety and the religious way of life to which he is wedded? According to Cleanthes: 'The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, and infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience...'[7] Its loss would be a disaster from his point of view.

It remains for Philo to press home his attack. He makes the following point against the notion of infinite power, wisdom and goodness: 'Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty'.[8]

[6] Ibid., 199.
[7] Ibid., 220.
[8] Ibid., 201.

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Demea is instrumental in obtaining the concession from Philo that evil is logically compatible with God, but as Philo notes, this is hardly damaging to his case. Philo states on compatibility: 'I will allow, that pain or misery in man is *compatible* with infinite power and goodness in the Deity, even in your sense of these attributes: What are you advanced by all these concessions? A mere possible compatibility is not sufficient. You must *prove* these pure, unmixed, and uncontrollable attributes from the present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone. A hopeful undertaking! Were the phenomena ever so pure and unmixed, yet being finite, they would be insufficient for that purpose. How much more, were they also so jarring and discordant? Here, Cleanthes, I find myself at ease in my argument. Here I triumph.'[9]

In the first place, Philo is admitting the logical possibility of evil and a benevolent creator but he is also disallowing Cleanthes from making use of this. Indeed, Cleanthes, with his *a posteriori* approach, has perhaps already disqualified himself from an *a priori* position. Cleanthes can only argue from the mixed phenomena of the world and therefore never infer a benevolent and just deity. Philo considers that since God is ultimately responsible for the workmanship in the world he is also responsible for evil: 'But there is no view of human life, or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes, or learn that infinite benevolence conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone'.[10]

In the *DNR*, then, Hume employs the miseries of the world against the desire of Cleanthes to establish by an *a posteriori* argument a benevolent and just God. A Designer shorn of goodness, benevolence and justice is shown in the *DNR* to be in a state of entire indifference towards creation. Hume continues his attack on the morality of the deity in the *EHU* where the use of the Argument from Design,[11] is shown to be so defective as to negate any attempt to conclude that god is moral.

3. The challenge to divine morality in the *EHU*

In the *EHU, Section XI*, Hume focused on the issue of whether it is possible to say anything about the nature of God, particularly in

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 202.
[11] Hereafter *AFD*.

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relation to moral qualities, such as goodness and justice. He considered that would involve drawing conclusions from the *AFD* which were unwarranted. He mounted a strong attack on all attempts to do this and in the process declined the notion of a particular providence and any future state. Hume opposed using the *AFD* to impute a moral nature to God claiming, for example, that a benevolent and just God would provide for a world in which, not only would his created beings have the comfort of survival, but also have redress in a future state.

In the *EHU, Section XI*, Hume nullified the project of specifying particular characteristics of the Designer with the rejection of attempts to argue from the *AFD*, with its conclusion of a possible designer, to sundry characteristics of that designer. The nub of the attack in the *EHU* is that however loosely one might argue from the world to a Designer, and Hume needed to allow for a shred of this argument to defend a general providence, it is not allowable then to endow the Designer with sundry qualities, including morality. In general terms, Hume is claiming that the inference from effect to cause, the pattern of the *AFD,* then succeeded by a move from cause to effect, is unwarranted. It could mean, for example, arguing from the world that a deity is just and then inferring that a just deity will provide for a future state which will exemplify the principle of justice with greater effect. The point is made in the *EHU*: 'Whilst we argue from the course of nature, and infer a particular intelligent cause, which first bestowed, and still preserves order in the universe, we embrace a principle, which is both uncertain and useless. It is uncertain; because the subject lies entirely beyond the reach of human experience. It is useless; because our knowledge of this cause being derived entirely from the course of nature, we can never, according to the rules of just reasoning, turn back from the cause with any new inference, or making additions to the common and experienced course of nature, establish any new principles of conduct and behaviour'.[12]

In the *DNR*, Cleanthes proudly proclaimed of the *AFD*: 'By this argument *a posteriori,* and by this argument alone, we do prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence'.[13] However, the *AFD* arises from experience of the world and to go further than the merest possibility of an orderer or designer would need further independent observational

[12] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 142.
[13] Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 143.

support. The point is stressed in the *EHU* dialogue: 'You persist in imagining, that, if we grant that divine existence, for which you so earnestly contend, you may safely infer consequences from it, and add something to the experienced order of nature, by arguing from the attributes which you ascribe to your gods. You seem not to remember, that aIl your reasonings on this subject can only be drawn from effects to causes; and that every argument, deduced from causes to effects, must of necessity be a gross sophism; since it is impossible for you to know anything of the cause, but what you have antecedently, not inferred, but discovered to the full, in the effect.'[14]

Hume's point may be expressed most succinctly as follows: If P implies Q, it does not follow that Q implies P! Hume's position is that if the God hypothesis is a factual hypothesis then it and any associated saving hypothesis must be supported by experience and anything not so supported must be dropped. Hence it is logically impossible to argue back from such a supported hypothesis to anything other than that which can be supported by experience. Yet again, Hume's point could also be expressed in the following terms: The appearance of intelligent design is entailed by and thus is a confirming instance of the 'God hypothesis', which includes creation and perfect intelligence. That is the *AFD*. But this approach could also ask: Are there any consequences of the hypothesis which are contradicted by observation? *Prima facie* there are, in the matter of pain. Therefore, *prima facie* the hypothesis is false. But there are saving recourses with which one could modify the hypothesis, which is what Hume does by abandoning the idea of moral perfection. This enables him to dissolve the problem of evil – since God is not moral there can be no problem of evil – but to retain a very loose possibility of a designer or orderer. Underlying Hume's position is the contention that effects must be proportionate to causes with no licence to go beyond these. Hume, then, resists any attempt to impute a moral nature to God and in the process declines the notion of a particular providence and any future state.

Hume had rejected the notion of a future state in A *Treatise of Human Nature,* hereafter known as the *Treatise*: 'A future state is so far removed from our comprehension, and we have so obscure an idea of the manner in which we shall exist after the dissolution of the body, that all the reasons we can invent, however strong in themselves, and however much assisted by education, are never able with

[14] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 140–141.

slow imaginations to surmount this difficulty, or bestow a sufficient authority and force on the idea'.[15] He made the same point, albeit in a different way, in the essay, *Of the Immortality of the Soul*: 'But if any purpose of nature be clear, we may affirm, that the whole scope and intention of man's creation, so far as we can judge by natural reason, is limited to the present life'.[16]

Moreover so far as the further punishment of the vicious and the reward of the virtuous are concerned, Hume declares that: '... these arguments are grounded on the supposition that God has attributes beyond what he has exerted in this universe, with which we alone are acquainted. Whence do we infer the existence of these attributes? It is very safe for us to affirm, that whatever we know the deity to have actually done, is best; but it is very dangerous to affirm, that he must always do what to us seems best'.[17]

The notion that this world may be but an entrance into something far greater is also rejected. Firstly the present world gives no evidence of anything greater, but more importantly: 'That the divinity may *possibly* be endowed with attributes, which we have never seen exerted; may be governed by principles of action, which we cannot discover to be satisfied: all this will be freely allowed. But this is still mere *possibility* and hypothesis. We never can have any reason to *infer* any attributes or any principles of action in him, but so far as we know them to have been exerted and satisfied'.[18]

In denying a future state, in the *EHU, Section XI,* Hume, through the Friend, denies the notion of compensation and retribution, leaving the brute facts of the world for good and bad alike. Any attempt to plead for justice, if only in the beyond, is given a summary rejection: *'Are there any marks of distributive justice in the world?* If you answer in the affirmative, I conclude that, since justice here exerts itself, it is satisfied. If you reply in the negative, I conclude, that you have then no reason to ascribe justice, in our sense of it, to the gods. If you hold a medium between affirmation and negation, by saying, that the justice of the gods, at present, exerts itself in part, but not in its full extent; I answer, that you

[15] D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature, Book One* (ed.) D. Macnabb (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1962/1739), 162–163.

[16] D. Hume, 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', in (ed.) E.F. Miller, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 592.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 141.

have no reason to give it any particular extent, but only so far as you see it, *at present*, exert itself.'[19]

It follows that with a designer about which nothing moral, including that of benevolence and justice, can be said, not only is it the case that the provision of a future state is sacrificed but, importantly for Hume, the case for a particular providence is sacrificed.

4. A Particular Providence

Hume's most urgent concern is to deny a particular providence, with its attendant violent passions, to which, he claims, people are driven by evil. By a particular providence he understands a notion of a just, caring, responsive orderer, who controls the universe, to whom people can appeal in the face of disaster and uncertainty and who has feelings like theirs. Hume maintains that the deity cannot be placated or persuaded by its subjects. In so far as Hume disposes of a moral deity he disposes of a particular providence and he further disposes of the problem of evil. Hume is quite explicit in his rejection of a particular providence: 'I deny a providence and a future state'.[20] Later, he expands on this in the course of the *EHU*: 'I deny a providence, you say, and supreme governor of the world, who guides the course of events, and punishes the vicious with infamy and disappointment, and rewards the virtuous with honour and success, in all their undertakings.'[21]

Hume, in the *NHR,* points to the role of evil as encouraging belief in a particular providence. Writing of the ignorance of the people and their failure to appreciate a general providence, he cites the reaction of the individual to uncertainty, remarking as follows: 'He will tell you of the sudden and unexpected death of such a one: The fall and bruise of such another: The excessive drought of this season: The cold and rains of another. These he ascribes to the immediate operation of providence: And such events, as with good reasoners, *are the chief difficulties in admitting a supreme intelligence*, are with him the sole arguments for it.'[22]

What Hume means here is that people seize on evidence of disorder to conclude that there is an orderer, which seems so utterly perverse to anyone of intelligence. Hume declares: 'In short, the conduct of

[19] Ibid.
[20] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 135.
[21] Ibid., 140.
[22] Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 153. [My italics].

events, or what we call the plan of a particular providence, is so full of variety and uncertainty, that, if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions, a constant combat of opposite powers and a repentance or change of intention in the same power, from impotence or levity.'[23]

Evil casts its shadow from the very beginning of the religious enterprise for Hume, who contends: 'The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events...'[24] The happenings of evil are the chief reason for the vulgar belief in a particular providence, which Hume so determinedly rejects in the *EHU*: 'Whilst we argue from the course of nature, and infer a particular intelligent cause, which first bestowed, and still preserves order in the universe, we embrace a principle, which is both uncertain and useless. It is uncertain; because the subject lies entirely beyond the reach of human experience. It is useless; because our knowledge of this cause being derived entirely from the course of nature, we can never, according to the rules of just reasoning, turn back from the cause with any new inference, or making additions to the common and experienced course of nature, establish any new principles of conduct and behaviour.'[25]

Allied to this is Hume's notion that the deity cannot be placated or persuaded by its subjects. Ironically, it is evil that leads people to believe in a particular providence and regard the same as an essential feature of theism. Indeed, according to Kemp Smith, Hume actually classifies as atheists: '... those who believe that God is influenced by prayers and sacrifices, and that there are therefore *special* religious duties (for the reason) ... that they conceive God in unworthy anthropomorphic fashion as intervening, like man and other animals, only by *special* acts in *special* circumstances-through auguries, dreams, and oracles, as the Greeks and Romans believed, through certain special happenings and revelations as the Jews and Christians teach.'[26]

What concerned Hume, and went far beyond the dynamics of the problem of evil was that when people do adhere to belief in a particular providence, they court the deity under the influence of the violent passions. This is an aspect on which he writes with urgency and fervour. Hume argues: 'Convulsions in nature, disorders, prodigies,

[23] Ibid., 139.
[24] Ibid., 176.
[25] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 142.
[26] Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. Intro. 23.

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miracles, though the most opposite to the plan of a wise superintendent, impress mankind with the strongest sentiments of religion: the cause of events seeming then the most unknown and unaccountable. Madness, fury, rage, and an inflamed imagination, though they sink men nearest to the level of beasts, are for a like reason, often supposed to be the only dispositions, in which they can have any immediate communication with the Deity.'[27]

The corollary of undermining a particular providence was the discrediting of the violent passions to which the former gave rise. Superstition and enthusiasm were the hallmarks of the religious devotee. Hume declared: 'Enthusiasm being founded on strong spirits and a presumptuous boldness of character, it naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it rises to that height as to inspire the deluded fanatic with the opinion of divine illuminations, and with a contempt for the common rules of reason, morality, and prudence'.[28] Hume, very much a conservative in domestic matters, was here concerned with the threat to stability and any civilized social ethic.

Popular religion, according to Philo in the *DNR*, has proved disastrous for societies: 'How happens it then, said Philo, if vulgar superstition be so salutary to society, that all history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men'.[29]

In particular, Philo indicts superstition and enthusiasm: '... even though superstition or enthusiasm should not put itself in direct opposition to morality; the very diverting of the attention, the raising up of new and frivolous species of merit, the preposterous distribution which it makes of praise and blame must have the most pernicious consequences, and weaken extremely men's attachment to the natural motives of justice and humanity...The steady attention alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence'.[30]

[27] Hume, *NHR,* op. cit. 154.
[28] Hume, '*Of Superstition and Enthusiasm*', in (ed.) E.F. Miller, op. cit. 77.
[29] Hume, *DNR,* op. cit. 220.
[30] Hume, *DNR,* op. cit. 222.

Therefore, worse than simply cherishing a false belief, a particular providence even threatened a system of ethics rooted in society and its needs! Ultimately, of course, Hume composed such a system himself in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

5. A General Providence

Whilst Hume rejected a particular providence, with its attendant violent passions of fear and hope, he defended a general providence, an act of design and creation. This is a concept which has become clouded and confused in debates over whether or not Hume was an atheist. The general providence did not require belief in a moral deity, with the potential to respond to particular intercessions and acts of self-abasement; it was, instead, a tentative conclusion from observation of the cosmos, and encouraged the calm passions of the individual of education and taste. However, what is curiously unsatisfactory from Hume's point of view is that he did not find appreciation of the general providence within the grasp of the vast majority of people, thus the concept lacked the potential for social stability and encouragement of rational thought. To understand how he arrived at the general providence one must look carefully at his treatment of the *AFD*.

Despite savaging the *AFD* in both the *EHU* and the *DNR*, Hume, whilst firmly resisting misuse of the argument, preserved a very minimal notion of design on the basis of observation of the cosmos. Indeed, if Hume is to have the notion of the general providence he must preserve a vestige of the *AFD*. One might consider that very little of the *AFD* is left following the attacks in the *EHU*. These criticisms include: the difficulty of accounting for the deity from one unique case; the notion that causal arguments must be based on experienced regularities, not available in the case of world constructions; the contention that the solution of the Deity as the cause of the universe bequeaths the more difficult problem of discovering the cause of the Deity; the position that resemblance to human contrivance is no more probable than resemblance to animals or other worlds; the contention that thought, design or reason operative within nature do not permit extension to account for the very existence of nature; the proposition that the existence of order within nature does not necessarily require anything external to nature to explain it.

However, notwithstanding the above, Cleanthes, in the *DNR, Part III,* advanced his second design argument appealing to instinctual or

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natural religious beliefs: 'Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with the force like that of a sensation'.[31] The notion of feeling is important here in rehabilitating the design argument to the extent of allowing Hume to present the case for a general providence. It is significant that Philo did not oppose this argument and in fact made use of it in the *DNR, Part X*. Certainly there is opposition to Cleanthes's position but this comes from Demea, not Philo. What one finds in Hume's advocacy of a general providence is indeed an argument rooted in aesthetic appreciation of the order and utility of the universe. In addition, in the *DNR* Philo did not negate that which he termed, the natural characteristics of the Deity. This is a very important point since it permits Hume's advocacy of the general providence, especially in the *NHR*, to be consistent with the attacks on design in the *EHU* and *DNR*. In relation to design in general he stands firm, stating in the *NHR*: 'All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Everything is adjusted to everything. One design prevails throughout the whole.'[32] In fact, he goes so far in the *NHR* as to argue: 'Whoever learns by argument, the existence of an intelligent power, must reason from the admirable contrivance of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that divine being, the original cause of all beings.'[33] This is the extent to which he is prepared to rescue the *AFD*, following his attack on the morality of the deity. In the *DNR*, Philo replies to Cleanthes implicitly expressing support for the latter's second design argument: 'Formerly, when we argued concerning the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtilty [*sic*] to elude your grasp. In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them'.[34]

So effective was Hume's presentation on evil, and his attack on the morality of the deity, that his espousal of a general providence appears weaker than it really is and his statements in this respect are sometimes treated as ironic. It seems that for Hume, and this is why one

[31] Ibid., 154.
[32] Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 138.
[33] Ibid., 150.
[34] Hume, *DNR,* op. cit., 201–202.

should be very cautious about attributing positive statements about design to irony, the general providence follows from careful observation of the universe and that is one of its great strengths. In a footnote in the *Treatise*, Hume writes: 'The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind; that is a mind whose will is *constantly attended* with the obedience of every creature and being'.[35] Where Hume is dealing with conclusions of observations from the universe his position is very different from his stance on abstract notions of a deity. His position in both the *DNR* and the *NHR* differs significantly in places from the verificationism seen in the early sections of the *EHU*, validating ideas from their corresponding impressions and finding the idea of God wanting: 'The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom.'[36] There is also the notorious: 'If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.'[37] Finally, the notion of God's having a moral property, or indeed any property, would be incoherent in terms of Hume's verificationist approach in the early part of the *EHU* and his work in the *Treatise*.

However, what Hume is doing in his notion of a general providence is to look at the empirical findings concerning the world and noting that these might point towards an orderer, though one who has no moral dimension. In the *EHU*, Hume states that: 'The deity is known to us only by his productions...'[38] How then are we to make anything of his productions? Hume's ultimate answer to this lies in his aesthetics. Hume is attracted by the beauty of final causes and we discover in the *Treatise*: 'that beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom* or *caprice*, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul.'[39] However, he also notes the limited scope of this appeal in terms of the mass of the people, stating his position in a way which

[35] Hume, *Treatise*, op. cit. 212.
[36] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 19.
[37] Ibid., 165.
[38] Ibid.,144.
[39] D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature, Books Two and Three* (ed.) P. Ardal, (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972/1740), 57.

gives him common cause with deism: 'Many theists, even the most zealous and refined, have denied a *particular* providence, and have asserted, that the Sovereign mind or first principle of all things, having fixed general laws, by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws, and disturbs not, at every turn, the settled order of events by particular volitions. From the beautiful connexion say they, and rigid observance of established rules, we draw the chief argument for theism: and from the same principles are enabled to answer the principal objections against it. But so little is understood by the generality of mankind, that, wherever they observe anyone to ascribe all events to natural causes, and to remove the particular interposition of a deity, they are apt to suspect him of the grossest infidelity.'[40]

It seems that, by a certain standard of taste, one can discern the products of the Deity, the indications of design, and be motivated by the calm passions. Hume writes in *Of the Standard of Taste*: 'It is sufficient for our present purpose if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others.'[41] The certain standard is very important because it includes some people and excludes many others. This hierarchy of taste means, as Hume concedes, that few can reach the standard by which they can envisage the deity as perfect intelligence, and the many are therefore left with belief in a particular providence and prey to the violent passions: 'The doctrine of one supreme deity, the author of nature, is very ancient, has spread itself over great and populous nations, and among them has been embraced by all ranks and conditions of men. But whoever thinks that it has owed its success to the prevalent force of these invincible reasons, on which it is undoubtedly founded, would show himself little acquainted with the ignorance and stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favour of their particular superstitions.'[42]

Granted Hume's work is marked by a critical stance on religion and an effort to trim back the importance of religion and substitute the paradigm of the natural science of man, his professions, even of very weak theism, are then treated as ironic. Yet Hume does not use his arguments to overthrow God, but to reject his moral nature. Whether such a move is permissible in relation to the concept of

[40] Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 154.
[41] Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in (ed.) E.F. Miller, op. cit. 242.
[42] Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 153.

God is another matter. In defence of the general providence one should note that the *DNR* contains what one might call the weak argument from evil, which is simply to disallow the morality of God whilst permitting support for a chastened *AFD* and a general providence. There are a number of reasons for Hume preferring a weak argument from evil. Hume made conciliatory statements, particularly in the *NHR,* in relation to the general providence. His *A Letter from a Gentleman,*[43] written after the defeat of the chair he sought, was conciliatory in tone: 'Wherever I see Order I infer from Experience that *there,* there hath been Design and Contrivance. And the same Principle which leads me into this Inference, when I contemplate a Building, regular and beautiful in its whole Frame and Structure; the same Principle obliges me to infer an infinitely perfect Architect, from the infinite Art and Contrivance which is displayed in the whole Fabrick [*sic*] of the Universe.'[44] Hume's desire to preserve what he termed the natural characteristics of God in the *DNR* was, I believe, in part at least, the desire to preserve the general providence. His ideal was to see a society characterised by the calm passions which he believed were attached to the General Providence. Finally, he appeared to hold that belief in the General Providence was rational and attainable by a small minority.

In terms of those who could accept a general providence, Hume had this to say: 'And in general, no course of life has such safety (for happiness is not to be dreamed) as the temperate and moderate, which maintains, as far as possible, a mediocrity, and a kind of insensibility, in everything.'[45] On the other hand, Hume found the violent passions, which so concerned him, intimately involved with popular religions:

'Thus it may be safely affirmed, that popular religions are really, in the conception of their more vulgar votaries, a species of demonism; and the higher the deity is exalted in power and knowledge, the lower of course is he depressed in goodness and benevolence; whatever epithets of praise may be bestowed on him by his amazed adorers. Among idolaters, the words may be false and belie the secret opinion: But among more exalted religionists, the opinion itself contracts a kind of falsehood, and belies the inward sentiment. The heart

[43] D. Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (eds) E.C. Mossner and J.V. Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967/1745).

[44] Ibid., 25

[45] Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 184.

secretly detests such measures of cruel and implacable vengeance; but the judgement dares not but pronounce them perfect and adorable.'[46]

It seems, then, that Hume's brand of theism, if one may call it such, differed from the mass understanding of theism and was geared to an appreciation of the universe as a whole and the laws by which it works. Part, or indeed all, of that appreciation involved the notion that it is a designed universe under a general providence. In the *NHR*, Hume talks of the beauty of final causes yet the failure of the ignorant to appreciate the same: 'Even at this day, and in Europe, ask any of the vulgar, why he believes in an omnipotent creator of the world; he will never mention the beauty of final causes, of which he is wholly ignorant.'[47]

There is something of a sense of despair about the inability of the mass of the people to appreciate the Deity of General Providence, as evidenced by Hume in the *NHR*: 'The fuller apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as a pure spirit and perfect intelligence...'[48] He adds, in the *NHR*: 'The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted, being ignorant and uninstructed, never elevate their contemplation to the heavens, or penetrate by their disquisitions into the secret structure of vegetable or animal bodies; so far as to discover a supreme mind or original providence, which bestowed order on every part of nature.'[49] For according to Hume, what is needed is teaching and reflection concerning the course of nature that: '... this very regularity and uniformity is the strongest proof of design and of a supreme intelligence...'[50] Hume accepted the hierarchy of individuals as a divine edict – and this shows him again sympathetic to vestiges of the design argument – writing in the *EHU*: '...that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence.'[51] Despite the fact that few could cleave to a General Providence, it is this which Hume recommends.

As if to emphasise that the *AFD* is not lost, Philo, in *DNR Part XII,* in effect introduces a version of the argument with echoes of Cleanthes's position in *part III*. It is natural functions to which he appeals in his thoughts on anatomy: 'But if we consider the skin, ligaments, vessels, glandules, humours, the several limbs and members

[46] Ibid., 178.
[47] Ibid., 153.
[48] Ibid., 160.
[49] Ibid., 159.
[50] Ibid., 154.
[51] Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 294.

of the body; how must our astonishment rise upon us, in proportion to the number and intricacy of the parts so artificially adjusted? The farther we advance in these researches, we discover new scenes of art and wisdom. But descry still, at a distance, farther scenes beyond our reach; in the fine internal structure of the parts, in the oeconomy [*sic*] of the brain, in the fabric of the seminal vessels. All these artifices are repeated in every different species of animal, with wonderful variety, and with exact propriety, suited to the different intentions of nature, in framing each species. And if the infidelity of GALEN, even when these natural sciences were still imperfect, could not withstand such striking appearances; to what pitch of pertinacious obstinacy must a philosopher in this age have attained, who can now doubt of a supreme intelligence?'[52] Here Hume aligns with Cleanthes's notion of instinctual support. What he has achieved in total here is to establish the idea of a general providence arising from an appreciation of the beauty and utility of the universe.

6. Conclusion

Hume's enthusiasm for a general providence is such that for him it seems to dwarf the impact of evil on individuals. Hume's own position on evil is that it is something to be weathered in one's own life and without due concern arising from the situation of others. The miseries of the world are there, but they are to be dismissed and ignored, dwarfed by the delights of enquiry. In opposing the evil which assails mankind, Hume recommends only this: 'Whatever weakens or disorders the internal frame promotes the interests of superstition: And nothing is more destructive to them than a manly, steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these spectres of false divinity never make their appearance.'[53] That is Hume's recipe for facing the evils about which he wrote so much in the *DNR*. The manly individual with his rational belief in a general providence will be able to resist the fear which is attendant upon the precarious fortunes of life. Hume, it seems, favours the self-reliant individual of taste, who brings admiration but never supplication to the notion of the divine and who looks for nothing more than the wonders of the cosmos.

[52] Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 215.
[53] Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 182.

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Hume surely achieved his goal of dissolving the problem of evil and undermining the notion of a particular providence. However, it would be going too far to argue that his notion of a general providence, whilst it brings him closer to theism than many would countenance, classifies him a conventional theist. His functional approach to certain features of the universe tended towards an architect of the same. But his aesthetic appreciation of the universe contained the same set of conventions that can be applied to portraiture, such that one could always construe his position to be: it is as if there were an architect! Moreover, and more importantly, there are latent difficulties in accepting Hume's crafting of a divine sovereign figure. For if there is indeed such a figure, and one holds that thereby Hume is some kind of theist, then how is it possible that Hume can make excellencies of that divine orderer merely contingent? Hume, if he is to be labelled a theist, takes the liberty of nullifying the morality of the divine yet retaining natural characteristics. The divine figure, if Hume means to subscribe to one, must, by definition, be indivisible in his excellencies and any notion that such excellencies can be divided and denied, whilst others may be affirmed is incoherent. For that which lacks an excellence, be it morality or any other, is not divine since the latter must necessarily be maximally excellent. If Hume has established that the divinity is amoral, and it seems he has, then he has nullified the notion of a figure of maximal excellence. The danger, then, for Hume, both from his leaning on an aesthetic appreciation of the universe and his relegation of the divine morality to a contingent status, is that his critics could argue that his author of the general providence is merely metaphorical.

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