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Critical Notice: James A Harris' *Hume: an intellectual biography,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015

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ABSTRACT
James Harris's new Hume biography offers, among other things, 'a series of conjectures as to what Hume's intentions were in writing in the particular ways that he did about human nature, politics, economics, history, and religion'. The biography is particularly novel with regard to Hume's intentions when writing about religion, which, Harris argues (in opposition to recent developments in Hume scholarship), were rather benign. Harris fails to appreciate the full extent of the difficulties attaching to his series of conjectures, however.

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1. Introduction

James A. Harris's new Hume biography aims at giving 'a complete picture of Hume's ideas as they are expressed in the full range of his writings' (vii). This aim makes Harris's biography different from Ernest Campbell Mossner's *The Life of David Hume* (1980), the standard Hume biography, which focuses not so much on Hume's ideas and works as on various episodes from Hume's life. Harris does indeed provide us with information about episodes from Hume's life, but the bulk of the book is concerned with Hume's ideas and works, and, in particular, with 'relat[ing] Hume's works to the circumstances in which they were conceived and written, and to the debates to which those works were presumably intended to contribute' (vii). Also, and not insignificantly from the point of view of Hume scholarship, Harris aims to offer 'a series of conjectures as to what Hume's intentions were in writing in the particular ways that he did about human nature, politics, economics, history, and religion' (vii–viii). It is especially with regard to Hume's intentions on the subject of religion that Harris

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offers a series of novel conjectures. However, and for reasons to be delineated below, it is doubtful whether Harris appreciates the full extent of the difficulties attaching to his conjectures.

Harris's biography divides into an introduction, eight chapters, and an afterword. In the Introduction Harris announces a core feature of his approach to Hume's life, namely that 'we take seriously Hume's description of himself as having intended from the beginning to live the life of a man of letters' (2). Hume's self-description as a 'man of letters' is found in his 'My Own Life,' written a short while before his death, and this text provides much of the blueprint for Harris's biography. Chapter 1 ('Pursuits of Philosophy and General Learning') is concerned with Hume's early reading in philosophy, which Harris takes to have been heavily focused on the writings of the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Bernard Mandeville, Pierre Bayle, and Francis Hutcheson. Chapter 2 ('Anatomist of Human Nature') deals with the context and contents of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which Harris sees as in large part an attempt to find a middle ground between the moral philosophies of Mandeville and Hutcheson. Chapter 3 ('Essayist') is concerned with the context and content of the various short essays that make up Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political*. Chapter 4 ('The Achievement of Independence') is mostly about Hume's *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (nowadays known as the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*). Chapter 5 ('Two Years at Ninewells') focuses on the *Natural History of Religion* and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume's two most explicit statements on religion. Chapters 6 and 7 ('The Start of a History of Great Britain' and 'The Completion of a History of England') are concerned with Hume's *History of England* volumes, relating their content to various questions regarding the interpretation of English history that were of interest to Hume and his eighteenth-century readers. Chapter 8 ('Paris, London, Edinburgh') is concerned mostly with Hume's interactions with the French *philosophes* in the 1760s, and his final years in Edinburgh leading up to his death in 1776. In an afterword ('Death and character') Harris discusses Hume's deathbed conversation with Adam Smith, in the context of which Hume famously confessed to having worked toward 'the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition' (466). Harris uses this remark as a starting-point for a concluding discussion of the perennial question of Hume's views on religion.

2. Hume's intentions

As mentioned above, one of Harris's aims is to offer 'a series of conjectures as to what Hume's intentions were' (viii). The question of Hume's intentions, although a recurring theme in modern Hume scholarship, has come to special focus in recent Hume scholarship in large part owing to Paul Russell's highly acclaimed *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* (2008).[1] Indeed, it is difficult not to regard Harris's study as in some sense a response to Russell.

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The gist of Russell's Hume interpretation, the so-called 'irreligious interpretation' of Hume, is the idea that Hume's fundamental intention in the *Treatise* was to undermine the grip of Christian theology on Western philosophy. Hume, accordingly, had an 'anti-Christian' or 'irreligious' agenda. This agenda Russell takes to be more fundamental than Hume's widely recognized skeptical and naturalistic agendas; indeed, the latter agendas are subservient to the former one. Speaking of Hume's project in the *Treatise*, Russell says that 'Hume's philosophy … [is] fundamentally an effort to discredit the metaphysical and moral paraphernalia of orthodox religious systems', and, again, that 'the primary aim of Hume's series of skeptical arguments … is to discredit the doctrines and dogmas of Christian philosophy and theology with a view to redirecting philosophical investigations to areas of 'common life,' with the particular aim of advancing 'the science of man".[2]

Now a reason why it is difficult not to regard Harris's book as in some sense a response to Russell is that it is so palpably *opposed* to Russell's interpretation of Hume's intentions. According to Harris, Hume's self-description as 'a man of letters' implies, or implicates, that Hume deliberately conducted his philosophizing in a spirit of (what is variously termed) 'impartial', 'impersonal', 'dispassionate', 'disengaged' or 'disinterested' inquiry (vii, 23, 298–300, 343, 456, 464). This, in turn, is taken to indicate that there is no 'single project', or underlying agenda, to which 'all, or even most, of his works … contribute' (viii). The general outcome of this approach is that there is 'little plausibility to a suggestion to the effect that the remit of the philosophical man of letters, as understood by Hume, was to work towards the demise of the Christian religion' (22). The 'suggestion' here referred to is no-one's if not Russell's, and it is thus plain that we are here dealing with an interpretation of Hume's intentions in direct opposition to that of Russell.

In view of this, it is quite astonishing that Harris's book contains little direct engagement with Russell. In fact, the only passage in which Harris directly engages with Russell is in a footnote to the Introduction. Referencing the view that 'Hume's career is to be understood as in its every aspect hostile to religion in general, and to the Christian religion in particular' (476, n. 61), Harris says:

> According to Russell, 'The core of Hume's philosophy is constituted by his fundamental irreligious commitments and objectives, as first laid down and developed in the *Treatise of Human Nature*' (*The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, p. 300). But again, if everything that Hume wrote is 'constituted and guided his fundamental irreligious commitments', then it would seem likely that there is little of interest to say about how Hume's ideas changed through time. For, *ex hypothesi*, they did not change through time. Hume's career is to be understood along the lines of a filling in of the detail of a vision that he had right at the beginning. (476, n. 61)

As a critique of Russell this passage leaves much to be desired. For, first, Harris here strangely assumes that Russell's interpretation involves the claim that 'everything' Hume wrote had an irreligious aim. But, and as can be seen in the quotation Harris provides from Russell, Russell's claim is not about everything

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that Hume wrote but about Hume's 'fundamental commitment' as manifest in 'the core' of Hume's philosophy and as articulated in the *Treatise*. Obviously one can have a fundamental commitment to a certain core view without writing only about things that are guided by that fundamental commitment. Second, Harris here assumes that if Hume was fundamentally committed to an irreligious agenda then there could be no changes in his ideas. But this is likewise a strange assumption, for, clearly, it is possible to be fundamentally committed to a certain core view while one's ideas on various topics associated with that view undergo changes. A fundamental commitment to a core view is not so much something that exists on the same level as all one's other ideas as something that underlies those ideas. So someone's fundamental commitment can remain constant while the overlying ideas undergo various changes. It is thus plain that Harris's brief direct engagement with Russell does next to nothing to undermine the irreligious interpretation of Hume.

3. Hume's intentions as manifest in his books

I shall refer to Harris's view that Hume deliberately conducted his philosophizing in a spirit of impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, disinterested inquiry, and hence wasn't pursuing anything like an irreligious agenda, as 'the Religiously Disengaged Thesis'. One possible way in which one could try to support this thesis would be via the indirect route of trying to undermine the opposite and conflicting view; but as we saw above, Harris doesn't do a very good job of this. Another possible way in which one could try to support the thesis would be via the more direct route of trying to show how the thesis is exhibited in Hume's writings. To that more direct route we now turn.

A survey of Harris's accounts of Hume's writings would seem to lend little support to the Religiously Disengaged Thesis, however. In fact one often gets the impression that Harris's accounts not only fail to support the Religiously Disengaged Thesis, but even run *counter* to it, supporting Russell's opposing view rather than the thesis in question. In what follows I will exemplify this by a brief survey of some relevant aspects of Harris's accounts. (Harris's account of Hume's *Dialogues* will require a bit more attention, and so will be treated in a separate section following this one.)

I start with the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Harris's account of Hume's *Treatise* focuses to a large extent on its moral philosophy, which Harris takes to involve an attempt to find a middle path between Mandeville and Hutcheson. In a summary statement Harris claims Hume's moral system develops in part out of 'the legitimate self-satisfaction of the well bred, and the pleasure taken by us all in wisdom, good sense, wit, eloquence, good humour, a handsome face, a shapely body, and the advantages enjoyed by the wealthy' (139). Those who favor an irreligious interpretation of Hume typically view this sort of value-system as a challenge to a Christian ethics which classifies the relevant forms of

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self-satisfaction as sinful vanity. One might expect a proponent of the Religiously Disengaged Thesis to take a different approach. Oddly, however, this is not what Harris does. Instead he claims that Hume's moral system bears 'an unmistakable sign of a wish to challenge the conventional list Christian virtues' (135), that Hume takes philosophy to be 'both a safer and more agreeable guide in life than 'superstition'' (102), and that Hume regarded the relevant sort of self-satisfaction as legitimate 'regardless of what Christianity says' (135). More generally, Harris notes that '[t]he assumption that someone who lacked religious belief must live immorally was one that Hume would be confronted with all his life', and that Hume's moral philosophy 'was, implicitly, an argument intended to show the assumption to be completely baseless' (63). Clearly this sounds as much like someone with an irreligious agenda than as someone whose deliberate intention is to pursue an impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, and disinterested inquiry.

Turning next to the *Essays*, *Moral and Political*, we find in this essay-collection three essays with a strong bearing on religious topics, namely 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', 'Of the Parties of Great Britain', and (in a later edition of the essay-collection) 'Of National Characters'. In the first essay Hume discusses 'corruptions of true religion', such as superstition, which Hume associates first and foremost with Catholicism, and enthusiasm, which Hume associates mostly with various strands of Protestantism (164). Harris thinks that one of Hume's aims in this essay is to argue, 'contrary to what the British generally liked to believe', that 'there was no *necessary* connection between, on the one hand, Protestantism and liberty, and, on the other, Catholicism and intolerance' (164–165). In 'Of the Parties of Great Britain' Hume goes on to point out that whereas in Great Britain the Calvinists tended to oppose political authority and the Arminians tended to support it, the reversed state of affairs held in the Netherlands. In making this observation, Hume's intention, according to Harris, was to raise 'disturbing questions about the relation between religion and politics, questions that would be pursued at length in *The History of England*' (165). In 'Of National Characters' Hume went on to claim that priests have a profession that makes them intolerant, hypocritical, and humorless. Harris takes Hume to be here simply 'abusing … the character of the priestly profession' (244). Now, if Harris is right in his understanding of Hume's aims in these essays, this would in no wise favor Harris's Religiously Disengaged Thesis. For, clearly, to argue that there is no 'necessary connection' between Protestantism and liberty (or between Catholicism and intolerance), or to raise 'disturbing questions' about the relation between religion and politics, or, once again, to engage in 'abuse' of the priestly profession, are in no wise unambiguous indicators of a writer whose deliberate intention is to engage in an impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, and disinterested inquiry.

Similar remarks hold of the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*, a book which Harris says put Hume's religious doubts 'in the

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public sphere' (226). This book contains the essay 'Of Miracles', a famous attack on the idea that it is (or can be) rational to believe miracle reports. Without providing much commentary on this essay, Harris notes that it and the book to which it belongs have as their 'overall agenda' to 'effect a categorical differentiation between the realm of experience on the one hand and the realm of religion on the other' and to 'fix the reader's mind firmly on the examination of common life' (227). If this is what Hume was up to in this work, it is, once again, hard to see how this could lend any support to the general thesis that Hume's deliberate intention was to engage in an impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, and disinterested inquiry. On the contrary, this is quite compatible with an opposite, irreligious intention on the part of Hume.

We turn next to one of Hume's most explicit and systematic statements on religion, the *Natural History of Religion*. Harris takes the 'heart' of this book to be 'the distinction … between a pure and genuinely rational theism, whatever that might have amounted to, and the corrupt forms that theism has actually taken in the world' (292). Among the corrupt forms of theism that Hume is hinting at and criticizing between the lines of this book are, Harris tells us, both Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. These religions are said to 'elevate God's power over his goodness', and, by incorporating a doctrine of hell, transform 'monstrous passions' into 'divine attributes' (293). Here, too, it is hard to find any obvious support for Harris's thesis that Hume's deliberate intention was to engage in an impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, and disinterested inquiry. If anything, this indicates a deep hostility toward the major monotheistic religions on the part of Hume.

As regards Hume's *History of England*, a book on which Harris dwells at length, Harris notes that Hume is here particularly interested in the way in which religion and politics have interacted historically, and with the political impact of religious extremism (165, 334–335). Scotland, for example, is studied as 'a hotbed of fundamentalist Presbyterian fervour' (346). Now although Harris describes Hume's historical narrative as 'impartial' (31) and 'dispassionate' (343), he also speaks of Hume's 'unspoken contempt for the idea that the horrors he often describes admit of some kind of providential explanation' (451), and explicitly concedes that Hume is seeking to 'emotionally engage the reader with the fate of history's victims' (31). Now, that this reading of the *History of England* is as compatible with an irreligious interpretation of Hume's fundamental intentions as with the Religiously Disengaged Thesis is, I trust, obvious. The conclusion to draw, then, is that Harris's accounts of the above books do very little to support his interpretation of Hume's intentions.

4. Hume's intentions in the *Dialogues*

As mentioned above, Harris's account of Hume's intentions in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* must be considered a bit more carefully. For it seems

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to be in this book, more than in any other, that Harris takes himself to find evidence of Hume's (alleged) impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, and philosophical ideal.

Harris's outline of the main discussion of the *Dialogues* is fairly standard, with Cleanthes urging the design argument, Demea urging the cosmological argument, and Philo, the skeptic as well as central character of the *Dialogues* (and the character typically associated most closely with Hume), urging objections against both of these theistic arguments while also seeking to undermine the rational basis of theism by a consideration of the problem of evil (447–451).

A moot point in *Dialogues* scholarship concerns who the three main characters – Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo – represent. Harris regards these characters as 'representatives of the principal currents of thought flowing through the religious life of Scotland in the middle of the eighteenth century' (301–302). More specifically, he associates Cleanthes with proponents of the design argument like Colin Maclaurin (449), Demea with proponents of the cosmological argument like Samuel Clarke (450), and Philo with skeptics like Pierre Bayle (449). These associations, it may have been worth pointing out, are not original to Harris, and can be found scattered throughout the commentary literature.[3]

Harris frames his above outline of the contents of the *Dialogues* with the idea, central to his general interpretation of Hume, that Hume deliberately intended to philosophize in an impersonal, impartial, disengaged, and dispassionate way. One of the first claims he makes about the *Dialogues* is that

> it can be read as a representation of an idealized intellectual community, as a portrayal of the kind of philosophical discussion that Hume wanted to be able to believe was possible in his time and place. (30)

And in summing up his account of the *Dialogues* he says that

> Hume knew that it was even harder for his contemporaries to consider religion from a detached and purely philosophical point of view than it was for them to reflect in that way on politics, economics, or history. Religion, quite simply, mattered more than anything else did … The *Dialogues* taken as a whole, like all of Hume's works, was an attempt to help the reader to stand back from everyday practical concerns, and to consider the matter at hand in terms of its general principles. (456)

These are important claims from the point of view of Harris's general interpretation of Hume, for it is here, and virtually only here, that Harris offers an account of Hume's text which, if plausible, would provide real support for his Religiously Disengaged Thesis. What, then, is Harris's evidence for these claims?

It is hard to say. Harris remarks that the use of the dialog form 'enabled Hume to put some distance between himself and the sceptic Philo' and that this was a means of 'throwing a veil' over the author's 'own sentiments' (447). But if this is Harris's evidence, then clearly he has not made a good case for the Religiously Disengaged Thesis, for there might be reasons for Hume's hiding of his own sentiments that are entirely compatible with his having had irreligious intentions.

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One could imagine Hume as using the character Philo for irreligious purposes but without wanting to say explicitly that he is so using him, for example. And clearly one can imagine all sorts of reasons Hume might have had for not wanting to say this explicitly.

Another possible ground for the above claims is found in the remark that the skeptic Philo 'has no rival thesis of his own', and, indeed, 'does not make a case for atheism' (448). If Harris is right about this it would perhaps be natural to think that since Philo isn't seeking to establish *any* position he cannot plausibly be taken to be seeking to establish any *irreligious* position either, in which case we have reason to doubt that Hume had irreligious intentions in the *Dialogues*. Nevertheless, Harris's take on Philo is, on this point, quite dubious. For the very skepticism that Philo urges may be understood as a 'position' or 'thesis' in its own right, and an irreligious position or thesis at that. It is true that skepticism can be joined to fideism and so isn't necessarily irreligious, but it needn't be so joined, and can easily be detached from fideism and turned into a force of irreligion – as is also explicitly recognized at the beginning of the *Dialogues*.[4] Furthermore, Harris's claim that Philo doesn't argue for 'atheism' in the *Dialogues* is problematic, for it is well-known that a denial of divine attributes like infinite goodness was considered a form of atheism in the eighteenth century, and one of the outcomes of Philo's consideration of the problem of evil is that the evil in the world makes ascriptions of infinite goodness to God vacuous (*Dialogues* X) or at best improbable (*Dialogues* XI).[5]

It is accordingly difficult to find any clear evidence in support of Harris's idea that Hume's intention in the Dialogs was to depict 'an idealized intellectual community'. Worse still, Harris also claims, on a more general note, that the main point of Hume's *Dialogues* is 'to present the best possible case for theism, and to show how it crumbles almost into nothing under rational examination' (447). How this claim squares with the idea that Hume in the *Dialogues* is pursuing an impartial, dispassionate, and disengaged inquiry, is, to my mind, puzzling. At face value, the claim certainly seems to go against the Religiously Disengaged Thesis.

5. Hume's historical context

Suppose we conclude that Harris's Religiously Disengaged Thesis is inadequately supported by Hume's writings, even on Harris's reading of these writings. Is there, we might next ask, any further evidence that might be offered in support of the Religiously Disengaged Thesis?

Well, it seems that Harris's interpretation of Hume's intentions is strongly influenced by his understanding of Hume's historical context. Of particular relevance to this context is what Harris takes to be the circumstance that there was no real *need* for Hume, in his social situation in mid-eighteenth century Great Britain, to worry about the adverse impact of religion on his life. Says Harris:

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> [T]here was no pressing need, in Britain in the mid-eighteenth century, to desire the extirpation of the Christianity [*sic*] as such. No one was being tortured, as Calas was, to make them confess that they had murdered their son to stop him from converting to a different religion. At home in Edinburgh, Hume enjoyed the company of moderates of the Church of Scotland, and regarded some of them as being among the acutest of his critics. (22)

But this characterization of Hume's historical context is disturbing. To start with, Harris here assumes that the absence of extreme religious phenomena like religiously motivated torture would have sufficed to do away with any felt need or desire in Hume to want to change the religious status quo. But what is the basis of this assumption? Clearly a person might feel the relevant sort of need or desire for many sorts of reasons other than those related to the extreme religious phenomena here referred to. One could imagine, for example, that Hume's experience of having been publicly rebuked, and warned against, by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, might have sufficed for feeling the relevant need or desire on the part of Hume. Indeed, one could even imagine Hume as having felt the relevant need or desire for the simple reason that he believed Christianity to be false and to have too much influence in society, without having to be pushed in this direction by any particular negative experiences.

Apart from this, there is also the further circumstance that the historical situation in Great Britain in the mid-eighteenth century was simply not as mild as Harris suggests. The Anglican and Presbyterian churches were the state churches in England and Scotland; access to university education was limited to members of these churches, as were professions of public service such as jurist and professor; blasphemy acts tailored to protect the fundamental theologies of these churches were in force; and so on. There were also well-known cases of religious state oppression: in 1729, when Hume was in his late teens, the writer Thomas Woolston was sentenced to prison for having raised objections to Biblical miracles, objections comparable to those raised not many years later by Hume in 'Of Miracles'; and in 1762, when Hume was in his prime, the freethinker Peter Annet was sentenced to the pillory on account of anti-religious writings, writings expressing views similar to Hume's.[6] Also worth mentioning is that Hume made revisions to the *Natural History of Religion* on account of a threat of legal prosecution from the Anglican authorities.[7] In view of facts like these, one has reason to doubt whether Hume would have concurred with Harris that there was no pressing need or desire to want a change in the religious status quo of Great Britain at that time. Moreover, there is strong internal evidence from Hume's writings suggesting that he would have rejected Harris's characterization. Consider, for example, how he in *Enquiry* 11 contrasts the religious and philosophical tolerance of Ancient Greece with the corresponding intolerance of 'the present age':

> [E]xcept the banishment of PROTAGORAS, and the death of SOCRATES, which last event proceeded partly from other motives, there are scarcely any instances to

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> be met with, in ancient history, of this bigotted jealousy, with which the present age is so much infested.[8]

This is hardly what one would expect to hear from someone who felt no 'pressing need' or 'desire' to change the religious status quo of his day. On the contrary, this sounds more like the voice of someone who feels disgusted by the religious status quo of his day.

6. Hume's deathbed confession

Adam Smith famously reports that when he visited Hume on his deathbed, Hume told him that he had been reading Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* and thinking about excuses he might make to Charon to delay his departure to Hades. At first Hume 'could not find one [excuse] that fitted him', thereafter he 'diverted himself with inventing several jocular excuses', but then, and after 'further consideration', he added that he

> might still urge, 'Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of one of the prevailing systems of superstition'.[9]

Upon retelling this story elsewhere, Smith reports Hume as urging not that he had been seeking the downfall of one of the prevailing system of superstition, but rather that 'the churches [be] shut up, and the clergy sent about their business'.[10] Also, Hume's close friend William Cullen reports in a letter from around the same time that what Hume really said to Charon was that he had been 'employed in making his countrymen wiser and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition'.[11] The significance of this is that we have here what seems to be a pretty clear confession on the part of Hume as regards his irreligious aims. Commentators who take Hume to have had irreligious aims have accordingly considered this a quite revealing and pertinent confession. Russell, for example, takes the confession to be 'very relevant' to his irreligious interpretation of Hume, and an indicator of the aims and nature of Hume's irreligious project.[12] It is thus a matter of considerable interest how Harris responds to this confession, and how he seeks to square it with his opposing Religiously Disengaged Thesis.

Interestingly, and also quite disturbingly, Harris nowhere recognizes that Hume's deathbed confession even poses a challenge to his interpretation. He does, however, take for granted an interpretation of the confession that makes it compatible with the Religiously Disengaged Thesis. In the Introduction he remarks that

> On his deathbed Hume joked that he might buy some time from Charon by telling him that he wanted to wait, before entering Hades, until the downfall of Christianity. Adam Smith's retelling of the joke in his published account was a provocation to Hume's enemies, but, still, the joke was just a joke. I think that it

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> tells us more about Hume's willingness to exploit his reputation as an atheist to comic effect than about his real intentions as a man of letters. (22)

And in the Afterword Harris goes on to say that

> It is possible that Hume permitted Smith to make public a joke that he would have known would cause outrage precisely because, in causing outrage, it would perfectly complement the story told in 'My Own Life' of a literary career that, where it had not met with indifference, had met with the hostility of bigots. (471)

It is noteworthy that Harris in the above passages does not recognize as a faint possibility that Hume's confession was meant as a serious statement of his irreligious objectives, rather than as 'just a joke'. Moreover, in failing to recognize this, and in simply stating, matter-of-factly, that Hume's confession was nothing more than a joke, Harris does away with any need to try to justify his particular interpretation over against rival interpretations. For scholars who take an opposing view of Hume's confession, Harris's failure to acknowledge rival interpretations will undoubtedly be unsatisfactory.

Apart from this, Harris's interpretation of the confession as a joke appears, when judged on its own merits, far from compelling. To start with, if the confession was just a joke, then what exactly *was* the joke? It would seem that in order for Harris's interpretation to square with the Religiously Disengaged Thesis, the joke would have to have centered on the claims that Hume was 'endeavouring' to 'open the eyes of the public', and that he took 'satisfaction' in 'the downfall of one of the prevailing systems of superstition'. For this to be a joke rather than straight talk, Hume must *not* have been endeavoring to open the eyes of the public, and must *not* have taken any satisfaction in the downfall of prevailing systems of superstition. But why not? What evidence could possibly be mounted for supposing that Hume, the preeminent Enlightenment philosopher, did not endeavor to open the eyes of the public, or take satisfaction in undermining prevailing systems of superstition?

Moreover, Harris's idea that Hume's confession was calculated to cause an 'outrage' which in turn was intended to 'complement the story' told in 'My Own Life' of a 'literary career that, where it had not met with indifference, had met with the hostility of bigots', is certainly a logical possibility, but it is just one of a thousand scenarios that one could think up. The question, of course, is what sort of evidence there is for this particular scenario; and, surprisingly, Harris offers no particular evidence at all for this scenario. Harris's particular take on Hume's confession is accordingly a matter of sheer speculation, and scholars who are not already on board with Harris's interpretation of the confession will find no reason in Harris's book to alter their view.

In sum, Harris's biography offers a picture of Hume very different from that which many of us are familiar with. In place of a Hume who is deeply concerned with loosening the grip of Christian theology on Western philosophy, and who self-consciously employs his philosophical and literary talents to discredit fundamental doctrines of Christian philosophy, we have here a Hume who is on

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the whole quite satisfied with the religious status quo of his day, and who wants nothing more than to speculate in an impartial, impersonal, dispassionate, disengaged, and disinterested frame of mind. The chief problems with this picture of Hume, however, are that it fails to properly engage with alternative Hume interpretations; that it isn't borne out by Harris's readings of Hume's writings; that it is, on the contrary, often in direct conflict with these readings; that it is informed by a flawed view of the social and religious situation in mid-eighteenth century Great Britain; and, perhaps most serious of all, that it oftentimes suppresses, or at any rate ignores and fails to address, important counter-evidence.

Notes

1. For enthusiastic reception of Russell's Hume interpretation on the part of leading Hume scholars, see, e.g. Garrett (2010, 108–112), Heydt (2010, 401–402), Millican (2011, 348–353), Meeker (2015, 675–79), Bailey and O'Brien (2014, 54–58).
2. Russell (2008, 285, 290).
3. For the Maclaurin-Cleanthes connection, see Hurlbutt (1954, 486–497), at 492–493; for the Demea-Clarke connection, see Russell (1966, 206).
4. Cleanthes speaks, in *Dialogues* I, of 'the ill use' that Bayle and 'other libertines' have made of 'philosophical scepticism'; see Hume (2008, 41).
5. On different forms of 'atheism' in the eighteenth century, see Holden (2010). For Philo's argument from evil, see Kraal (2013, 573–592).
6. See, for example, Herrick (1997, 98–99, 142–144).
7. Mossner (1980, 321–326).
8. Hume (2000, 100).
9. Quoted from *The Letters of David Hume*, Greig (1932, 2:451).
10. Quoted from *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. Mossner and Ross (1977, 204).
11. Quoted from Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 601.
12. Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's* Treatise, 300.

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