it also acts as an historical demonstration (though not a logically rigorous demonstration) of the existence of the God who raised up Jesus. Pannenberg has gone into this matter of verifying Christian faith in some detail in his work on Christology *Jesus, God and Man* and in a number of articles which have appeared in the first volume of *Basic Questions in Theology.* My purpose here is not to examine the plausibility of these arguments but simply to show that there exists in modern Protestant theology a position which radically rejects a Positivism of Revelation and which would not accept the rather strange meaning which has been given to 'justification' by Rudolf Bultmann and Gerhard Ebeling.

English Bards and a Scottish Previewer: David Hume

by Dayton Haskin, S.J.

> 'It is a tide which has turned only once in human history. . . . There is presumably a calendar date —a *moment*—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, secretly, the noes had it'.[1]

Thus George Moore, Tom Stoppard's brilliant, bespectacled version of the modern moral philosopher. In *Jumpers,* Stoppard has managed to do with contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy what he did earlier in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with modern literary criticism—to make of an academic discipline a playing field for his sport, and of its preoccupations so much grist for the artist's mill. Stoppard's wit draws the finest of lines between the serious and the outlandish; and his irreverence makes for good fun—at the expense of his earnest protagonist. But George wins us, albeit the way a warm puppy wins us; and we can summon a measure of sympathy for his plight. George moves in a world where all his colleagues benignly presume that intelligent people outgrow belief in God; and so, he feels defensive about his commitment to a deity fashioned of old by the philosophers.

[1]Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (London, 1972), p. 25.

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It really does not matter to most believers today, I suppose, that the onus for proving the existence of God has passed to them. Believers are not so interested as they used to be in cornering the adversaries in the labyrinth of the Five Ways. What the believer may feel, however, is a certain social onus, as he rubs shoulders with that large company, now in the ascendancy, who look upon him as they might look upon a curious fossil unearthed in a Palestinian excavation.

That the tide has turned and the believer has ridden out with it to an exile in a foreign land characterizes the current Christian *Sitz im Leben.* Our poets sensed, three and four generations ago, that this would be the climate of the twentieth century. Yeats implied it when he complained that he had been robbed of the simple-minded religion of his childhood by Huxley and Tyndall; and Matthew Arnold anticipated Jumpers' *metaphor* with the retreating Sea of Faith in 'Dover Beach'. But more than a century before Arnold began to preach to the Victorian middle classes there arose a prophet in the Northern Kingdom, a man who foresaw the turning of the tide. It was he who played the leading role in transferring the philosophical onus onto the believer, and he who awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber. Like Tom Stoppard, David Hume was creative and playful, and more than a bit irreverent, in the face of contemporary philosophy. And like many of our English bards since, he was uncommonly sensitive to the difficulties entailed in belief, once the God-hypothesis has been discovered to be superfluous.

Poet and persona in Hume's writings on religion

That the eighteenth century should have witnessed the revival of the classical dialogue as a vehicle for philosophy comes as no surprise. Berkeley and Hume were contemporaries of the poets who produced Horatian odes and satires after the fashion of Juvenal. But the similarity between poetic and philosophical writing extends beyond the simple matter of choosing a literary form in which to write; and the modern reader encounters some of the same difficulties in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* that he finds in *Gulliver's Travels* or the *Dunciad.* Most notable in this regard is the problem of sorting out the relationship between the writer himself and the speakers he employs in his fiction. While it is clear on the one hand that Swift does not speak in his own person in *A Modest Proposal* or the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity,* it is much less evident in, say, Pope's Moral Essays whether the speaking voice is to be equated with the poet himself.

It would seem that the problem of deciding where Hume stands in the *Dialogues* has been settled.[2] Despite Pamphilus' judgment in

[2]See Norman Kemp Smith's edition of the *Dialogues* (London, 1947): here the case for Hume's affinities with Philo is carefully put forward.

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favour of his master at the close of the work and Hume's ironic claim, in a letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot in 1751, that Cleanthes is the 'hero of the Dialogue', it is evident that Philo gets the best of the argument. Moreover, Philo's benign scepticism readily squares with what we know of Hume's own cast of mind. It seems unlikely that Hume regarded Cleanthes' formulation of the argument for the existence of God from the design of the universe as conclusive.[3]

Yet not only does Hume neglect to identify himself with Philo explicitly; he does not speak in his own person when, in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,* he puts forward an earlier refutation of the Argument from Design. In fact, Hume stands at three removes from the speech he records there: the speech is assigned, by the Hume-like narrator, to a 'friend', who, in turn, pretends to speak in the person of Epicurus before a body of Athenians.

Now no doubt some of the ambiguity about just where Hume himself stood on the Argument from Design can be attributed to the man's prudence. In an age when the onus was still on the atheist, and agnostics and Freethinkers were roundly condemned (or at least denied chairs in the University of Edinburgh), it is not surprising that Hume should have put himself at some remove from the position he espoused—while making certain that the position was nonetheless clearly enunciated. One is reminded of Chaucer's Nun's Priest, who, knowing that Mother Superior is along on the pilgrimage, disclaims any responsibility for Chauntecleer's antifeminist gibes: 'This been the cokkes words, and nat myne; I kan noon harm of no woman divyne'. In fact, this distance device has been a favourite of poets in diverse times and places; and Hume's use of it in the *Enquiry* and *Dialogues* is perhaps better illuminated if we compare it with Byron's playful use of his narrator in *Don Juan,* where he couches opinions that Convention would deem outrageous in the casual ramblings of a fictional *persona.* The sport makes for pleasurable reading. But it is a bit disconcerting when we wish to ascertain where the author himself stands.

Hume does not argue unequivocally in his own voice against the Argument from Design. In fact, in *The Natural History of Religion,* which dates to the same period as the *Dialogues* and the *Enquiry,*[4] the Design Argument is accepted from the start and without debate. For once, moreover, Hume seems to be speaking in his own person without a fictional intermediary: 'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the

[3] See F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, V: Hobbes to Hume* (London, 1959), p. 308.

[4] *The Natural History* was first published in 1757; but Hume seems to have written it in 1749-51. *The Dialogues concerning Natural Religion,* though published posthumously in 1779, were substantially written before 1751. The *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* was first published in 1748.

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primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion'.[5] It sounds very much like the 'hero of the Dialogue' and the bearer of young Pamphilus' prize for approaching nearest to the truth.

There is no evident irony, such as we find in Swift's *Argument against Abolishing Christianity,* which would lead us to say that the speaker Hume employs here condemns himself out of his own mouth. If there is irony, it is of that delicate sort such as we find in the *Dialogues* when Cleanthes, in placing a favourable interpretation on the fact that theologians use whatever philosophical system best suits their purpose, actually confirms just the charge which Philo has made with evident cynicism.[6]

The uses of imagination

The disconcerting fact is that at many points in the course of the *Natural History* Hume explicitly accepts the Design Argument. 'All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. . . . One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author' (p. 37). Admittedly, the cogency of the argument will appeal more to the intellectual sort. The majority remain vulgar polytheists, who invest every part of the universe with divine status. Only the few possess that reasonable natural religion of the philosopher which recognizes that 'a purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing' (p. 96). Most men are ignorant and superstitious, and their religion derives chiefly from 'an anxious fear of future events' (p. 85). They employ imagination, which, in a pre-Coleridgean era, is suspect: it is the source of vulgar superstitions.

Hume judges that the use of imagination to cope with life's ambiguities and uncertainties arises because of the frailty of human nature, from which even 'philosophers cannot entirely exempt themselves' (p. 41). This is borne out in Hume's metaphor imaging the human situation: 'We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us' (p. 40). Here Hume becomes a maker of fictions, offering us a picture of the human situation which, like the one Conrad was to offer in one of his early stories, implies design but not a particularly benevolent designer. In 'Youth', Conrad's Marlow tells his fellows:

> There are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life, that might stand for a symbol of existence. You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something—and you can't. Not from any fault of yours. You simply can do nothing, neither great or little—not a thing in the world.

[5]Quotations from the *Natural History* and the *Dialogues* are from *Hume on Religion*. ed. Richard Wollheim (London, 1963). Page numbers in parenthesis pertain to this edition.

[6]See Part I, p. 112.

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Now Conrad's vision is not Hume's. But his Marlow, who elsewhere finds himself winding his way through an unintelligible jungle, is not unlike Hume's philosopher of natural religion. Both live in a world where men are ignorant of causes and where even the most noble and persistent efforts to garner some intelligibility are fraught with hopelessness. Yet both seek an image of the world as a whole, and an understanding of man's place in it. But where Conrad sees the human imagination providing an apt means of coping with this situation—Marlow has, at least, his memories; and he can fashion a story which creates some pattern and meaning—Hume deems the imagination a snare: it breeds foolish superstitions, which, when allied to philosophy are perhaps amusing; when they are allied to religion, they can be dangerous.

The *prosopoeia* of poetry, according to Hume, are so much absurdity; and he would have experience correct that 'universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves', whereby we 'find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds' (pp. 40-41). Thoroughgoing empiricist that he is, Hume positions himself at the forefront of that long-standing criticism of the poet which pretends his metaphors are unintelligible, or less politely, calls him a liar.

Elsewhere, however, Hume seems more indulgent towards the widespread human tendency to think in images and to make metaphors. His final condemnation of revealed religion, as opposed to philosophical religion, at the close of the Natural History employs the language of metaphor itself: the question is, Can we take Hume at face value here?

> The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind, than to be thus selected from all other parts of creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator (p. 97).

It sounds very pious, and Hume wanders remarkably close here, in some respects, to the myth of the Artificer in Plato's *Timaeus*. Such indulgences of mythopoeic power serve, however, to call into question the purity of the philosophical religion Hume pretends to advocate in his writings. For there is a delicate irony in this 'may be considered' and 'nothing surely can more dignify mankind'. Hume's bias against the distorting imaginative faculty becomes explicit as the passage continues:

> But consult this image, as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him!

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Given that the Argument from Design engages the imagination as well as the reason, it is not difficult to discover the roots of Hume's uneasiness with it: the Argument grows out of this same 'universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power'—and the same human desire to dignify oneself by claiming to bear the image of a divine craftsman.

The strategy of Dialogues

In the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion,* Hume pits two believers *versus* a sceptic. But Demea, who represents religious orthodoxy, and Cleanthes, who puts forward the Design Argument, actually spend most of their energy refuting one another, with the result that Philo manages to pick up the spoils. Philo consistently espouses a modest, moderate position, while each extremist in his turn sides with him against the other. Cleanthes, for instance, refutes Demea's *a priori* argument for the existence of God. Demea sides with Philo in maintaining that we can know very little about the nature of the deity, given the limitations of human reason and our lack of experience of things divine. As is well known, Hume was impatient with dogmatism; and a clear indication that his sympathies lie chiefly with Philo is found in Philo's unremitting insistence that only such inferences as the evidence warrants are to be drawn.

Hume has artfully contrived the *Dialogues* according to the classical adage, *virtus in medio stat.* His Odysseus is Philo, who steers his way between Scylla and Charybdis, much as Dryden's *persona* had done in *'Religio Laici'.* Like Philo, Dryden's *persona* proves more deft at uncovering the dangers of the extremes than at propounding a positive doctrine. We are left to infer where the author himself stands by examining what comes under attack. Dryden opposes the Deists' unchecked confidence in Reason as the sole avenue to Truth to the Puritans' irrational fanaticism which allies itself to emotion and special revelations. His *persona* argues for balance, order, and simplicity in one's religious position; for his age is weary of extremism and sophistry. Although Dryden accepted a Christian revelation which Hume would not, their basic technique is remarkably similar: so paint the extremes that your reader feels most comfortable in the middle: when you take the Greek to Delphi, the navel of the cosmos, he is in no danger of falling off the edge of the world into chaos and darkness.

The principal question which Hume explores in the *Dialogues* is the cogency of the Design Argument. This question recurs throughout the work, and clearly Hume regards it as the only argument for the existence of God that is worthy of debate. He assigns Cleanthes the task of formulating and defending the argument; and Cleanthes resolutely maintains that the evident design or pattern we discern in the universe not only suggests a first cause, but requires that there be

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an artificer, whom he would identify with God. By the 'rules of analogy', he insists, 'we are led to infer' that, since the 'productions of human contrivance' resemble the world, the causes also resemble one another; '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' (pp. 115-16). This argument alone is thought to be capable of proving the existence of the deity, and it likewise establishes that He is possessed of intelligence.

This argument was the crown of eighteenth century Natural Religion, a triumph of the Age of Reason. Its attractiveness for Hume lay chiefly in its empiricism, for it starts with the data of the world around us and moves from them to their supposed cause. But Hume saw many difficulties with this. In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,*[7] he restricts his critique chiefly to two problems: (1) supposing that the analogy from human artifacts obtains in the case of that unique effect which is the universe as a whole; and (2) ascribing to a cause more than is warranted in virtue of the effect. This critique has the added advantage, in Hume's view, of preserving the autonomy of ethics from religion; and his 'friend', playing Epicurus, calls attention to the uselessness of knowing that the world has a cause since this knowledge provides us with no new principles of conduct and behaviour.[8]

In the *Dialogues,* however, Hume explores the Design Argument in considerably more detail. He allows Cleanthes to extend the argument beyond the inference of a cause of the universe to specify that the cause is a single intelligent artificer. But he likewise broadens his critique. Through Philo, Hume points out the impossibility of our ever getting such an overview of the entire cosmos as would justify our making a pronouncement about the universe as a whole: the totality of the world is beyond our experience. To this, Hume's anti-hero adds the classical difficulty of the Design Argument—that the world evinces 'many inexplicable difficulties', and the presence of evil in the world argues, at least, against the benevolence of its creator. Philo also questions the legitimacy of alleging that a single designer is responsible for the whole of the world.

But the most telling attack which Philo levels is his claim that pushing everything back to a designer who is outside the world, and therefore outside our experience, is uneconomical. Moreover, ascribing the cause of the universe to something we cannot know has ill effects: 'When you go one step beyond the mundane system', Philo tells Cleanthes, 'you only excite an inquisitive humour, which it is impossible ever to satisfy' (p. 135). Yet this is chiefly how the revealed religions, of which the *Natural History* would document the instances,

[7] Section XI, pp. 230 ff. in *Hume on Religion.*
[8] *Hume on Religion,* pp. 239-40.

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have been able to exercise their control over men. They appeal to some special revelation which reduces what Wordsworth, who flirted with the pantheism which Philo's position might engender, called 'the burthen of the mystery, the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world'.

In the end, Philo accepts a very limited proposition couched in the familiar eighteenth century language of probability: 'That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence'. Philo goes on to underscore both the limits of its meaning and the caution with which he affirms it. It is scarcely to be presumed that Hume was himself convinced, though he would not dogmatically refute the argument. At any rate, he knew that men do not believe in God because of this argument, but find in it, rather, something of a confirmation of their belief.[9]

Moving the onus onto the believer

Throughout the *Natural History* Hume manages to undercut his supposed acceptance of the Argument from Design, without making his dissatisfaction with it explicit and thereby detracting from his attack on the hypocrisy and superstition of revealed religion. As in the *Dialogues* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,* Hume sees life as an 'enigma' and a 'riddle'; and he thinks that human reason is too frail to provide us with sufficient knowledge to render life intelligible. Given this situation, he sees some advantage in accepting the idea of a 'sovereign author [giving evidence of himself] in the more obvious works of nature' (p. 96). At least this is better than the superstition of the vulgar masses, who run to revealed religion for comfort in the face of life's ambiguities and the 'contrarieties of nature'.

As in the *Dialogues*, however, this acceptance must be distinctly qualified. Hume accomplishes this by weaving a subtle scepticism about the cogency of the Design Argument throughout the work. 'No wonder', he concludes after describing man's sorry plight, 'that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence' (p. 41).

Elsewhere, Hume anticipates both Feuerbach's charge that God is but a projection of man's imagination and Shelley's intuition of an awesome 'unseen power' atop Mount Blanc or riding the West Wind: 'However strong men's propensity to believe invisible, intelligent power in nature, their propensity is equally strong to rest their attention on sensible, visible objects; and in order to reconcile these opposite inclinations, they are led to unite the invisible power with some visible object' (p. 51). Hume's 'most inquisitive, contemplative,

[9]*See Natural History*, pp. 55-56. .

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and religious man' must ask himself in the light of this, whether he has not made God in his own image and likeness.

The better still to undercut any facile belief in a designing deity, Hume underlines the discrepancy between the image of the divine craftsman as drawn by philosophy and the actual images which appear in the 'popular religions of the world' (p. 97)—images which regularly reduce the deity to something quite inferior to man himself. Hume assumes the pose of the *naïf* in the face of this phenomenon, feigning great puzzlement at the 'doubt, uncertainty, [and] suspense of judgment' which attend even the 'most accurate scrutiny' (p. 98). Rather than ushering in a polemic against belief, then, Hume contents himself with the measure of delight to be found in an 'escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy'.

Like Stoppard's recent drama, Hume's writings on religion take us along on an excursion into these regions and delight us by exploring the philosophical terrain with a sense of humour. We are programmed to arrive at that 'consequent scepticism'[10] that results from exploring the possibilities of knowledge and discovering our limitations. This scepticism Hume employs in a manner reminiscent of Pope's mock-heroic verse, which deflates human pride and cheerfully accepts human limitation. Such a journey can bring us to a post-critical naïvete—but only if we travel through the problems we have with faith and knowledge, neither skirting them nor magnifying their importance. On this score, Hume quotes Bacon to advantage: 'A little philosophy . . . makes men atheists: A great deal reconciles them to religion'.[11]

If, after giving Hume a fair reading, we would still believe in God, we are at least better equipped to know what our belief entails. Hume provokes the believer to clarify what it means to believe and points out the need men have both for revelation and for some means of judging various claims, as Locke had insisted before him, which men adduce for the divinity of their revelation. A 'well-disposed mind', says Philo, 'will feel . . . a longing desire and expectation, that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate [man's] profound ignorance, by affording some particular revelation to mankind' (p. 204).

At this point, however, the Christian parts company with a man who honestly could not see his way to bear the onus he had discovered to be the believer's. The Christian faith is richer in so far as it has faced squarely the difficulties he has met. His becomes, in the terminology of William James, a 'twice-born' religion in as much as a slick, easy, 'healthy-minded' faith withers under a critical eye; and whatever replaces it is born in a fire. As Hume himself framed it, perhaps with Stoppard-like self-satisfaction, 'To be a philosophical

[10]See *Enquiry*, XII.
[11]*Natural History*, p. 56. I have regularised italics.

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Sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian' (p. 204). The calm, obscure regions of philosophy do not induce belief, but they can help to purify it. For the most part, however, they provide us with a pleasant diversion, engaging our imagination as well as our reason. In this these calm, obscure regions betray their remarkable similarity to the poetry of the neo-classical period—and suggest certain affinities with a current drama which makes a sport of exploring a territory that David Hume discovered more than two centuries ago.

Someone you know would find one of the articles in this issue interesting (perhaps more than one).

Drop us a card, giving us the name and address, and we will send a free copy.

A number of our readers in Britain have asked where they can get hold of *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutierrez, which was reviewed last month by Páraic Réamonn ('Liberating Theology: Gustavo Gutierrez').

The answer is that it has not yet become available in bookshops in this country but can be obtained from the Catholic Institute for International Relations (C.I.I.R.), 41 Holland Park, London, W.11, for £2 plus 20p for package and postage.

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