

# God, Hume and Natural Belief

J. C. A. Gaskin

plerique, quod maxime veri simile est et quo  
omnes duce natura venimus, deos esse dixerunt.

Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I.1

Hume's doctrine of natural belief allows that certain beliefs are justifiably held by all men without regard to the quality of the evidence which may be produced in their favour. Examples are belief in an external world and belief in the veracity of our senses. According to R. J. Butler,<sup>1</sup> Hume argues in the *Dialogues*<sup>2</sup> that belief in God is of this sort. More recently John Hick<sup>3</sup> has argued that for some people it is as natural (and as rational) to believe in God as to believe in an external world. I shall first inquire what Hume understands by reasonable belief and by natural belief. I shall then use the results of this investigation to argue, against Butler, that belief in God is *not* a natural belief; and against Hick, more briefly, that his thesis is not viable in as far as it depends upon Hume's doctrine of natural belief. These discussions are important to the philosophy of religion since by means of natural beliefs it could be urged that belief in God is something justifiable without reference to reason or evidence: a position which would be of immense value to the theist.

<sup>1</sup> R. J. Butler, 'Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume' in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1960, pp. 73–100. This brilliant and important article has received much less attention than it merits from anthology-makers and critics. The argument which I refer to as 'Butler's thesis' forms only a part of this long article. With much of the rest I am in warm agreement.

<sup>2</sup> References to Hume's writings will be given by means of abbreviations followed by page numbers. The following abbreviations are used: *Dialogues* for the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (2nd ed. London, 1947); *Enquiry* for the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. C. W. Hendel (New York, 1955); *Letters* for *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Gregg, two vols. (Oxford, 1932); *N.H.R.*, for *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (London, 1956); *Treatise* for *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888); *Abstract* for *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge, 1938) and *Letter* for *A Letter from a Gentleman*, ed. E. C. Mossner and J. V. Price (Edinburgh, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> John Hick, 'A New Form of Theistic Argument' in *Proceedings of the XIV International Congress of Philosophy*, vol. V, pp. 336–341 (Vienna, 1970).

## Reasonable Belief

Hume's remarks on belief are scattered throughout his philosophical writings, but major clusters of them occur in *Treatise* 94–106, *Treatise* 628–629 (the *Appendix*) and *Enquiry* 61–68. A passage from the *Treatise* (which he repeats verbatim in the *Enquiry*) contains the main outline of his theory:

... 'tis evident, that belief consists not in the nature and order of our ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind. I confess, that 'tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is *belief*, which is a term that every one sufficiently understands in common life.<sup>4</sup> And in philosophy we can go no farther, than assert, that it is some thing *felt* by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgement from the fictions of the imagination. It gives them more force and influence; makes them appear of greater importance; infixes them in the mind; and renders them the governing principles of all our actions (*Treatise*, 629; *Enquiry*, 63).

And again:

It follows, therefore, that the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure (*Enquiry*, 61).

It is axiomatic for Hume that while I may *imagine* what I please, I cannot *believe* something at will:

We can, in our conception, join the head of a man to the body of a horse, but it is not in our power to believe that such an animal has ever really existed (*Enquiry*, 61).

In his account of belief Hume thus adopts a position characterized by the following points: (i) The word 'belief' signifies an attitude to or feeling about what is believed. This attitude or feeling can be recognized (introspectively) but is difficult to characterize further. (ii) The belief-feeling or attitude influences action. (iii) The belief-feeling or attitude cannot be commanded at will.

Leaving aside most of the usual criticisms of this position, it remains clear that there are problems in it for anyone wishing to distinguish

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that in some chapters devoted to attacking Hume's account of belief, Thomas Reid comes to an almost identical conclusion concerning its indefinability: 'In like manner, every man that has any belief—and he must be a curiosity that has none—knows perfectly what belief is, but can never define or explain it' (*Inquiry into the Human Mind*, Ch. II, sect. V).

between *reasonable* beliefs on the one hand and *irrational* or *unreasonable* beliefs on the other. (I shall frequently use the term 'non-rational' in order to avoid sub-distinctions of the non-rational implied by the words 'irrational' and 'unreasonable'.)

*Problem A.* If believing *p* consists in having a belief-feeling for *p*, this belief-feeling will presumably be the same whether the belief is reasonable or non-rational. How then should reasonable and non-rational beliefs be distinguished?

*Problem B.* If belief is some attitude which cannot be given or withheld at will, 'Hume seems to be leaving no room for the possibilities either of legitimately criticizing people for holding irrational beliefs, or of altering our own beliefs or those of others with the help of argument' (Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, p. 98).

Some of the teeth of problem A can be drawn by admitting that for the believer there is *no* difference between the belief-feeling for a reasonable belief and the belief-feeling for a non-rational one. Both are his beliefs and their rationality depends upon something other than the manner in which they are entertained. Upon what does it depend? Hume does not say, but he does not *prevent* us from saying (unoriginally) that the rationality of a belief depends (i) upon the person's ability to justify his belief that *p* (the justification involving the production of reasons or evidence that *p* is the case, or the pleading of successful action undertaken on the presumption that *p* is the case) and (ii) upon the person's ability to *modify* the belief-feeling for *p* in the face of fresh evidence. But according to problem B this modification is just what the believer cannot undertake at will. Now there is no doubt that Hume, like everyone else, does wish to distinguish between reasonable and non-rational beliefs, 'weaning our mind from all those prejudices which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion' (*Enquiry*, 159). What account then can be given, within Hume's theory of belief, of a reasonable man altering his beliefs in the light of fresh evidence?

Consider an example: if I truly announce 'I believe I shall be killed if I enter an aeroplane', then Hume is *right* in saying I cannot at will abandon my belief-feeling about this proposition. The belief stole in on me over a longish period, unnoticed and unreasoned, and I cannot shake it off when it suits me to do so. Nor can I decide to adopt a belief (say, belief in God) in the way in which I could, presumably, decide to *think* about the existence of God. But what can happen (and this is the part of the story which Hume does not specifically mention although what he says allows for it) is that various considerations such as accident statistics can be put before me which might be expected to result in a modification of my belief about the danger of flying. I do not at this stage *decide* to change my belief-feeling, but I attend to the evidence which tells against what I believe and if my belief satisfies the conditions for what is called

'reasonable' belief, my belief-feeling will be found to alter. This situation is exactly paralleled in Hume's account of ethical disputes. If I say 'X is wrong' and you say 'X is right' this means that I approve of X and you disapprove. I cannot decide to change my approval, but on hearing and agreeing with your account of the misery produced by X, my feeling of approval may wear off and become one of disapproval *provided* that my ethical view is reasonably based. (See, for example, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hendel's edition, p. 13.)

Likewise my belief-feeling cannot be changed at will but if it has as its object a reasonable belief it can change as a result of my attention to and assessment of the evidence. There are of course numerous well-tryed methods of preventing modification of the belief-feeling—e.g. by giving attention to a partial selection of evidence or by 'forgetting' that one's reasons for the belief are insufficient—but these do not alter the general case that with reasonable belief the belief-feeling occurs or fails to occur or is modified, as the involuntary accompaniment of an honest assessment of the evidence. If we wish to call this assessment 'deciding to believe' (or 'deciding not to believe') this would probably be in conformity with ordinary usage, but it would also, according to Hume, muddle an important distinction between the evidence which I can review at will and the belief-feeling which I cannot.

There are however a number of beliefs, according to Hume, which are *not* the resultant of a conscious rational assessment of evidence and which are *not* upset by such an assessment except in brief moments of 'philosophical melancholy and delirium' (*Treatise*, 269).

It seems evident that men are carried by a natural instinct or prepossession to repose faith in their senses, and that without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe which depends not on our perception but would exist though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated (*Enquiry*, 160).

They are, as he says, 'a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or prevent' (*Enquiry*, 60). Nevertheless one does not wish to call these beliefs either irrational or unreasonable although they may be non-rational. They belong to the class of beliefs which Hume sometimes speaks of as 'natural instincts'—'it being to Hume's eternal merit to have suggested the existence of such a class' (Butler, p. 74; see note 1). With Butler I shall normally refer to them as 'natural beliefs': the phrase is not in fact used by Hume but is entirely consistent with his usages.

In summary: there are, according to Hume, two types of belief: (i) Those in which thinking and assessing influence the belief-feeling. These are reasonable beliefs. (ii) Those in which thinking and assessing do not

influence the belief-feeling. These are non-rational beliefs. Among non-rational beliefs, some, called natural beliefs, are in some way justifiable. The rest are in a straightforward way irrational or unreasonable. Two questions now occur: which beliefs are to count as natural beliefs and what characteristics do they have which make them natural beliefs rather than irrational or unreasonable beliefs?

### Natural Belief

Hume distinguishes at least three 'species of natural instincts' or 'natural beliefs':

(1) Belief in the continuous existence of an external world independent of our perception of that world (*Enquiry*, 160, etc.).

(2) Belief that the regularities which have occurred in our experience form a reliable guide to those which will occur (many locations).

(3) Belief in the reliability of our senses qualified to take account of acknowledged and isolatable areas of deception and confusion (many locations). Butler would add a fourth belief: belief in an orderly universe stemming from an agent designer commonly called God. I do not think this belief is a natural belief nor that Hume regarded it as one, but these points will be discussed later. Now what is it that makes these beliefs natural beliefs in Hume's sense?

According to Butler (p. 78) 'Hume indicates that natural beliefs are non-rational, that they have a certain degree of force, and that they are unavoidable'. In the subsequent discussion he points out that the first of these considerations does not separate natural beliefs from irrational beliefs while the second is not a distinguishing mark because according to Hume it is a characteristic of all beliefs. The third on the other hand is one which Hume never abandons although he might be forced into the position of admitting that not all natural beliefs are true. Unfortunately Butler does not explain in what sense natural beliefs are unavoidable, nor, it appears to me, does he state all their characteristics. This I shall now try to do.

If we examine Hume's list of natural beliefs and what he has to say about them we find that they have four distinctive characteristics, namely:

*First*, they are beliefs of naïve common sense. Hume would argue that philosophical conclusions must therefore keep close to them: 'philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflection of common life, methodized and corrected' (*Enquiry*, 170; see also *Dialogues*, 134).

*Secondly*, if their rational basis is probed very closely—as Hume probes it—then, according to Hume, if one takes a certain strong sense of the word 'rational' there is no rational justification for holding them: they

are non-rational but not irrational or unreasonable beliefs (*Enquiry*, 162, etc.).

*Thirdly*, neither the excessively sceptical philosopher, nor anyone else, can *act* in the world unless he has these beliefs of naïve common sense. This is the vital point which makes these 'unavoidable'. Hume is very emphatic about it in more than one of his works:

Here I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life (*Treatise*, 269; see also *Treatise* 183, 184, 187, 193, 197, 213, 216, 273, etc.).

The same point is made in the *Enquiry* with the conciseness usually displayed in the later work:

Nature is always too strong for principle . . . [And Pyrrhonian scepticism] can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must *act and reason and believe*, though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundations of these operations or to remove the objections which may be raised against them (*Enquiry*, 168–9; see also *Letter*, 19).

Significantly this same point is brought out very forcibly by Philo at the beginning of the *Dialogues* and is never controverted by any other speaker: 'To whatever length any one may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing' (*Dialogues*, 134). If, in a moment of 'philosophical melancholy and delirium', one loses these beliefs then one can only remain in a state of paralysed non-communication with the world, 'utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty' (*Treatise*, 269).

*Fourthly* (this is a consequence of the third), these beliefs are universally, if inarticulately, held. For example, *everyone* acts as if there were an independent, continuous physical world.

In short, natural beliefs are beliefs of naïve common sense. They are non-rational but necessary as a pre-condition of action, and they are universally held. Which of these criteria distinguish natural beliefs from irrational or unreasonable beliefs?

(i) As with irrational beliefs there is inability to produce good evidence that the belief is true. *But*, unlike irrational beliefs, there is no evidence which makes it more reasonable to adopt any alternative set of beliefs. The sceptical criticism of natural beliefs establishes no others in their place (*Enquiry*, Sec. XII).

(ii) Unlike irrational beliefs there *is* justification for acting as if they are true. The justification is the discovery that there is no other course

open to us. If we do not act as if these beliefs are true, we do not act at all. As Hume remarks in the *Abstract* ‘... upon the whole (our Author) concludes, that we assent to our faculties and employ our reason only because we cannot help it’ (p. 24).

Thus a natural belief is in a certain sense ‘non-rational’ but it is *not* irrational or unreasonable and it *does* have the very important practical justification that things ‘work out well’ if I have the belief and *cannot work out* if I do not have the belief.

### Belief in God: Butler’s Argument

Professor Butler’s thesis (see note 1) is that since Hume speaks in several of his works as if the existence of God could never be doubted, since the question in the *Dialogues* concerns God’s attributes and not his existence, and since each of the participants in the *Dialogues* appears to assent to belief in God as something natural and unavoidable, then this belief *is* a natural belief in Hume’s sense. Philo’s criticism of the argument from design ‘should be viewed as an attempt, not to deny that God exists, but to break down Cleanthes’ initial opinion that theological beliefs may find rational support in the recognition of evidence’ (Butler, p. 87). Up to and including *Dialogue XI* Hume’s argument takes the form: no evidence either *a priori* or *a posteriori* justifies belief in God, ‘but we commonly act in accordance with belief in design. Therefore belief in design must be a natural rather than a rational belief’ (p. 88). In the final section of the *Dialogues XII* Philo explains just how little this natural belief involves. It amounts only to acknowledging ‘the fact of design’ which is unavoidably impressed upon us by ‘our belief in an ultimate principle of order in the universe, and this belief, like our belief in causation, is unavoidable: nobody behaves as if the universe were ultimately a chaos!’ (p. 98). Belief in design is equivalent to belief in a designer, and this belief ‘would make no sense if God lacked intelligence; ... But nothing can be said *about* God’s intelligence as contrasted with man’s’ (p. 90).

Professor Butler’s thesis, to which my précis does scant justice, has striking merits. It makes Hume’s theory of belief and his account of religious belief into a connected whole. It makes Philo’s apparent confession of faith in section XII of the *Dialogues* into a comprehensible development of his own argument instead of something apparently at variance with his earlier utterances. It makes Hume’s repeated assertions<sup>5</sup> that there is a God into honest reports of his belief rather than asides

<sup>5</sup> For example: *Enquiry*, 145; *N.H.R.*, 22; essay ‘The Platonist’ (1742); *Dialogues*, 214; *Treatise*, 633.



calculated to allay criticism of his atheism. But these advantages of interpretation also attach to a quite different understanding of Hume's thought. In contrast to Butler I shall now argue that:

- (1) Belief in God does not satisfy all the criteria for a natural belief in Hume's technical sense of that term.
- (2) Hume knows that it does not satisfy the criteria and Philo admits by implication that it does not and yet both assent to the existence of God in the highly attenuated sense explained by Philo at the end of the *Dialogues*. This assent is therefore to a reasonable belief and not to a natural belief.
- (3) This rational assent is given to a proposition so limited that it is religiously insignificant.

Examined under the criteria for a natural belief, belief in God fails at least two of the four tests. In the *first* place, is belief in God a belief of naïve common sense? This criterion is the most difficult to apply because of vagueness about what counts as common sense, but belief in God would seem to be inculcated by education or cultural background, i.e. by factors which could be absent, rather than by factors present in the experience of all men as such. It is in this respect not like belief in an external world which is the untaught assumption of every sane man. *Secondly*, is it the case that belief in God lacks rational foundation? Without begging the question of a very large area of philosophy no general answer can be given and even Hume's answer is, at first sight, equivocal. He seems to say in different places that theological reasoning is 'too sublime for our understanding', or 'sophistry' and that the Christian religion is founded on faith not on reason and that every reasonable man will believe in God. These positions are, I think, compatible, but for the moment their complexity forestalls an answer to the question 'does Hume think that belief in God is reasonable?' *Thirdly*, is belief in God unavoidable in the crucial sense (which Butler does not point out) that no one can *act* in the world if he lacks this belief? Surely not. Only too clearly men can and do live in a coherent and successful manner without belief in God. In some rather deep sense they may not live as satisfactorily as those who have the belief but they *can* function in the world and in society without it or any form of it. The *fourth* criterion of a natural belief is that it is universally held. Hume sometimes speaks as though a shadowy form of belief in God were almost universal but he is careful not to commit himself:

The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exception, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas, which it had suggested (*N.H.R.*, 21).



Hume's caution is amply justified by the atheistical philosophies of the modern world: whatever might once have been the case it is no longer true that all men believe in a God. Thus the first criterion is indecisive, the second cannot be applied as yet, but the third and fourth tests rule out belief in God as a natural belief. What is more, Hume knows that belief in God does not satisfy all the criteria for a natural belief and Philo admits by implication that it does not.

In the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes, Philo's opponent, does indeed express himself in a manner which suggests that belief in God, via the argument from design, could be a natural belief: '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 a force like that of sensation' (*Dialogues*, 154). But this part of Cleanthes' case is not endorsed by Philo, and in a letter, unequivocally in his own person, Hume admits that he cannot establish via the argument from design that belief in God is unavoidably forced upon us like belief in our senses:

The Propensity of the Mind towards it [the argument from design], unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Senses & Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem'd a suspicious Foundation. 'Tis here I wish for your Assistance. We must endeavour to prove that this Propensity is somewhat different from our Inclination to find our own Figures in the Clouds, our Face in the Moon, our Passions & Sentiments even in inanimate Matter. Such an Inclination may, & ought to be control'd, & can never be a legitimate Ground of Assent (*Letters*, vol. I, 155).

The most straightforward reading of the conditional 'unless that Propensity were as strong and universal as that to believe in our Senses and Experience' would suggest that Hume thinks the condition is not satisfied. This reading is confirmed elsewhere. In the *Natural History of Religion* he comes close to speaking of belief in God as a natural belief but shies off it: 'The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, is at least a general attendant of human nature' (*N.H.R.*, 75). In the 'Author's Introduction' to the same work he had already admitted that belief in God is not universal and is not an original instinct:

Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of Religion, if travellers and historians may be credited; . . . It would appear, therefore, that this preconception springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature (*N.H.R.*, 21).

Elsewhere (but notably in the *Enquiry*) Hume maintains that it is a mistake to try to establish religion (but he does not say belief in God) upon good reasons and arguments (see, for example, *Enquiry*, 140 and 145). Thus

he appears to conclude that belief in God is not an original instinct; that it is not universal; that it does not 'flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation' and that religion *in general* cannot be established by reason.

The difficulty with the last item in this summary of his views is that in several of his writings he affirms belief in a deity by way of the argument from design: 'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author' (*N.H.R.*, 21). At the end of the *Dialogues* Philo also affirms his reasoned belief in a divine Being:

No one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature. A purpose, an intention or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker (*Dialogues*, 214, see also 202).

This too is puzzling, particularly the phrase 'as he discovers himself to reason' since the whole burden of Philo's argument appears to have been that he does not discover himself to reason. But this crucial phrase is repeated by Philo three pages later: 'Here then the existence of a Deity is plainly ascertained by *reason*' (my italics). If we adopt Kemp Smith's as yet uncontroverted argument<sup>6</sup> that Philo very largely speaks for Hume in the *Dialogues*, it might appear that Hume is here admitting that belief in God, like belief in an external world, survives the destruction of its supporting arguments: his continued use of the word 'reason' being merely perverse and confusing. He should have used the phrase 'natural instinct'. This is not so. In the first place, Philo has already asserted in his discussion with Cleanthes concerning scepticism that 'If we distrust human reason, we have now no other principle to lead us into religion' (*Dialogues*, 193). This assertion is never disputed by Cleanthes despite his attempt to argue the fact of design as something unavoidably obvious. It is surely as clear a warning as could be given by Philo that it is not part of his programme to allow that belief in God is a natural belief or 'original instinct', i.e. one which must survive after the philosophical arguments collapse because it is a universal requirement for living in the world.<sup>7</sup> In the second place, as Kemp Smith and Butler both point

<sup>6</sup> *Dialogues*, N. Kemp Smith's edition, pp. 57–75 and 97–123. Kemp Smith's evidence still seems decisive. It has been partially challenged by J. Noxon in 'Hume's Agnosticism' in *The Philosophical Review*, 1964, but his evidence is largely self-stultifying and his conclusion is rather a guess about Hume's psychology than a statement about the extent to which Philo represents Hume's opinions.

<sup>7</sup> Even Demea's profession 'that each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast' (*Dialogues*, 193) does not claim for belief in God the *universality* and *unavoidability* which would be required to make it a natural belief.

out, Philo's profession of belief, qualified as it is by the phrase 'as he discovers himself to reason', amounts to exceedingly little. Just how little is emphasized by Hume in an addition to the text dating from 1776 (the year of his death). The paragraph is given to Philo and is the last in the book:

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; . . . what can [a man] do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs (*Dialogues*, 227).

I would thus argue that Philo does *not* concede that belief in design (as Butler maintains) 'must be a natural rather than a rational belief'. Instead he concedes that belief in a designer is a *rational* belief: one to which the mind has a strong propensity but which is 'somewhat ambiguous', probable rather than certain, incapable of rational development or extension, dependent upon an imperfect and very limited analogy, and which commits the believer neither to action nor forbearance from action. This is the substance of the existential assent to belief in God which is found so frequently in Hume's writings and which Philo reserves for himself despite his arguments. As Hume says in an early letter: he has an objection 'to every thing we commonly call Religion, except the Practice of Morality, & the Assent of the Understanding to the Proposition *that God exists*' (*New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Klibansky and Mossner, Oxford, 1954, p. 13). This assent of the understanding is minimal in commitment and it leaves Hume free to argue (in the *Enquiry* and elsewhere) that theological argument and speculation contain nothing but 'sophistry and illusion', that the social and historical manifestations of religion have been mostly bad,<sup>8</sup> and that belief in the Christian religion is the irrational consequence of an arbitrary 'miracle' of faith 'which subverts all the principles of the understanding' (*Enquiry*, 140–141) somewhat in the manner of the Calvinist doctrine of grace.

<sup>8</sup> Note particularly *Dialogues*, 223–226; much of *N.H.R.*; the essays 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' and 'Of National Characters' (the long note on the clergy); the unpublished preface to vol. II of the *History of England* reproduced by Mossner in his *Life of David Hume*, p. 307, and the *History of England* itself, much of which consists in a recital of the ill effects of religion on politics and society particularly under the Tudors and Stuarts.

It is this assent of the understanding to the very limited proposition 'there is a god' (the capital letter does not seem warranted any longer), together with the 'propensity' of the mind to give the assent when it contemplates the orderliness of nature, which might suggest that Hume considers belief in god a natural belief. But it is not. The assent is not universal and it does not even influence action, let alone form a prerequisite of action. In this respect Butler is mistaken when he argues that our belief in an ultimate principle of order in the universe is unavoidable: 'nobody behaves as if the universe were *ultimately* a chaos'. I do not behave as if *ultimately* the universe were one way or the other. My behaviour is not regulated by whether I infer an ultimate principle of order or of chaos. But my intellectual assent might be given to the probability of the former and I might name this principle of order 'god'. But use of this word is religiously neutral. Assent to the existence of god in this sense carries no duties, invites no action, allows no inferences, and involves no devotion. It is, as Hume argues through Philo in *Dialogue* XII, and as Lysicles the sceptic in Berkeley's *Alciphron* had argued in strikingly similar terms,<sup>9</sup> a proposition so hedged by doubts, restrictions and ambiguities that by suitable prompting both the religious man and the speculative atheist can be brought to give their assent to it. But the assent is *not* to a natural belief.

### Belief in God: Hick's Argument

In a paper given in Vienna in 1968 (see note 3) Professor Hick employs Hume's doctrine of natural belief in part of his argument towards the conclusion that 'theistic belief may be a rational belief in the sense that it may be the reasonable and well grounded belief of a rational person, arising out of his own compelling religious experience'. With this conclusion I am not in disagreement, but I do not think Hume's doctrine can be used to support it.

Hick first points out that belief in an external world is a natural belief in Hume's sense. He then asks what features this belief has. His answer is 'the givenness or the involuntary character' and 'the fact that we can act successfully in terms of our belief in an external world'. These features he also finds to be present in the case of 'the religious experience of

<sup>9</sup> In *Alciphron* IV, 16–17, the sceptic Lysicles argues 'you must know then that at bottom the being of God is a point in itself of small consequence, and a man may make this concession without yielding much. The great point is what sense the word *God* is to be taken in'. He concludes 'Since, therefore, nothing can be inferred from such an account of God, about conscience, or worship, or religion, you may even make the best of it. And, not to be singular, we will use the name too, and so at once there is an end of atheism'.

“living in God’s presence”’. Thus he has warrant to conclude that the experience of God (or perhaps the belief arising from that experience) is a natural belief, as natural and reasonable for those who have it as belief in an external world is for everyone. What he actually says is that for some ‘their “experience of God” was so vivid as to make it as natural for them to live in terms of the divine presence as to live in terms of their physical environment’.

In the light of the earlier parts of this article my disagreements with Hick’s argument may be stated briefly.

(a) Our belief in an external physical world is not something ‘in terms of which we can act *successfully*’. It is something, at least according to Hume, in the absence of which we could not act at all, successfully or otherwise. In its absence we might indeed be accounted insane (Hick’s point) but our insanity would take the particular form of being ‘utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty’ (Hume’s point). But belief in the presence of God is different. Absence of this belief is neither going to make us appear insane to the rest of mankind, nor, more importantly, is it going to reduce us to total inactivity. The religious man *could* lose his religious belief and still carry on some sort of activity in the world, but he could *not* carry on at all, according to Hume, if he had lost his belief in an external physical world.

(b) For Hume either the belief must be universal (a corollary of being unavoidable) or it is not a natural belief at all. Belief in an external world is universal. Belief in the presence of God is not. This is a difference which Hick does not make clear and which breaks down any attempt to give a religious belief the status of a natural belief in Hume’s sense of that term.

(c) If Hick wishes to argue that a certain religious belief is, in some sense, as natural and reasonable for some people as belief in an external world is for everyone, he cannot do so by allying his argument with Hume’s doctrine of natural belief. In Hume’s doctrine a belief cannot *be* a natural belief if it is ‘natural’ for some people while not for others: hence, in part, Hume’s own rejection of belief in God as a natural belief—a rejection which cannot be revised by Professor Hick if he sticks to Hume’s sense of the term ‘natural’.

I have argued that from what Hume says about natural belief it is impossible to agree with either Butler’s thesis that belief in God is a natural belief or with his contention that Hume regards it as such. From Hume’s repeated affirmations of the existence of a deity, together with Philo’s assent to a very restricted sense of the proposition ‘there is a god’, I conclude that Hume regards belief in a god as reasonable and that he thinks this reasonableness is recognized by most men when they survey the orderliness of nature. But this reasonable belief amounts to

so very little that the theist and the atheist can agree about it. The belief is religiously insignificant and leaves Hume free (a) to criticize and condemn religion 'as it has commonly been found in the world'; (b) to dismiss theological argument because it is 'beyond our understanding' and (c) to attribute belief in a particular revelation to an irrational faith which he sarcastically refers to as a miracle. It is failure to notice the genuineness of Hume's rational assent to the existence of god which has made it appear as if his assent is insincere, or inconsistent with his critique of religion, or the expression of a natural belief. It is none of these; but neither is it of any advantage to the religious apologist.

In short, belief in God does not transcend all evidence and survive all criticisms. If it does, it survives as an irrational or unreasonable belief, not as a belief justified because no man can act in the world without it.<sup>10</sup>

Trinity College, Dublin

<sup>10</sup> The ancestor of this article was a paper read in 1968 at a meeting of the Irish Philosophical Club at Ballymascanlon. I am indebted to the company on that occasion for their comments. More recently I am grateful to David Berman, my colleague in Trinity College, for his very useful suggestions and corrections and for his careful scrutiny of the final draft.