

A Threat Then and Now: Hume, Moral Psychology, and Religion's Moral Failings

Myisha Cherry

Introduction

An empiricist and skeptic, David Hume challenged the reliability of religious testimony, miracles, and evidence for the existence of God on empirical grounds. However, Hume's hostility towards religion is on moral grounds. For Hume, religion has moral failings and is thus a threat to morality. His moral arguments against religion take up a large part of Part XII of *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *A Natural History of Religion* although some criticisms of religion are scattered throughout *The Treatise*, *Enquiries*, *On The Immortality of the Soul*, and in other works.

Some philosophers have criticized Hume for his view that religion is a threat to morality. Joseph Ellin questions Hume's grasp of religion and claims that Hume fails to consider religion's contribution to morality. As a result, Ellin suggests that Hume "falls short of a balanced or fair accounting."¹ Edward Craig supports this view by stating that for Hume, "when it comes to the possible good effects of religious belief ... [Hume] appears to have a blind spot."² Ellin believes that if Hume's criticism of religion is about the origins of religion that does not mean that religion cannot outgrow his criticisms. A religious defender may claim that a perverted religion caused historical religious violence but not humane religion. They may even concede to the point that Hume's criticism of religion was for a certain type of religion at a certain time but they may argue that the problems Hume finds with religion

¹ Ellin, Joseph (1989). Streminger: "Religion a Threat to Morality". *Hume Studies* 15 (2): 295-300

² *Ibid.*, 297

are not ever-present. Similarly, William Davie notes that Hume may have had contact with a few religious folks who left a bad taste in his mouth and his observations led him to conclude that religion was "a cancer destroying moral fiber."³ However, his acquaintance with the few should not be a judgment of the whole. He adds, "times have changed, and religion has retreated from its position of global dominance. Hume's bold pronouncements were true, or true enough, in his own day and age."⁴

In this paper, I challenge Davie's words by supporting the relevance of Hume's claim for today through empirical support. Hume provides several reasons for why religion is a threat to morality. Each reason stands on its own and so in section 1, I will explain one of them; that religion distracts us from morality. For Hume, this distraction is a moral failing and thus contributes to religion being a threat to morality. Heeding the call by Hume that we "hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience... and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation", in section 2, I present recent empirical work in moral psychology to add support to Hume's claim that religion distracts from morality by explaining its effect on the contemporary religious. I also provide responses to the empirical data's analyses and objections. In section 3, I offer up a conceptual analysis of religion that I believe Hume (and the empirical evidence supports) is presenting throughout his work.

My support of Hume is not to suggest that there is nothing good about religion; instead I hope to show that Hume's claim that religion is a threat to morality is empirically and conceptually tenable in our own day and age. The claim that religion distracts us from

³ Davie, William (1999). "Hume on Monkish Virtues". *Hume Studies* 25 (1/2):139-153.

⁴ *Ibid.*,143.

morality makes more sense by understanding Hume's psychological conception of religion. The claim's truth lies in the fact that for Hume, religion is not tied to a certain time period, but lies within human nature itself.

2. Religion Distracts from Morality

In "Religion a Threat to Morality", Gerhard Streminger, provides a systematic account of Hume's view that religion is a threat to morality.

Streminger describes three main negative influences of false religion found in Hume's work. "(1) The clergy has an interest in setting bounds to human knowledge; (2) The God of false religion has no moral authority; and (3) False religion corrupts the natural sentiments and promotes an 'artificial, affected' life."⁵ In what follows, I will elucidate Streminger's third point and show how religion's production of the 'artificial, affected' life distracts from morality. According to Hume, this distraction occurs because religion suppresses the moral sentiments, denies our natural ability to be moral, and prioritizes rites and rituals over morality.

Religion suppresses the moral sentiments. Call this the 'Suppression Claim'. For Hume, believers are not able to accept their doubts about God. "They must then be careful not to form any sentiment of blame and disapprobation. All must be applause, rapture, and admiration."

⁵ Streminger, Gerhard (1989). "Religion a Threat to Morality". *Hume Studies* 15 (2): 279.

extacy.”⁶ Their religion only recommends “passive courage and suffering [and it] subdu[es] the spirit of mankind... fit them for slavery and subjection”.⁷

The moral sentiments of the religious are suppressed when they are encouraged to withhold their moral sentiments from God. We can imagine the implications of this. If the clergy and church stand as representatives of God, then the moral sentiments are not only suppressed toward God but can also be suppressed toward religious authority. Explanations and justifications of God are voiced through religious authority. It is not only the doubts about God that believers are not able to accept but also doubts about what religious authority say about God that they are not able to accept. The believer may suppress their moral sentiments concerning the words and actions of religious authorities as long as they are described as God’s words or God’s ordained actions for religious authority. By withholding moral sentiments, believers are not exercising their moral sentiments but instead are allowing doctrine and dogma (created by religious authorities) to approve and disapprove of things for them. Dogmatism becomes a guide for the religious and not human nature. Dogmatism breeds violence, intolerance, and cruelty of others for only their god and his authorities are right while laypersons as well as other religions are wrong.

Religion also denies our natural tendencies. Call this the ‘Unnatural Claim’. In doing so, it distracts from morality because it denies our natural capacity for morality. It instead gives a negative view of human nature and claims that we need religion to be moral. In different religions, God is always perceived as being greater than humans. This is why human curiosity

⁶ Hume, David. *Natural History Of Religion*. Retrieved from http://social.stoa.usp.br/articles/0016/2535/The_Natural_History_of_Religion_-_David_Hume.pdf. P.32

⁷ Ibid., p.22

leads to religion. God is morally perfect and human beings are morally imperfect. For god or gods to be a god, the divine must have certain qualities that distinguish divinity from humanity. By doing so, we deny ourselves of possessing these qualities and thus form a reliance on the divine in order to embody a fraction of these qualities. Our natures are considered depraved in order to establish the perfection quality of God.

However, Hume believes we are not depraved. In the *Enquiries* he notes that all humankind ``resemble the good principle... we are always inclined, from our natural philanthropy, to give preference to the happiness of society, and consequently to virtue of its opposite.’’⁸ Hume believes before creating rules we must know what our natures are. Religion tells us that our natures are depraved and then gives us rules to follow that require dependence on God in order to know what these rules are or to get the strength to carry them out. But if we are to have rules, I believe Hume will say that we must know that our natures, through sympathy and common fellow-feeling, have already figured the rules out already. Denying our natural tendency for morality distracts from morality because it takes us through steps that are a waste of time. There are no additional steps or necessities required. We have what we need for morality already in our nature. As long as we think we are depraved, we will not only waste time but we will become lazy and excuse-ridden as well as miss out on the immediate resources in our natures to recognize good and work towards morality.

Lastly, religion distracts from morality because rites, rituals, and the selfish desires for eternal rewards make the religious prioritize superstition over morality. Call this the `Selfish Claim'. The Priest in the story of the Good Samaritan is a biblical example of this ritual-over-

⁸ Hume, *Enquiries* p.227

morality prioritizing. It was forbidden for priests to touch a corpse. At the risk of defiling himself and disobeying Jewish law, he decided to pass on the other side upon seeing a man lying in the middle of the road. In doing so, the priest gave up the chance to save and care for someone in need. Hume notes ``Many of the votaries ...will seek the divine favor, not by virtue and good morals... [but by] frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous ecstasies.”⁹ Hume continues by claiming that if a religion was found to be based on morality to gain divine favor, the desire for superstition would make hearing moral sermons the essentials of their religion.”¹⁰ For Hume, religious believers turn to rites, rituals, and ceremonies to gain divine favor even if these practices have no purpose, are violent to our natural inclinations, or are harder than morality. Hume also claims that a focus on ``eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beg[e]t a narrow, contracted selfishness... it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence.”¹¹ The religious abandon the sympathy Hume believes is essential for morality and instead focuses on an eternal god and their eternal reward. There is no common fellow-feeling motivating action nor is there an expression of our natural philanthropy or concern for the happiness of others.

2. Empirical Support

Is Hume's claim that religion distracts from morality only representative of the people he encountered or is it part of religion itself? In the following, I will present recent empirical work in moral psychology to add support to Hume's claim that religion distracts from

⁹ Hume, *NHR* 34

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹¹ Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by Dorothy Coleman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.p. 221-2

morality is as true now as it was for Hume 300 years ago. I will show how each study supports Hume's claims raised in section 1 and answer possible objections.

2.1. Religious Racism

Hall, Max, and Wood (2010)¹² conducted a meta-analytic review to examine the relations between racism and social-cognitive motives for religion in the United States since the Civil Rights Act. They sought to describe and account for the social-cognitive motives that underlie religiosity and racial prejudice or tolerance. Hall, Max, and Wood describe social-cognitive motives for religion as group identification and the values of social conformity and respect for tradition.

Similar to other group identity beliefs, religious people are likely to respond to others depending on whether the other is part of the in-group or the out-group. Religious groups also tend to sharply differentiate between themselves and non-believers, themselves and similar religious groups that have different doctrinal stances, as well as other religions. Religions also tend to be practiced within race. This makes the Us versus Them mentality of the religious to be delineated not only along religious lines, but also along racial lines. Those who are considered different tend to be viewed as holding different values and therefore are less trusted as well in competition with the in-group. These factors can promote prejudices.¹³

¹² Hall, D., Matz, D. C., & Wood, W. (2010). "Why don't we practice what we preach? Social-cognitive motives behind religious racism". *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14, 126-139

¹³ See Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan. "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust Is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice." In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2011, Vol. 101, No. 6, 1189–1206.

Since religion seeks to explain and justify norms, it encourages acceptance of the social order. Studies show that the religious show a greater respect for tradition and conformity to others' expectations and norms.¹⁴ Fundamentalism, for example, is an orientation that is rooted in values of conformity and tradition. It is a religious orientation that reflects unquestioning certainty in religious truth. This rigid and dogmatic cognitive style may account for one of the links between religious fundamentalism and prejudice.

It may be that if religion preaches love and acceptance, it will be impossible for religion to be linked to the prejudice of other groups. However, humanitarian motivations are usually expressed toward the in-group members. This motivation endorses benevolent values of humanitarianism but not universalism. The former expresses selflessness in relation to close others. The latter expresses concern for the welfare of all people.

Out of 866 reports, Hall, Max, and Wood chose 55 independent studies to review. The reports were found through a search of the primary reference sources in the fields of psychology and religion, using search terms such as religion and spirituality with prejudice, stereotypes, ethnic, Black, etc. The 55 studies contained a total of 22,075 participants.

What Hall, Max, and Wood found was that extrinsic religiosity and fundamentalism were more strongly associated with racism in primarily religious samples. The spiritual or quest sample was more strongly associated with racial tolerance. Greater religious identification and greater religious fundamentalism were all positively related to racism. They concluded that values of social conformity and respect for tradition underlie both religiosity and racism.

¹⁴ See Saroglou, V., Delpierre, V., & Dernelle, R. (2004). Values and religiosity: A meta-analysis of studies using Schwartz's model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 37, 721-734.

The value of social conformity accounts for identification with the similar religious who look like them. The value of respect for tradition accounts for the religious respect for the values that they hold that others may not and the continuation of such practices. But these values also contribute to the exclusion and prejudice of others who appear different from the religious group. Whether religious people are more racially prejudiced depended on the social-cognitive motives underlying religiosity.

Hall, Max, and Wood claim that simply identifying with a religious group establishes an intergroup dynamics of favoring the in-group and even derogating racial out-groups. They provide additional reasons to account for this. The divine in a religious group takes on the attributes of the believers' own images. By depicting deities in this way, the religious group makes racial distinctions between the in-group and out-groups. Although in-group identification does not always lead to out-group derogation, Hall, Max, and Wood claim that the moral superiority that religious groups afford to themselves and their beliefs may contribute to intergroup prejudice.

Hall, Max, and Wood findings can be used to support Hume's 'Suppression Claim.' The findings show that the religious are more prejudice based on the socio-cognitive motives that undergird their religious identification and beliefs. The socio-cognitive values such as identification and conformity and tradition can override their sentiments and contribute to their intergroup prejudice. In doing so, instead of the religious extending a common fellow-feeling towards another, the member of the out-group can become a target of the religious'

malevolence.¹⁵

Hume speaks of the intolerance of religions when he provides his examples of the inquisition and persecutions in Rome and Madrid. Hume also mentions the Anabaptists in Germany and the Camisards in France as being victims of religious violence. The religious committed this violence instead of extending universal benevolence. Hall, Max, and Wood's study supports the claim that religious intolerance is not restricted to Biblical tales, political events during Hume's time, or a case of Hume making a hasty generalization about a few bad religious apples. Instead the study shows that it is the social-cognitive values of religion that presents outsiders as other, as threats, and as those we are not obligated to help. This is not a historical phenomenon. It is a part of religion. Perhaps Hall, Max, and Wood's findings provide a psychological account of the religious intolerance that Hume constantly took note of and warns us about. In addition, there are other studies in empirical moral psychology that support the claims of Hume and Hall, Max, and Wood (2010). The studies highlight that religious service attendance increases hostility towards outsiders¹⁶ and there's a close link between religious attendance and support for suicide bombings among Palestinian Muslims.¹⁷

¹⁵ I would add that what's going on here is in part the re-inforcement of a bad natural tendency to set up us/them divisions, and not just the overriding of good natural sentiments.

¹⁶ Ginges, J., Hansen, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2009). "Religion and support for suicide attacks". *Psychological Science*, 20, 224-230.

¹⁷ Ibid.

4. What is Religion for Hume?

What should we say about this empirical data? Philosophers are usually skeptical about social science research to prove philosophical arguments. So I do not want to stop at the empirical data. There is more to be said about what this data and Hume's criticism of religion points to. Whether we are fully persuaded by the empirical evidence or not, I think the empirical examples bring us closer to an understanding of what religion is for Hume.

If for Hume, we know morality because of our human nature it is also the case that we come to be religious because of our human nature. Religion is not something outside of us. It is not an external object that we encounter in the world or a force that overtakes us. Religion is a psychological human tendency. "This preconception springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature such as give rise to self-love...gratitude, resentment...the religious principles must be secondary...perverted by various accidents and causes."¹⁸ Religion originates in human nature and religious principles are founded in human nature.

When Hume criticizes religion, he is criticizing not only a religious institution but also more importantly, a human tendency. It is through *our* curiosity and lack of knowledge of the unknown that we create a sense of the divine. Through our hope and fear for the future, fear of death, and desire for other needs, our eyes see the divine.¹⁹ The uncertainties and 'fortuitous accidents' that we encounter bring out our psychological need for a supreme creator. Melancholy, the panic that seizes our minds, and our weak and timid tendencies rather than more agreeable passions bring us to a sense of religion. Hume is warning us of

¹⁸ Hume, NHR. 2

¹⁹ Ibid., 6

our own power to distract ourselves from morality. Because we have a natural tendency toward religion, Hume is warning us of what happens when we give into this tendency. In the first Book of the *Enquiries*, Hume says it is natural for us to engage in metaphysics. However, we should beware because it will lead us into melancholy and endless uncertainties and distract us from common life. Similarly, religion is also a natural tendency but it will also distract us. Religion will distract us from morality. Hume's criticisms of religion are a warning of what happens when we give into this human tendency. This is why when Hume explains the bad influences of popular religion on morality in *A Natural History*, he recommends this criticism to anyone "who makes human nature the object of their enquiry."²⁰

Our human nature has a religious tendency. Once we give into this tendency, we become distracted from morality. Hume maintains that religion breeds intolerance and persecution and they are against our natural inclination for philanthropy. Also, allowing hopes, fears, and melancholy to have such a psychological force perverts our human nature. When our minds conceive of a superior god, "this belief sinks the human mind into the lowest submission."²¹ Our sentiments for order and duty to society provide a strong inclination to perform a moral action. However, the religious mind is preoccupied with satisfying the divine because of his own terror and fears.²² As a result, he does not see that bringing happiness to society will please the divine so he does other actions. These other actions have no purpose in life or

²⁰ Ibid., 5

²¹ NHR, 22.

²² See Azim F. Shariff, Mijke Rhemtulla. "Divergent Effects of Beliefs in Heaven and Hell on National Crime Rates." PLoS ONE, 2012; 7 (6)

they do violence to his natural inclinations.²³ Here, religion distracts us from a morality that our human nature naturally recognizes.

As the empirical support in this paper suggests, something psychologically different is taken place between the religious and less religious or when anyone is under religious influence. This is not to point to pathology but it is to highlight the threat to morality that this psychological tendency brings with it. We take on a distorted view of human nature under religion. The sentiments of the religious are suppressed. The religious are less motivated by compassion and religious duty can work against sympathy.

For Hume, our giving into our tendency for religion disrupts our moral psychology. We have everything within our nature to be moral. However, when we allow our minds to surrender to our religious tendencies, our morality suffers.

A religious objector may consider the argument I have laid out so far and conclude that in order to not encounter the pitfalls Hume warns us about; it is religion that needs to be changed. They may argue that what needs to be changed is doctrine or conceptions of duty and this will satisfy everything that Hume is concerned about. They may consider Hume's idea of religion as not merely a warning but a roadmap on how to improve religion. However, I think this conclusion will be mistaken. For Hume it is not the religion that needs to be changed, the problem is our psychology. It is a part of our human nature and it cannot be changed. When we give into religion, our psychology will continue to do what it has

²³ Hume. NHR, 34

always done. Even the idea of true religion, raised in the *Dialogues*, is rarely ever practiced. It is rarely ever practiced because of who we are when we give into our religious tendencies.

Conclusion

Reading Hume's criticism of religion may lead readers to think that Hume was only focusing on a religion of the past and the religion of his day. For some, the religion Hume refers to represent a few bad apples or a few gullible Christians but not the whole bunch. However, recent empirical work in moral psychology confirms Hume's concerns. Although any empirical evidence is subject to falsifiability, the empirical studies discussed in this paper adds support to the claim that Hume's criticisms of religion are not limited to people of his day nor is it a distorted view of the religious few he encountered (particularly as it relates to the claim that religion distracts from morality). Rather, it provides for us a much clearer picture of how Hume viewed religion. Religion is not merely an institution but a psychological tendency. This psychological tendency is not limited to people of the Enlightenment but it is ever-present in human beings because it originates out of human nature. Religion is a threat then and now because at any moment we can give into our religious tendencies. If we do, Hume warns us, it will distract us from morality.