



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Embracing the mystery: David Hume's playful religion of wonder

Hannah Lingier 

Department of Philosophy, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium  
Email: [hannah.lingier@gmail.com](mailto:hannah.lingier@gmail.com)

(Received 23 September 2022; revised 10 July 2023; accepted 11 July 2023; first published online 29 August 2023)

### Abstract

In this article I show how David Hume's works provide the ingredients for a conception of religiosity understood as a feeling of wonder concerning nature or existence, accompanied by a playful attitude regarding the imaginative shapes that can be given to this emotion. Hume serves as an inspiration rather than an object of study: I respect the spirit and values of his work, while going beyond his own explicit points. My reading accounts for Hume's aversion to traditional religions ('superstition'), and for his acknowledgement of the universal attraction of the idea of invisible intelligent power and his own fascination with it. I argue first that superstition is a natural reaction to existential uncertainty. Second, I argue that uncertainty fuels activity, creativity and morality, and thus may be left untended. Though it always involves a measure of pain, too, human happiness is found in challenge and activity. Traditional monotheist religions respond to this need by generating experiences of wonder, thus, however, stimulating passive devotion and dogmatism. Opposing this, the suggestion of Hume's works is to respect the mystery of nature rather than shrouding it in unfounded convictions. The fictional character Philo illustrates how the longing for an answer by itself can already be a profoundly religious feeling. Hume's descriptions of ancient polytheism and Philo show how this can be accompanied by a playful, imaginative interaction with the world.

**Keywords:** David Hume; religion; imagination; wonder; existential uncertainty

In this article I show that Hume's oeuvre provides the ingredients to develop a conception of playful religiosity. Some thinkers have paired religion and play in order to provide an answer to certain problems which religion faces today. For Mark Teismann a playful attitude towards religion is a solution to the postmodern breakdown of certainties. Rather than flee into fundamentalism or resign to nihilism, we can take on 'an "as if" mentality that allows us to follow devoutly a path without needing to rigidly defend its absolute truth' (Teismann and Weber (2020), 116). Plate argues that the dialectic between free play and games 'allows religious studies scholars to rethink religious traditions, to account for movement, change, adaptation' (Plate (2011), 229). Both suggest play as a solution but do not investigate the philosophical conditions: how can we think the relation between subject and the divine that makes this possible? Much remains to be said and Hume's view on human nature may serve as an interesting starting point.

On the one hand, Hume's ethics of moderate scepticism – that is, his respect for the boundaries of reason in our beliefs – relativizes the truth claims of traditional religion, making possible a more flexible and personal religiosity. On the other hand, he grants

a place to the reality and universality of the religious experience and the constitutive role of fictions in this regard. For Hume, constructing (cognitive) wholes is the foundational activity of human nature. Thus, Hume lays the foundation for religiosity as a feeling of wonder concerning nature or existence, attended by a playful, open attitude with regard to the possible shapes that could be given to this emotion. We can creatively give shape to the feeling that there exists something we could call divine, without landing on a fixed interpretation or continued belief. Despite the general (anti-religious) spirit that emanates from Hume's works, a nuanced reading of Hume's philosophy of religion may be of value to philosophy of religion more generally.

I start with a discussion of the Humean mind. I argue that the mind's basic activity, for Hume, consists in making associations, filling gaps in between perceptions, making beautiful wholes; in short: connecting. This activity, in fact, constitutes the essence of human nature, as it is through this activity that ideas of 'self' and 'world' become possible. I then show that religion's origin, for Hume, lies in this need to connect, and that – ironically – the problems it generates can be attributed to its success in fulfilling this need. Superstition soothes the original existential uncertainty by means of a more manageable, sometimes even pleasant, uncertainty regarding invisible powers. However, Hume shows us that the uncertainty from which superstition arises need not be resolved and the acceptance of uncertainty may be the foundation of a form of religiosity more conducive to human nature.

### The Humean mind

The main function of the mind or imagination<sup>1</sup> for Hume is to connect perceptions (impressions and ideas). Following Deleuze's interpretation of Hume that human nature, or the subject, only comes to exist when the mind starts to apply the principles of association to its perceptions, I argue that this mental *connecting* is the basic human activity, that which constitutes human nature.

The imagination in early modern philosophy was generally regarded as a faculty where mental images are stored and combined in novel ways. The idea is that many (rationalism) or all (empiricism) mental entities are images that enter the mind through the senses. The imagination enables us to conjure these images in the absence of the related objects and to manipulate (combine, separate, enlarge . . .) them. Technically this interpretation also applies to Hume's conception of imagination. However, it falls short of describing the full import of the concept in his philosophy: for Hume, we live in the 'empire of the imagination' (A 35) and we do not have 'any idea but what is there produced' (T 1.2.6.8). For a predecessor like Locke there was a clear demarcation between fiction and reality, and thus between reasonable and illusory combinations of the ideas stored in the imagination. Complex ideas are real when they consist of simple ideas that coexist in things without us, while fantastic ideas consist of simple ideas which in reality have no union. The way to truth, from this perspective, is quite simply to 'examine things as they are' (see Locke (1824), 2.11.15). With Hume, a crucial change occurs. Belief comes to depend solely on how vividly an impression strikes the imagination. The distinction between impressions and ideas is reduced to a difference in their degree of vivacity, and the notion of 'truth' becomes blurry: we have no way of knowing whether our impressions and ideas correspond to anything similar in 'reality'. The task of this imagination, he explains in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, is to connect perceptions into meaningful wholes. In this activity it is 'guided by some universal principles': resemblance, contiguity of time or space, and cause and effect (T 1.1.4.1). These principles of association are based on a sort of 'attraction', the cause of which Hume does not attempt to discover. Although they seem to help us to navigate the world, there is no reasonable ground to think

that these relations exist outside our minds: as far as we can tell, they are ‘nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir’d by custom’ (T 1.4.7.5).

Gilles Deleuze has suggested that this connecting activity for Hume constitutes the essence of human nature. In itself, he writes, the Humean mind has no order or regularity; it is ‘given as a collection of ideas and not as a system’ (Deleuze (2001), 22). So, Deleuze wonders, ‘how does a collection become a system’ or ‘how does the mind become human nature?’ (Deleuze (2001), 22). His answer is that the imagination becomes human nature through the principles of association (Deleuze (2001), 23). These principles ‘attribute to ideas the links and principles of union’, which are ‘not a quality of ideas themselves’ but qualities of human nature. Only by applying the principles of association (or the principles of human nature, as Deleuze calls them) do beliefs become possible, and does the self, and with it the world, come to be.

Not only is this cognitive activity constitutive of human nature sense, it is also directly linked with our emotional well-being and behaviour.<sup>2</sup> There is something peculiar about Hume’s conception of the imagination that removes it even further from his predecessors: the imagination finds great pleasure in executing its prime task of connecting perceptions (compare Costelloe (2018)). Hume often writes of it in terms of propensities, seduction and indulgence.<sup>3</sup> Once it has been put in motion, it is ‘apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse’ (T 1.4.2.22). Hume’s remarks about the imagination have an anthropomorphic streak to them, as if it has feelings of its own, but of course the pleasure of its activities is felt by a person.<sup>4</sup> This shows, for example, in the human tendency to ‘push on our enquiries, till we arrive at the original and ultimate principle’ (T 1.4.7.5), thereby inventing causes that have no ground in experience. Another example is the idea of independently existing objects, which is an invention of our imagination motivated by its desire to impose a greater regularity on perceptions than is justified.<sup>5</sup>

### The pleasures of wonder and the active life

There exists a tension in this connecting drive. On the one hand there is a strong longing to fill the gaps between or behind our perceptions: the love of beautiful wholes is defining for human behaviour and the connecting tendency often takes the form of a drive to resolve uncertainty, to fill the void with what is known (as we shall see, this is the foundation of superstition). On the other hand, the activity of connecting itself – creating these beautiful wholes – is a source of energy and pleasure. Related to this is human nature’s love of wonder: the feeling that attends the commotion of the spirits in the face of something incomprehensible, great, new, or impressive. It is the experience of a gap or stop in the easy flow of the imagination. I argue that while Hume sometimes takes on a condescending tone when describing humankind’s attraction to wonder, especially in the context of superstition, it is in fact a crucial cognitive state.<sup>6</sup> To be active and enlivened is one of the prime human joys and this is precisely what wonder does: it activates the mind and stirs the passions. Wonder gives the opportunity to exercise that connecting tendency which constitutes human nature.

We find Hume’s most direct treatment of wonder in the section ‘Of Miracles’ of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, where he blames ‘the gross and vulgar passions’ of wonder and surprise (EHU 10.16) for stimulating credulity. It is not only a sign of bad taste (see SR), it also adds violence to any attending emotion and stimulates belief in the fanciful tales of ‘quacks and projectors’ at the cost of dependable knowledge. People are, apparently, attracted to miracles and extravagant theories. Any theory with an ‘air of paradox’ seduces aspiring philosophers, and ‘any thing propos’d to us, which causes surprise and admiration, gives such a satisfaction to the mind, that it indulges itself in those

agreeable emotions, and will never be persuaded that its pleasure is entirely without foundation' (T 1.2.1.1). It is for this same reason that we enjoy the painful emotions aroused by tragedy: 'the view, or at least, imagination of high passions . . . makes the time pass the easier . . . and is some relief to that oppression, under which men commonly labour, when left entirely to their own thoughts and meditations' (Tr 4).

Wonder also plays a leading role in the attractivity of superstition. 'Primitive man' beholds the regularity of nature 'with listlessness and unconcern' (NHR 6.1), but calamities and monstrosities draw his attention as they 'alarm him from their novelty' (NHR 1.6). This feeling is recreated in the images, stories, and ceremonies of superstition. It uses the attraction to the extraordinary to enhance belief: it must not be 'too easy or familiar', 'Amazement must of necessity be raised; mystery affected; darkness and obscurity sought after' (NHR 11.3). In short: 'in matters of religion men take a pleasure in being terrified' (T 1.3.9.15). Like tragedy, superstition bears the potential to be a source of pleasure by evoking passions and arousing the indolent mind.<sup>7</sup>

In these contexts, Hume's stance on wonder is clearly disapproving. However, it is not only the superstitious mind that craves wonder. Hume, without judgement, characterizes humans as perpetually in search for novel perceptions that activate the spirits.

When the soul applies itself to the performance of any action, or the conception of any object, to which it is not accustom'd, there is a certain unpliableness in the faculties, and a difficulty of the spirit's moving in their new direction. As this difficulty excites the spirits, 'tis the source of wonder, surprize, and of all the emotions, which arise from novelty; and is in itself very agreeable, like every thing, which inlivens the mind to a moderate degree. (T 2.3.5.2)

Wonder is essentially a commotion of the spirits. This is caused by the 'suddenness and strangeness of an appearance' or anything 'for which we are not prepar'd, and to which we are not accustom'd' (T 2.3.9.26). It is a pleasant experience: although the imagination enjoys repetition and familiar connections, too much custom renders 'the actions of the mind so faint and languid, that they are no longer able to interest and support it' (T 2.3.5.4). Because the mind is 'insufficient, of itself, to its own entertainment, . . . it naturally seeks after foreign objects, which may produce a lively sensation, and agitate the spirits' (T 2.2.4.4). This means that even painful passions give 'sensible pleasure' (T 2.3.10.10). Closely related to wonder is the feeling of admiration. 'Any very bulky object' (for example 'the ocean, an extended plain, a vast chain of mountains, a wide forest, . . . an army, a fleet, a crowd' (T 2.2.8.4)) can agitate the spirits, making admiration 'one of the most lively pleasures, which human nature is capable of enjoying' (T 2.2.8.4).

The mental 'commotion' produced by unexpected, new, or impressive appearances 'naturally produces a curiosity or inquisitiveness' (T 2.3.9.26). In some cases, when the curiosity is related to an event either very great or strange, or when we have a personal interest in or relation to the matter, this gives rise to a desire to eliminate the unease by finding answers.<sup>8</sup> In some such cases, it might be better to speak of fear rather than wonder. Fear stems from the same experience of mental fluctuation but sparks a greater sense of unease or pain, as the uncertainty is felt more intensely or is more closely related to one's own well-being or personal sphere. 'Trembling curiosity' is the impetus for the creation of a comforting system of religion. This, however, is not necessarily the case. Philosophical or scientific curiosity is not in the first place a desire to find 'truth' or to clear up difficulties. Rather, like gaming or hunting, the activity is enjoyable in itself (although the desire to find a solution, to overcome the challenge, is also needed to keep us invested in the activity). The *Treatise* section 'Of Curiosity, or the love of truth' is, contrary to what the title implies, concerned with the joys of the search rather than

with truth itself: 'The first and most considerable circumstance requisite to render truth agreeable, is the genius and capacity, which is employ'd in its invention and discovery', and 'to fix our attention or exert our genius . . . of all other exercises of the mind is the most pleasant and agreeable' (T 2.3.10.3). It is not the love of truth that motivates philosophers, but the mental activity. It is the difficulty of the topic that makes it interesting to investigate it. 'The "whole bent or tendency" of [the action and pursuit of truth] lies in the *continuing* pursuit of it' (Deckard (2011), 231).

Humans, for Hume, need such exciting experiences. As Deckard comments: 'One's soul is asleep looking for something to awaken it from its slumber . . . One requires something to move on' (Deckard (2011), 227–228). This depiction of the mind in the *Treatise* corresponds to Hume's characterization of human nature in his *Political Discourses*. 'There is no craving or demand of the human mind more constant and insatiable than that for exercise and employment' (In 11). Happiness consists of a mix of action, pleasure and indolence, but the need for indolence is no more than 'an indulgence to the weakness of human nature' (RA 3): we need rest from time to time to be able to (continue to) enjoy activity. This is why the modern society is such a blessing (as opposed to fear-inspired superstition, for reasons I will discuss below).

In times when industry and the arts flourish, men are kept in perpetual occupation, and enjoy, as their reward, the occupation itself, as well as those pleasures which are the fruit of their labour. The mind acquires new vigour; enlarges its powers and faculties; and by an assiduity in honest industry, both satisfies its natural appetites, and prevents the growth of unnatural ones, which commonly spring up, when nourished by ease and idleness. (RA 3)

The danger of indolence lies in the impossibility of humanity to remain in a state of idleness. It is 'agreeable for a moment', but prolonged it either leads to 'languor and lethargy' and a loss of all enjoyment (RA 3) or it stimulates the growth of 'unnatural appetites' (RA 3) such as superstition or abstruse speculations.

## Religion and wonder

There are good reasons to believe that religion, in Hume's line of thought, could and should disappear altogether. Some scholars, conversely, hold that Hume identified certain benefits in religion or even deemed it necessary for a flourishing society.<sup>9</sup> The problem with the first view, as I will show, is that religion, as Hume describes it, is a reaction to an existential uncertainty (leading to wonder but more often fear) which cannot simply be resolved by different means. Religion is a semi-universal product of the natural unifying activity of the human mind. On the other hand, Hume was clearly opposed to religion 'as it has commonly been found in the world'. The core problem, I argue, is the closed nature and paralysing effect of monotheist superstition: a new form of uncertainty is artificially created through impressive stories and images, but this is a false kind of wonder, which stimulates passivity, obedience, and dogmatism. This is at odds with the ethics of activity and openness propagated by Hume. The suggestion of Hume's oeuvre, I argue, is that a veneration for the unknown, which we could call a religious feeling, should be respected in its own right, without being 'resolved' by means of all-encompassing truths. Novelty, openness, a 'void' or empty space of some kind are cornerstones of Hume's thought. Such a space, not yet filled by the imagination, stimulates activity. Hume's description of ancient polytheism and Philo, the protagonist of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, serve as examples of an open and creative 'religious' attitude towards life.

Hume is sceptical about the strength of religious beliefs. While the mind is forced to concentrate on abstract ideas, they may have some persuasive power, but this fades as soon as one returns to normal life (cf. T 1.3.9.13–15; NHR 7.2; NHR 12.15). Superstition must employ rituals, images, and stories to stimulate the passions and belief.<sup>10</sup> While Hume asserts the near universality of religion in the *Natural History*, in the same text he attributes religion's growth and persistence to ignorance, disorder, and ambitious priests, all of which can realistically be avoided in a well-organized commonwealth. Indeed, in his *Essays* Hume proclaims the waning influence of religion in Great Britain: the British 'are now settled into the most cool indifference with regard to religious matters, that is to be found in any nation of the world' (NC 17). In times of prosperity, people 'have little leisure or inclination to think of the unknown invisible regions' (NHR 3.4). The rising level of education and the distractions of the modern society provide the ideal context for a declining interest in religious matters. In a letter to Andrew Stuart, Hume expressed the hope that 'all the Churches shall be converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses'.<sup>11</sup> Professional activities and general prosperity distract from fears about finitude; the luxuries, social gatherings and clubs of learning fulfil the need for mental stimulation and entertainment.

According to Yenor (2006), Hume considered commerce to be an adequate replacement for religion.

The ethic of humanity arises in modern commercial republics and that ethic makes people at home in this world; it tells against a central tenet of religious belief: that people need God. Once prosperity and Enlightenment spread, the well of religious conviction dries up and God is rendered obsolete because, for Hume, there is no restless soul grounding religious passions. (Yenor (2006), 398)

The inequality and ignorance of pre-modern times foster the misery, fear, and weakness in which religion takes root (Yenor (2006), 406). Thus, 'Improving human life by controlling nature undermines superstition by making belief in particular providence superfluous; human beings can provide for themselves' (Yenor (2006), 408). Moreover, 'Commercial exercise and employment keep psychologically disordering terrors from arising to the mind' (Yenor (2006), 409).

But all this hinges on the question how deep religion's roots reach. In the *Natural History* fear is advanced as the main cause of superstition. The idea of invisible intelligent power is created to be able to cope with anxiety concerning one's fate.

We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These unknown causes, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependance. (NHR 3.1)

Fear, we learn from *A Dissertation on the Passions*, arises when the outcome of a given situation is uncertain, that is, when it is a matter of probability whether it will be good or evil. In that case the imagination 'fluctuates between the opposite views' (DP 1.8) and the heart between the opposite emotions of joy and grief (DP 1.9), giving rise to hope or fear, depending on whether joy or grief is dominant. Fear, like wonder, attends the experience of uncertainty. The difference between the two lies mainly in the subject's reaction to such uncertainty. In the case of wonder, the subject finds satisfaction in this mental

turbulence, while fear means that the unease is felt to be too great (T 2.3.9.26). There is a desire for control and clarity and the mind attempts to reduce the unease by restoring order (cf. T 2.3.9.26; T 2.3.10.12). Fear awakens the imagination's attraction to regularity and repetition, to familiar objects which it 'naturally prefers . . . to others' (T 2.2.4.8).

Before they 'employ their imagination' to form an idea of the 'unknown causes' that steer the events of nature and their lives (NHR 3.1), people feel a great distance between themselves and the world they inhabit. The unaccountability and unpredictability of nature and life in general are, naturally, a source of uncertainty and, at times, of intense fear. The imagination, confronted with this uncertainty, is spurred into action and creates the idea of invisible intelligent powers – a clear instance of the connecting tendency of the imagination. Thus, the imagination not only fills an epistemic gap by creating an explanatory system, but also provides a measure of existential comfort, as the world is turned into a more familiar place by means of a system at the core of which stand humanlike beings. Superstition fulfils a basic need that follows directly from the natural tendency to construct meaningful wholes.

In modern times a better knowledge of nature and political order have mitigated much of the chaos which early humans experienced. But although the accompanying emotion may be less intense in later times, there remains an unbridgeable gap between us and the world we inhabit (and there is no reason to think this will change – although on this point too, we can never be certain). The opening phrase of part three of the *Natural History* beautifully describes the sentiment that motivates the search for an explanation: '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; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent those ills, with which we are continually threatened' (NHR 3.1). Or consider the following remark: 'No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence' (NHR 3.2). These passages suggest that the uncertainty is existential, especially when we take account of Hume's scepticism: human reason is limited and there are boundaries to the enquiry into causes ('in the most usual conjunctions of cause and effect we are as ignorant of the ultimate principle, which binds them together, as in the most unusual and extraordinary' (T 1.4.7.6)). On a fundamental level, the feeling of uncertainty, of being a stranger in the world, is part of being human. Hume was familiar with this sentiment, as his conclusion to the first book of the *Treatise* indicates:

The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty. (T 1.4.7.8)

Fear and hope continue to exist until the outcome becomes certain and the passions can evolve into grief or joy. If the object of our uncertainty is our fate, the events of our lives, it is unlikely that this point of certainty will ever be reached in a fundamental sense. Yenor is too quick in concluding that, according to Hume, religion has no 'deeper, more ineradicable roots'. While nature has become more predictable, the first causes,

the future, life itself remain a mystery. Uncertainty is part of the human condition, as is the desire to make wholes of our experience.

But as Hume makes clear, the way religion tends to this existential uncertainty is less than desirable. Monotheist superstition takes the longing for certainty too far. Its beliefs are considered to be absolute and universal truths, and are encased in rigid logic and tradition, with no opening for other opinions. The intolerance that characterizes such religions has spilled ‘an ocean of blood’ (H App4.12). Moreover, people captured by ‘the illusions of religious superstition’, ‘are in a different element from the rest of mankind’ (EPM AD.57). Moral distinctions have a foundation in nature, but ‘precept and education’ are powerful enough to ‘create, without any natural principle, a new sentiment of [approbation and dislike]; as is evident in all superstitious practices and observances’ (NHR 5.3). Divine favour is sought not by moral behaviour, but ‘by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions’ (NHR 14.1). Blind obedience to authority and tradition overshadows the natural virtues that form the foundation of a healthy community.

The other problem is related to wonder. The certainty provided by the idea of invisible power is accompanied by artificially generated wonder, aimed solely at fixating the mind on superstition itself: priests overemphasize the wonderful in order to stimulate fear and devotion (cf. NHR 14.8; EHU 10.16–19). The intense passions they generate lead to ‘Popular sedition, party zeal, a devoted obedience to factious leaders’ (EPM 5.35). In the *History of England*, religious faction features as one of the most dangerous problems of the modern age, an idea also expressed in the *Natural History*: ‘few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are more pernicious of society than this corruption of theism, when carried to the utmost height’, as was the case in the ‘inquisition and persecution of Rome and Madrid’ (NHR 9.6). The spilled blood is accompanied by grave consequences for society as a whole: the inquisitors attack not only human lives but ‘virtue, knowledge, love of liberty’, and ‘leave the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption, and bondage’ (NHR 9.6).

Superstition makes itself indispensable as it claims the role of provider of both wonder and comfort. But this false kind of wonder paralyzes rather than activates: it fosters dogmatism, intolerance, obedience, and false virtues. Superstition, especially the monotheist kind, puts a halt to activity and a fulfilling life while keeping the mind engaged through artificial emotions.

How, then, to deal with that existential uncertainty? In the *Treatise* Hume writes that ‘there is no passion . . . capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction’ (T 3.2.2.13). Disturbing passions should not be oppressed or ignored but integrated in the institutional structure. Avidity, for example, is better satisfied in a society with rules concerning property. This way, the passion is employed in a way that is beneficial for society.<sup>12</sup> Religion, too, is such an ‘invention’ that redirects fear to make it more controllable, although at the same time it further stimulates the passions and leads to dogmatism and faction. A positive religion would provide a positive outlet for the original emotion, without necessarily eliminating it.

But the feeling of uncertainty is not in itself problematic, at least not in modern times. For the primitive, left entirely to the mercy of the forces of nature, the intensity of the passion might have been unbearable, and possibly superstition was the best remedy at the time. For the eighteenth-century British person, however, nature has become more familiar and controllable. The fear has abated and the uncertainty, which necessarily remains, is bearable, often even forgettable. The circumstances of modern life allow us to bear the unease of existence.<sup>13</sup> Hume himself takes refuge in the amusements of normal life when his sceptic thoughts become too heavy: ‘I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends’ (T 1.4.7.9).



As the discussion on wonder indicated, uncertainty is, in fact, a condition for a fulfilling life. Indeed, a fundamental aspect of Hume's thought is the acceptance of uncertainty and respect for the mystery of nature. Opposite the closed character of superstition stands Hume's ethics of openness. This 'virtue', if we can call it that, recurs in different forms throughout his works. In his moral works, Hume pleads for the acceptance of different viewpoints and ways of life: this is a precondition for a moral life (EPM 5.42). Moreover, as we saw, challenge and activity are key to a happy life. With regard to epistemology, his basic idea is that we should not attempt to establish final truths but remain open for experience and experiment. He fostered a profound respect for what we cannot know, remaining humble in his own attempts to understand human nature, as, for example, the conclusion of the *Natural History* indicates ('The whole is a riddle, an ænigma, an inexplicable mystery' (NHR 15.13)). Or consider the following passage:

But besides all the *agreeable* qualities, the origin of whose beauty, we can, in some degree explain and account for, there still remains something mysterious and inexplicable, which conveys an immediate satisfaction to the spectator, but how, or why, or for what reason, he cannot pretend to determine. There is a MANNER, a grace, an ease, a genteelness, an I-know-not-what, which some men possess above others, which is very different from external beauty and comeliness, and which, however, catches our affection almost as suddenly and powerfully. . . . This class of accomplishments, therefore, must be trusted entirely to the blind, but sure testimony of taste and sentiment; and must be considered as a part of ethics, left by nature to baffle all the pride of philosophy, and make her sensible of her narrow boundaries and slender acquisitions. (EPM 8.14)

There is much we can discover, and we can systematize nature to a great extent, but there always remains something that escapes us.

Regarding religion specifically, there exists in Hume's work a suggestion for an open, playful religious attitude, which does not anchor itself on a fixed interpretation of the divine. We see this, for example, in the description of ancient polytheism, where Hume praises the lightness of the ancient religion:

the fables of the pagan religion were, of themselves, light, easy, and familiar; without devils, or seas of brimstone, or any object that could much terrify the imagination. Who could forbear smiling, when he thought of the loves of Mars and Venus, or the amorous frolics of Jupiter and Pan? In this respect, it was a true poetical religion; if it had not rather too much levity for the graver kinds of poetry. We find that it has been adopted by modern bards; nor have these talked with greater freedom and irreverence of the gods, whom they regarded as fictions, than the ancients did of the real objects of their devotion. (NHR 12.18)

Their 'multitude of stories' sit 'so easy and light on men's mind, that, though it may be as universally received, it happily makes no such deep impression on the affections and understanding' (NHR 12.26). Polytheism remains in its proper realm of feeling and fantasy as it produces a wide variety of stories that make tangible the way the world feels in a specific context. More stories can always be added and the existing stories can be adapted if need be. They even adopt gods of other nations.

Another illustration of such a playful, open attitude towards religion is Philo, the fictional character who in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* undermines his friends' arguments for the existence of God. Despite his sceptical attitude, he is attracted to the idea of intelligent design. Having elaborately criticized the a posteriori argument from

design, Philo proclaims in the final part that ‘a purpose, an intention, a design strikes every where the most careless, the most stupid thinker’ (D 12.2). Still, his moderate scepticism entails that he can go no further than conclude that ‘the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence’ (D 12.33). This decision to stay within the boundaries of reason clearly takes effort. In the text’s very last paragraph, Philo says he is ‘astonished’ due to the ‘greatness of the object’ and feels ‘a longing desire and expectation’ for answers. Philo’s scepticism goes hand in hand with a longing for religious belief. This is already a spiritual stance: on a purely emotional basis there is little difference between him and his religious conversation partners. But rather than letting his awe in the face of the greatness of nature land on a specific idea of the divine, Philo lets his imagination run wild and invents a variety of answers to the question of the origin of the universe.<sup>14</sup> His conscious effort to not get stuck in the idea of intelligent design is both painful and liberating.

## Conclusion

Hume’s works shows us that the existential uncertainty, which in some circumstances understandably gives rise to superstition, may be left unresolved when certain conditions are met. Not only is it bearable, a gap in the flow of the imagination activates the mind and passions. When in modern times scientific and political advancement have made life less threatening, humankind is no longer plagued by the overwhelming anxiety that sparked the need for superstition. Nevertheless, however orderly our world becomes, some uncertainty and mystery always remains. The impossibility, or at least improbability, of certainty is a cornerstone of Hume’s thought. Modern life can at most play the part of a distraction, as its many activities and pleasures leave no time to dwell on such ‘abstruse subjects’. The suggestion of Hume’s works is to cultivate a respect for the unknown rather than shrouding it in unfounded convictions, and to cherish the sense of wonder attending the realization that there are things beyond our reach: an awareness of and profound respect for all that lies outside ourselves and thus can never be completely grasped. Hume’s portrayal of Philo suggests that this in itself is a religious feeling: Philo attests to an intense feeling that there is something that can be called divine, but refuses to let his mind rest on a specific interpretation. This respect for the unknowable is key to toleration but also, more profoundly, to the possibility to fully actualize our (active, connecting) nature. Human life, in essence, means to deal with the chaos of existence, ever finding new connections, new ways to make sense of our lives and the strange world that hosts us.

Thus, Hume provides the conditions of a playful relation between subject and world. His ‘empire of the imagination’ opens a playing field: while certain fictions are indispensable, some of the wholes that make up the world can be reconstructed, shaped to one’s needs and feelings, and transformed accordingly. Of course, this focus on the constitutive role of the psyche severely relativizes the divine and the religious experience: in the context of Hume’s work, the psychic contents that express the subject’s relation to the divine receive the status of fictions. But it may lead the way to conceive of a playful, fluid, creative relation to one’s conception of the divine.

**Competing interests.** None.

## Abbreviations of Hume’s works

D Hume (2012)  
 DP Hume (2009)  
 EHU Hume (2006b)

EPM Hume (2006a)  
 H Hume (1983a; 1983b)  
 In Hume (1987, 295–307)  
 NC Hume (1987, 197–215)  
 NHR Hume (2009)  
 RA Hume (1987, 268–280)  
 SR Hume (1987, 191–196)  
 T Hume (2011)  
 Tr Hume (1987, 216–225)

## Notes

1. Hume's analysis of the mind is for most part an analysis of the imagination. The imagination is a broad (and vague) concept, which comprises the general characteristic activities of the mind, including those of the understanding. In some contexts, he distinguishes the understanding as constituting 'the general and more established properties of the imagination'. Presumably this can be understood as our 'demonstrative and probable reasonings', as opposed to the more 'trivial suggestions of the fancy' (T 1.3.9.19 n. 22).
2. As the imagination is inextricably linked with the passions, what strikes the imagination also arouses the passions, and the force of the latter depends on the force of a perception on the imagination. ('Tis remarkable, that the imagination and affections have a close union together, and that nothing, which affects the former, can be entirely indifferent to the latter' (T 2.3.6.1).) Vice versa, it is our interest in something that engages our attention (cf. T 1.3.10.10).
3. This indulgent tendency makes the imagination prone to error. It is quick to go beyond the bounds of experience and, in its attraction to simplicity and regularity, to combine ideas without the proper evidence.
4. In his review of *The Imagination in Hume's Philosophy*, Jonathan Cottrell takes issue with Costelloe's interpretation of the imagination as hedonistic:

Either (i) Costelloe is attributing teleological explanations to Hume, couched in terms of the imagination's 'end' (23), which Hume could not accept, given his rejection of final causes (Treatise, 1.3.14.32); or (ii) these apparently teleological explanations are to be cashed out by attributing 'desires' to the imagination (as Costelloe sometimes seems to intend, e.g. at 23, 147, and 205), which conflicts with Hume's refusal to reify faculties (a refusal that Costelloe recognizes and claims to honor). (Cottrell (2019), 560)

It is indeed this latter option that is at play. It is, however, an artificial move to separate the imagination or the mind from the person. When talking about the desires of the imagination, this is nothing else than to talk about certain cognitive tendencies of human nature. It is we who take pleasure in our mental activity, and in orderly, encompassing wholes, not a mind that is somehow separate from us.

5. See Lingier (2021) for a more elaborate discussion on Hume's conception of the imagination and its relevance for the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.
6. Compare Deckard (2011), 212.
7. As in 'dramatic performances', Hume attributes the pleasure found in superstition to the lack of or at least weakness of belief, because of which the passion 'has no more than the agreeable effect of enlivening the mind, and fixing the attention' (T 1.3.9.15). In his later essay 'Of Tragedy' Hume repeats that passions are a cure for the 'languid, listless state of indolence' of man, but has developed a more nuanced view of the pleasures of art, which excludes cruder sources of excitement like superstition.
8. For example, a person arriving in a town for the first time will at first be indifferent to its history, but after a while, having acquired an interest in the place, may acquire an 'ardent desire' for knowledge (T 2.3.10.12).
9. See for example Jordan (2002); Costelloe (2004); Willis (2015). Willis argues that true religion can be a source of mild emotions that support morality. A similar view is defended by Lemmens: 'a refined sense of awe and wonder at the special place of human nature within the whole of the creation' (Lemmens (2011), 235). Costelloe argues that 'Hume emphasizes how "there must be an ecclesiastical order, and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community"' (H III, 134–135, cited in Costelloe (2004), 182). Hume's point in this last quotation, however, is that religion is best controlled by the state, because the consequences of leaving the clergy to their own devices are, euphemistically put, undesirable (H 29.5). Compare Susato (2015), 150.
10. Interestingly, Hume uses the examples of superstitious ceremony, relicts, and pilgrimage (T 1.3.8.4–6; T 1.3.9.9) to illustrate his account of the nature of belief in general.
11. 'David Hume to Andrew Stuart of Torrance' (see Savage (2012), 256).
12. Sabl has, in the same line of thought, argued that toleration is the way to control the religious affections, as 'our passions are more durably satisfied when applied to an enlarged sphere than when limited to a narrow one'

(Sabl (2012), 56). However, contrary to rules of property which lead to more prosperity, toleration does not lead to 'more religion'. Rather, it loosens people's attachment to their sects by playing on their self-interest. Sabl is focused solely on 'partisan fellowship', the need to belong to a group, which toleration redirects to 'zeal for the public'. The question remains what becomes of the original needs from which religion arose.

13. In fact, the uncertainty may now tend more in the direction of hope than of fear. In this sense, it resembles the emotion involved in Willis' conception of true religion. He understands the 'sense of order and regularity' as basic theism, which 'irresistibly orients the mind to the idea of an Author of Nature' (Willis (2014), 45–46). This can form the basis of either superstition or true religion (Willis (2014), 53), depending on the passions involved. Superstition builds on violent passions, the tandem of hope and fear with regard to futurity. True religion requires a different kind of hope, that is, hope as a 'temperate, peaceful and congenial disposition even in the face of misery' (Willis (2014), 89). This moderate hope is a form of acceptance: 'a belief that what we have is all we need'. This captures nicely the difference between wonder and fear: both are reactions to uncertainty, but fear implies the desire to resolve the uncertainty as soon as possible, whereas wonder implies an acceptance and even enjoyment of the commotion this generates.

14. Philo is an endless source of creativity when it comes to explaining the creation of the world:

A comet, for instance, is the seed of a world; and after it has been fully ripened, by passing from sun to sun, and star to star, it is at last tossed into the unformed elements which every where surround this universe, and immediately sprouts up into a new system. (D 7.5–6)

His conversation partners repeatedly point out Philo's fertile imagination (D 3.1, 3.9, 5.13, 7.18, 9.18). Other examples are the world in embryo-state (D 2.21), as vegetable (D 7.5), as the body of God (D 6.3) or creation of a spider (D 7.17), God as a 'stupid mechanic' (D 5.7), an infant deity, and an elderly (or dead) deity (D 5.12). See Lingier (2021).

## References

- Costelloe T (2004) 'In every civilized community': Hume on belief and the demise of religion. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 55, 171–185.
- Costelloe T (2018) *The Imagination in Hume's Philosophy: The Canvas of the Mind*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cottrell J (2019) The imagination in Hume's philosophy: the canvas of the mind by Timothy M. Costelloe. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57, 559–560.
- Deckard MF (2011) 'Of curiosity, or the love of truth': David Hume on wonder in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In Losonczy P and Deckard MF (eds), *Philosophy Begins in Wonder: An Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy, Theology, and Science*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, pp. 211–233.
- Deleuze G (2001) *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. Boundas CV (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hume D (1983a) *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, vol. 3. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Hume D (1983b) *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, vol. 5. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Hume D (1987) *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Miller EF (ed.). Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
- Hume D (2006a) *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition*. Beauchamp TL (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume D (2006b) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*. Beauchamp TL (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume D (2009) *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion*. Beauchamp TL (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume D (2011) *A Treatise of Human Nature: Volume 1: Texts*. Norton DF and Norton MJ (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume D (2012) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Popkin H (ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Jordan WR (2002) Religion in the public square: a reconsideration of David Hume and religious establishment. *The Review of Politics* 64, 687–713.
- Lemmens W (2011) Beyond the calm sunshine of the mind: Hume on religion and morality. *Aufklärung und Kritik: Zeitschrift für freies Denken und humanistische Philosophie* 18, 214–240.
- Lingier H (2021) Hume's dialogues: a natural explanation of natural religion? *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 82, 233–248.
- Locke J (1824) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 25th edn. London: William Baynes.

- Plate SB (2011) Religion is playing games: playing video gods, playing to play. *Religious Studies and Theology* 29, 215–230.
- Sabl A (2012) *Hume's Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England*, 1st edn. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Savage R (2012) *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain: New Case Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Susato R (2015) *Hume's Sceptical Enlightenment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Teismann MW and Weber L (2020) *A Playful Spirit: Exploring the Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology of Play*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Willis A (2014) *Toward a Humean True Religion: Genuine Theism, Moderate Hope, and Practical Morality*, 1st edn. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Willis A (2015) The potential use-value of Hume's 'true religion'. *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 13, 1–15.
- Yenor S (2006) Revealed religion and the politics of humanity in Hume's philosophy of common life. *Polity* 38, 395–415.