History of Philosophy
48 Hume on Religion and Ethics
By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

In these lecture excerpts, Dr. Arthur Holmes analyzes **David Hume's foundational impact on the philosophy of religion and ethics**, emphasizing the interplay between **logic and psychology**. In religious matters, Hume critiques the rational proofs for God's existence while acknowledging that the **ordered complexity of nature** exerts a psychological pressure toward belief. Moving to ethics, Hume argues that morality is primarily rooted in **human sentiment and benevolence** rather than abstract reason, suggesting that we approve of actions based on their **utility and the common good**. Holmes explains that for Hume, concepts like justice are **artificial constructs** that arise naturally from our shared emotional development and social needs. Ultimately, the text illustrates how Hume transitioned Western thought toward **subjectivism and naturalism**, redefining religious and moral convictions as products of **human experience and feeling**.

Briefing Document:

A History of Philosophy: David Hume on Religion and Ethics

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of David Hume's philosophical inquiries into religion and ethics, as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores Hume's critique of natural theology, his psychological account of religious belief, and his sentimentalist approach to moral philosophy.

Part 1: Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What is the primary distinction between Hume's two major works on religion, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *A Natural History of Religion*?

2. How does Hume characterize the effectiveness of the classic logical arguments for the existence of God?

3. According to Hume, why is polytheism a "natural psychological development" for human beings?

4. What role does "monotheism" play in Hume's historical and psychological framework?

5. How did Hume's critique of the teleological argument bring the "problem of evil" into sharper focus?

6. In Hume's ethical theory, what are the two specific types of judgments that reason is capable of making?

7. Why does Hume conclude that reason alone cannot motivate moral action or produce moral judgments?

8. What is the distinction between "calm" and "violent" passions in Hume's theory of impressions?

9. How does the principle of "sympathy" lead to the development of natural benevolence?

10. What are the three "laws of nature" that Hume identifies as essential for social utility and justice?

Part 2: Answer Key

1. **What is the primary distinction between Hume's two major works on religion, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *A Natural History of Religion*?** The *Dialogues* focus on the "logic of belief," specifically evaluating the viability of natural theology and classic arguments for God's existence. In

contrast, *A Natural History of Religion* examines the "psychology of belief," exploring the emotional and developmental factors that lead humans to adopt religious ideas.

2. **How does Hume characterize the effectiveness of the classic logical arguments for the existence of God?** Hume provides a full-scale critique asserting that these arguments are not logically complete or clear enough to prove a first cause or a rational designer. However, he admits they possess "considerable weight" psychologically because the ordered nature of the world leaves a powerful "impression" on the human mind.

3. **According to Hume, why is polytheism a "natural psychological development" for human beings?** Polytheism arises because humans have diverse emotional concerns—such as the need for food and security—which are triggered by various aspects of the natural world. These different impressions naturally give rise to the notion of multiple causes or beings (gods) responsible for these distinct areas of experience.

4. **What role does "monotheism" play in Hume's historical and psychological framework?** Monotheism develops when the rational and contemplative mind reflects on the "ordered unity" of nature, leading to the speculative notion of a single being behind that unity. Because it is a rational abstraction rather than a product of the imagination, monotheism often lacks vitality and tends to revert to polytheistic forms or "secularistic polytheism."

5. **How did Hume's critique of the teleological argument bring the "problem of evil" into sharper focus?** Hume argued that if one attempts to prove a designer based on the purposeful order of nature, they must also account for "dis-teleology," or the lack of order and purpose represented by evil. This forced subsequent philosophers to address whether a supremely good designer could be reconciled with the observable presence of evil in the world.

6. **In Hume's ethical theory, what are the two specific types of judgments that reason is capable of making?** Reason is limited to making judgments regarding the "relations of ideas," such as the definitions of moral terms, and "matters of fact," such as describing the circumstances or consequences of

an action. It can provide the factual data necessary for a situation but cannot evaluate the moral worth of that data.

7. **Why does Hume conclude that reason alone cannot motivate moral action or produce moral judgments?** Hume maintains that reason is incapable of approving or disapproving of an action; it merely describes facts and consequences. Because moral judgments require an emotional response of approval or disapproval to motivate the will, morality must be founded on sentiment rather than logic.

8. **What is the distinction between "calm" and "violent" passions in Hume's theory of impressions?** "Calm" passions are steady, subtle feelings, such as the satisfaction derived from beauty or moral goodness. "Violent" passions are forceful and intense emotions, such as love, hatred, pride, and jealousy, which may arise directly from experiences of pleasure and pain.

9. **How does the principle of "sympathy" lead to the development of natural benevolence?** Sympathy arises when reason recognizes factual "resemblances" between the experiences of others and ourselves, causing us to feel a version of their pleasure or pain. This shared feeling evolves into "benevolence," a natural altruism where we desire the good of others because their well-being is psychologically linked to our own.

10. **What are the three "laws of nature" that Hume identifies as essential for social utility and justice?** Hume identifies the three laws as the stability of possession (property rights), the transfer of property by consent, and the performance of promises (keeping treaties). He views these not as metaphysical truths but as "artifacts" that arise naturally because they are necessary for the utility and survival of society.

Part 3: Essay Questions

1. **The Tension of Belief:** Analyze Hume's distinction between the "logic of belief" and the "psychology of belief." How does his admission that teleological arguments have "weight" complicate his overall skeptical critique of natural theology?

2. **Subjectivism and the Theory of Ideas:** Explain how the "theory of ideas" led to the gradual "subjectivizing" of reality from Locke to Berkeley to Hume. How does Hume's ethical subjectivism serve as the final step in this historical progression?

3. **Hume vs. the Scottish Realists:** Contrast David Hume's empiricist account of moral and religious knowledge with the "Scottish Realist" reaction led by Thomas Reid. In what ways did Reid's rejection of representational knowledge change the approach to theistic arguments?

4. **Naturalism and Utility:** Discuss Hume's definition of "Justice." How does his view of justice as a utilitarian "artifact" differ from the natural law traditions of thinkers like John Locke or Thomas Aquinas?

5. **The Role of Sentiment in Ethics:** Evaluate Hume's claim that "morality is more properly felt than judged of." If reason cannot justify moral values, what are the implications for the universality and objectivity of ethics in a secular society?

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Abstruse Philosophy	A term used by Hume to describe philosophy concerned with deep, logical proofs and metaphysical speculation, often contrasted with practical philosophy.
Benevolence	A natural sentiment of wishing, wanting, and willing what is good for others; for Hume, it is the foundation of utility in ethics.
Calm Passions	Steady and mild emotional responses, such as the aesthetic appreciation of beauty or the quiet approval of a virtuous act.
Dis-teleology	The absence of discernible purpose or order in nature; often cited in discussions regarding the problem of evil and the failure of the design argument.

Ethical Naturalism	The view that morality is grounded in nature, specifically in the universal psychological and emotional development of human beings.
Ethical Subjectivism	The theory that there are no objective moral truths; moral statements are instead expressions of the speaker's subjective feelings or sentiments.
Impressions of Reflection	Second-order mental states that arise from reflecting on our own ideas, which were themselves originally derived from sense impressions.
Natural Theology	The attempt to prove the existence and attributes of God through reason and the observation of nature, independent of divine revelation.
Scottish Realism	A philosophical school (represented by Thomas Reid) that rejected the theory of ideas in favor of the belief that humans have direct, rational awareness of the external world.
Sympathy	The psychological mechanism by which we associate the experiences of others with our own through resemblance, allowing us to share in their pleasures or pains.
Teleological Argument	The "argument from design," which posits that the order and purposefulness of the universe imply the existence of an intelligent creator.
Utility	The principle of usefulness or the common good; in Hume's view, it is the primary reason why certain social rules and laws of justice are established.

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