

***The end of radical Enlightenment:
from the heterodoxy of Radicati to the unbelief of Hume***

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I

The starting-point of this paper is provided by two essays attacking the Christian prohibition on suicide. In 1732 an exiled nobleman from Savoy-Piedmont, Count Alberto Radicati di Passerano, published in London *A Philosophical Dissertation upon Death, composed for the consolation of the unhappy*.¹ The tract had been translated from Radicati's Italian by Joseph Morgan, author of a work entitled *Mahometism fully explained* (1723), and was published by William Mears. The *Philosophical Dissertation* immediately attracted the hostile attention of the Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, who wrote to the Secretary of State, the Duke of Newcastle, demanding prosecution. Newcastle passed the matter to an assistant, Charles Delafaye, who, after further prompting from Gibson, contacted the Attorney General, Philip Yorke. Although Newcastle was hesitant, Yorke agreed that there were grounds for a prosecution, and author, translator and publisher were arrested. Radicati and Morgan were immediately bailed - it is not known who paid Radicati's bail - but Mears remained in prison for some time.²

¹ [Alberto Radicati,] *A Philosophical Dissertation upon Death composed for the consolation of the unhappy, by a Friend to Truth* (London: printed and sold for W. Mears, 1732); now reprinted in Alberto Radicati, *Dissertazione filosofica sulla morte*, ed. T. Cavallo (Pisa, 2003). This edition also prints an eighteenth-century French translation of the work, faced by a modern Italian translation from the French. Subsequent references are to the original publication.

² The story of the publication and prosecution was established in detail by Franco Venturi, in his great study of Radicati: *Saggi sull'Europa illuminista. I. Alberto Radicati di Passerano* (Turin, 1954), pp. 205-20. See also: Silvia Berti, 'Radicali ai margini: materialismo, libero pensiero e diritto al suicidio in Radicati di Passerano', *Rivista Storica Italiana*, cxvi, 3 (2004), 794-811.

In 1755, David Hume did not publish his essay ‘Of Suicide’. More accurately, he agreed to its suppression. He had hoped to publish it as one of *Five Dissertations*, along with ‘The Natural History of Religion’, ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’, and dissertations on the Passions and on Tragedy. The collection was in fact printed, and advance copies circulated, only for these to be called in and publication halted by the publisher, Andrew Millar. Millar was apparently put under pressure by William Warburton, who had seen a pre-publication copy, and, like Gibson twenty-three years earlier, sought or at least threatened prosecution.³ Hume having agreed to withdraw the essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul, Millar kept his nerve to the extent of publishing ‘The Natural History of Religion’ as one of *Four Dissertations* in 1757. Unsatisfied, Warburton immediately connived with his side-kick Richard Hurd to publish *Remarks on Mr David Hume’s Essay on the Natural History of Religion. Addressed to the Rev. Dr. Warburton* (1757), denouncing Hume as ‘a veteran in the dark and deadly trade of irreligion’, and much else.⁴ Meanwhile the two suppressed essays remained unpublished in English until after Hume’s death, appearing in 1777 as *Two Essays*.

If the similarities in the responses to the two essays on suicide were striking, the biographical circumstances of the two authors were of course very different. Though born (in 1698) into a long-established family of Piedmontese feudal nobility, Alberto Radicati had had a troubled youth. By the time he decided to leave Piedmont for exile in London, in 1726, he was in his second marriage, and was bitterly at odds with both his own and his first wife’s families. Worse still, he left without the permission of his king, and under a cloud of heterodoxy. He had failed to persuade

³ For this story (with characteristic added speculation): E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, second edition (Oxford, 1980), pp. 321-7.

⁴ [William Warburton and Richard Hurd,], *Remarks on Mr David Hume’s Essay on the Natural History of Religion. Addressed to the Rev. Dr. Warburton* (London, 1757), p. 8.

Vittorio Amadeo II to adopt his full, radical programme of measures to reduce the power and wealth of the Papacy and the Church in Savoy, and in retaliation the Church had raised accusations of heresy. Once in London Radicati received no support from the diplomatic representative of Savoy. Instead he found congenial intellectual company among the surviving English Freethinkers, who included Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal and Thomas Woolston. Unfortunately, however, publication of the *Philosophical Dissertation* followed hard on the controversy provoked by Woolston's *Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour* (1727-8), which advanced an entirely allegorical interpretation of Christ's miracles, based on Origen. Woolston had underlined the provocation by dedicating each of the six *Discourses* to a Bishop, beginning with Edmund Gibson. Gibson had led the charge against him, in print and by securing a prosecution. Gibson and his fellow bishops were careful to argue that the issue was one for the civil magistrate to resolve, and contrasted the liberty under the law which England had enjoyed since 1688 with the absolute liberty or license sought by the freethinkers. It was not difficult to make the same argument, with still greater apparent force, against Radicati's defence of suicide.⁵

Radicati was even more a marked man because of his advertised intention to publish in full his *Twelve Discourses concerning Religion and Government*. He had published the first of these, along with a thinly-disguised 'Account of His Conversion', as *Christianity set in a True Light* in 1730; announced in the *Philosophical Dissertation* and in *The Craftsman*, the *Twelve Discourses* appeared in 1734.⁶ Shortly afterwards, however, Radicati abandoned England, and sought refuge

⁵ On the significance of this controversy for the reception of Radicati's *Philosophical Dissertation*, see now: Giuseppe Ricuperati, 'Scrivere dall'Europa del dissenso: itinerari e percorsi della ragione', introduction to Alberto Radicati, *Discorsi morali, storici e politici*, ed. Duccio Canestri, (Turin, 2007), pp. i-lxiv, esp. xvii-xxxiv.

⁶ [Alberto Radicati,] *Christianity set in a True Light, in XII Discourses, Political and Historical*, by a Pagan Philosopher newly converted (London, printed for J. Peele, 1730) – but only printing the first

in the United Provinces. He continued to publish, notably a version of the *Twelve Discourses* in French.⁷ But had long since been abandoned by his wife, and was reduced to extreme poverty. In October 1737 he fell ill with tuberculosis, and died within the month. By then the orthodox of Holland had found a new way to persecute him, obtaining from him a deathbed ‘conversion’ back to the Calvinism he admitted to having adopted much earlier, in Savoy.⁸

David Hume’s path to the compromises of 1755-57 was rather different. His first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) had attracted disappointingly little notice on publication. But Hume had himself taken steps to prevent its becoming notorious, by ‘castrating’ the work of parts liable to give offence. One of these, he admitted, was ‘some reasonings concerning miracles’; others remain the subject of guesswork.⁹ Nevertheless, the *Treatise*’s complete elimination of the divine from its explanation of both the understanding and morals did not escape either fellow-philosophers or clergy, in England or in Scotland. The realisation of this was almost certainly a factor in Frances Hutcheson’s steadfast opposition to Hume’s being appointed to the vacant post of Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University in 1745, and likewise informed the Edinburgh clergy’s refusal to approve Hume’s candidacy.¹⁰ The rejection had condemned Hume to several more years of short-term appointments as a tutor and diplomatic attaché, before his income from

Discourse and a contents list of the others; *Philosophical Dissertation*, p. 27n; *Twelve Discourses concerning Religion and Government, Inscribed to all Lovers of Truth and Liberty*, by Albert Count de Passeran, ‘The Second Edition’ (London, printed for the author, 1734). See Venturi, *Alberto Radicati di Passerano*, p. 210, and Berti, ‘Radicali ai margini’, p. 798.

⁷ *Recueil de pièces curieuses sur les matières les plus intéressantes*, par Albert Radicati, Comte de Passeran (Rotterdam, chez la veuve Thomas Johnson et fils, 1736).

⁸ Franco Venturi, ‘La conversione e la morte del conte Radicati’, *Rivista Storica Italiana*, lxxv, 2, (1963), 365-73, transl in ‘Radicati’s exile in England and Holland’, in *Italy and the Enlightenment. Studies in a Cosmopolitan Century*, ed. Stuart Woolf (London, 1972), 63-102; Silvia Berti, ‘Radicati in Olanda’, *Rivista Storica Italiana*, xcvi, 2 (1984), 510-22.

⁹ David Hume to Henry Home (Lord Kames), 2 Dec. 1737, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols (Oxford, 1932), I, pp. 24-5; also, M.A. Stewart, ‘An early fragment on evil’, in M.A. Stewart and J.P. Wright (eds), *Hume and Hume’s Connexions* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 160-70.

¹⁰ M.A. Stewart, *The Kirk and the Infidel* (Lancaster, 1995).

publications was sufficient to enable him to realise his ambition to be an independent man of letters.

Hume's response to the rejection had been a mixture of defiance and renewed prudence. Defiance was evident in his publication of the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (1748), with essays on miracles and on 'the practical consequences of natural religion' (renamed in 1750 'Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State'). Between 1748 and 1755 he also wrote the essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul, 'the Natural History of Religion', and the 'Dialogues concerning Natural Religion'. Of these, the 'Dialogues' most explicitly and persistently questioned the existence of God. Hume began sending drafts of this work to friends as early as 1751, but in the face of their consistent reservations, withheld it from publication in his lifetime, instead making careful provision for publication after his death. The decision to withdraw the essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul was therefore by no means out of character: Hume recognised that publication of works perceived to be hostile to Christianity would make life difficult for both himself and his friends. He had certainly not abandoned his intention to pit philosophy against superstition, but he tacitly acknowledged that this was a war which could not be waged frontally. To the end of his life Hume remained sensitive to clerical reaction, warning Edward Gibbon (who apparently did not foresee the danger) that he would face 'the clamour of bigots' for chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall*. He was, quite literally, at pains to ensure that he himself died a philosopher's death a few months later.¹¹

¹¹ Hume to Edward Gibbon, 18 March 1776, *Letters of Hume*, II, pp. 309-11. For other bibliographical and biographical details, see M.A. Stewart, 'The dating of Hume's manuscripts', in Paul Wood (ed), *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester, N.Y., and Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2000), pp. 267-314, and my 'David Hume', in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

Viewed together, Radicati's fate and Hume's prudence may well be taken as evidence of the retreat, if not outright defeat, of radical Enlightenment in Britain by the mid-eighteenth century. Despite Warburton's ire over the publication of Hume's 'Natural History' (and, three years earlier, the *Works* of Bolingbroke), the era of Free-thinking and irreligion associated with Shaftesbury, Collins, Toland and Tindal was in the past. The 1730s in particular appear to have been a decisive decade: the hounding of Radicati underlined the confidence of the orthodox that they had won their campaign against the freethinkers. Yet while this seems to me broadly accurate – Jonathan Israel is persuasive in claiming that by 1740 radical Enlightenment was over in England (and in Italy)¹² - the cases of Radicati and Hume bear further investigation. In the remainder of this paper I wish to pursue two lines of investigation. First, I shall look more closely at the content of Radicati's and Hume's arguments, at their discussions of suicide in particular, and at the broader approach to religion evident in other of their works. Second, I shall look at the relation between their treatments of suicide, their approaches to religion, and their ideas of liberty. If liberty was not, of itself, a major preoccupation of Radicati, it most certainly was one for Hume.

II

The argument of Radicati's *Philosophical Dissertation upon Death* was in two parts. The first outlined an understanding of nature according to which the fear of death could not be innate. Nature, according to Radicati, consists of an eternally co-existent matter and motion, the particles of matter moving through spaces which separated them. So constituted, Nature possesses the qualities of power, wisdom, and

¹² Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001), p. 6.

perfection. It is always active, its motions necessitated according to unalterable laws of nature.

NATURE, being herself superlatively perfect, ever was and ever will be active; nor can she once cease from operating, even for the shortest instant, or in the smallest part of the whole universe: because inaction is the very summit of imperfection. This constant and perpetual operation is that which I term the *course*, or the unalterable *Law of Nature*.

On this understanding of Nature, death is simply a dissolution of corporeal parts, and will be followed by their recombination in new bodies. The fear of death, therefore, cannot be natural; on the contrary, Nature delights in change. Instead, Radicati believed, the fear of death has been instilled by certain ‘ambitious men’, who, discontented with the state of equality which Nature had given them, employed cunning and artifice to obtain dominion over others. Exploiting the ignorance of the people, they took advantage of an eclipse, a comet, or a peal of thunder, to make them believe that the gods were angry, and would punish them unless appeased. It was these ‘impostors’, claiming to interpret the divine will, who had taught men to fear death. Naturally, it is death alone which frees men from bondage to other men, restoring the original equality between them.¹³

The second part of the work was a demonstration that it was not immoral for a man to deprive himself of life, for all morality is acquired by education and habit, and what counts as moral has consequently varied quite arbitrarily between peoples and across history. Approval of theft, killing, rebellion, and all kinds of sexual practices - fornication, adultery, sodomy - could be found among the ancients, including the ancient Hebrews, and in the Indies, China and Japan, and modern Europe. The sentiment of remorse is no guide to what is morally good or bad, because it too is the product of education. What is good is always local to a society, and measured by

¹³ [Radicati,] *A Philosophical Dissertation upon Death*, pp. 3-28; quoted passage on p. 19.

what it contributes to the public quiet and happiness. Besides, men act from the necessity of self-preservation, even when committing crimes. They act in accordance with provident Nature in pursuing what is physically good and avoiding what is physically harmful. And when they lose their happiness, they cannot be compelled to live in misery. For this reason, Radicati concluded, Nature ‘has given to men an intire liberty to quit life when it is become troublesome to them.’ In ceasing to live, a man does no wrong to society, himself, or ‘the order of Providence’. The perfection of Nature is undiminished.¹⁴

It is not difficult to treat Radicati’s argument in the *Philosophical Dissertation* as a radical version of pantheist materialism. Margaret Jacob underlines its similarity to Toland’s pantheism; Jonathan Israel likewise numbers him among the radical Spinozists.¹⁵ A contrary interpretation is offered by Silvia Berti, who rejects the attribution of pantheism in favour of an Epicurean form of materialism. Although observing that his endorsement of vacuities between corporeal particles left him open to inconsistency, Berti concludes that Radicati adhered to a strictly materialist ontology.¹⁶ In either case, however, it seems to follow that Radicati’s arguments were virtually those of an atheist.¹⁷ But this depiction of Radicati’s thinking is complicated when the *Philosophical Dissertation* is set alongside his larger work, the *Twelve Discourses concerning Religion and Government*, whose publication he anticipated in the *Dissertation*.

Although not published in full until 1734, the *Twelve Discourses* was certainly of earlier origin. Much of its content derived from Radicati’s vain attempt to

¹⁴ *Philosophical Dissertation*, pp. 28-94, quotations from pp. 86, 92.

¹⁵ Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981), p. 173; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 68-9; also *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 43, 671.

¹⁶ Berti, ‘Radicati ai margini’, pp. 805-9.

¹⁷ Thus David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London, 1988), pp. 94-5, who judges Radicati’s pantheism ‘even more evidently atheistic than Spinoza’s’.

persuade his king, Vittorio Emmanuele II, to attack the power and expropriate the property of the Church in Savoy. Several of the discourses were devoted to explaining how the Church had acquired temporal possessions and worldly power, and how the Papal monarchy in particular had acquired and maintained its authority. In response, Radicati set himself in Discourse XI to demonstrate that ‘all sacred and civil authority belong *de jure* to the Prince’, an argument he supported by repeated references to Hobbes’s *De Cive*. The work culminated in Discourse XII with a series of recommendations for restraining the power of the Roman clergy, and re-establishing the authority of the civil sovereign.¹⁸

The attack on the Church was predicated, however, on an account in the opening discourses of the doctrine of Christ and its correspondence with the Law of Nature. In Discourse I Radicati defined the teaching of Christ as contained in four simple principles: poverty, humility, forgiveness, and charity. Each of these was illustrated by quotation from the Gospels, and exemplified in their accounts of Christ’s own behaviour.¹⁹ Commenting on Christ’s injunction of charity, Radicati observed that Christ commended the Samaritan and the publican for their charity, contrasting their behaviour with the lack of charity shown by the Pharisees. This showed that Christ was satisfied that those commonly called atheists or deists are more charitable than priests. But, Radicati added, it is a mistake to say that deists are atheists, for they admit a first cause under the names of God, Nature, Eternal Being, matter, universal motion, or soul.

Such were Democritus, Epicurus, Diagoras, Lucian, Socrates, Anaxagoras, Seneca, Hobbes, Blount, Spinoza, Vanini, St Evremond, Bayle, Collins, and in general all that go under the name of Speculative Atheists; and none but fools or madmen can ever deny it. So that the word Atheist must signify Deist, or nothing. There being no such thing as an Atheist in the world, as the Ignorant

¹⁸ Radicati, *Twelve Discourses concerning Religion and Government*, Discourses VI-IX, XI (references to Hobbes on pp. 236, 240), XII.

¹⁹ *Twelve Discourses*, pp. 3-10.

imagine, and the crafty priests would have believed, when they brand with this odious name such as detect their impostures, with design to expose them to the rage and fury of an incensed populace.*

*Vide Bayle's *Pensees diverses*, chap. 130 &c. *Continuat. Des pensees diverses*, chap. 20, 21, 76, 143, 144, 145.²⁰

Discourse III built on these foundations by maintaining that Christ's principles corresponded to the Laws of Nature which had obtained before the Fall. In that state of innocence, men had not had to work for a living, but had lived in a condition of perfect equality. This, Radicati argued, was the true 'state of nature'. It refuted the doctrine of Hobbes on the subject.

Now in a society where there is an equality in every thing and every body, and where necessaries are not wanting, there must consequently be peace and quiet; with submission to the learned Hobbes, who pretends to prove that in the State of nature men are always at daggers-draw with each other, because the principle he builds upon is false; by supposing a multitude already corrupted by the notion of *meum* and *tuum*, and consequently by luxury and ambition, instead of a plain and simple multitude, following the all-wise Laws of Nature.²¹

Societies in such a pre-lapsarian state of innocence had existed in the Canary Islands, and among many nations of Africa and America, before they were discovered by Christians; they had even existed in ancient Britain. To those who had fallen, however, Christ's coming had offered an opportunity to renew the original Laws of Nature. Christ offered redemption, not by returning men to the state of nature, but by placing them in a state of grace. He delivered men from the curse of the laws of Moses, and offered them a second chance to live according to the Laws of Nature. Radicati now left his readers in no doubt as to the radicalism of these Laws, and hence Christ's teaching:

Such were the laws of Christ, bearing an exact resemblance to those of Nature, whereby he proposed to settle a perfect Democracy amongst men, the only

²⁰ *Twelve Discourses*, pp. 10-11.

²¹ *Twelve Discourses*, pp. 32-3. In a footnote Radicati quoted from *De Cive*, and commented on Hobbes's misuse of the idea of *societas*, which applied as well or better to savages following the laws of nature as to men living under civil governments.

method he could take to make them happy. To this end he introduced a community of goods, banished luxury and riches, and ordained that no man should be distinguished from another: well knowing that in a Government really Democratical, men ought to have all things in common, and be all equal; no father must know his children, nor the child his father, as such a superiority and knowledge could not suit with that community of goods, and that equality, which are the basis of a commonwealth.²²

In other words, the equality enjoined by the original laws of nature, and re-affirmed by Christ, required not only community of goods, but denial of family, and thus keeping women in common. For, Radicati argued, it was love of our children and descendants which was the greatest incentive to acquire riches. This was why Christ had advised his disciples to hate the names of father, mother, and wife, and had refused to acknowledge his own mother and brothers. The distinction of families is a perpetual occasion of division, the real cause of Hobbes's *bellum omnium contra omnes*.²³

According to Radicati, the apostles and the primitive Christians had lived according to Christ's commands for nearly 300 years. They had every thing in common, and did not want for necessities. (Radicati did not claim, however, that the primitive Christians had communities of women.) What had brought this way of life to an end, he argued in Discourse IV, was the building of temples and the establishment of Bishops, along with the appointment of Deacons to administer the temporal goods of the Church. The Deacons had gradually yielded to temptation, appropriating the common fund for themselves; seeing this, Bishops has taken over the responsibility for temporals, at the same time as they competed in ingenious interpretations of the simple doctrine of Christ. By such means the Church, and in

²² *Twelve Discourses*, pp. 45-6.

²³ *Twelve Discourses*, pp. 46-51.

due course the Papacy, had begun their long ascent to power over the laity and their rulers.²⁴

Radicati was liberal with references in the *Twelve Discourses*, displaying his knowledge of Hobbes's *De Cive* and Bayle's *Pensées diverses* and the *Continuation des pensées diverses*. He cited works by Grotius and Spinoza, and supported his account of the corruption of the early Church by reference to its recent historians. Other obvious inspirations were the works of Collins, Toland, and, especially, Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation, or the Gospel a republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730). As with the *Philosophical Dissertation*, more than one intellectual history of the *Twelve Discourses* can be reconstructed. For the limited purposes of this paper, however, the significance of the *Twelve Discourses* lies in the light they may throw on the interpretation of the *Philosophical Dissertation upon Death*.

As we have seen, Radicati took the opportunity in the first of the *Twelve Discourses* to deny the charge of atheism. But the terms in which he did so, claiming that all the philosophers accused of atheism were in fact deists because they admitted a first cause, whether they called it God, Nature, matter or soul, may have been a stratagem.²⁵ The claim is in any case apparently contradicted in the *Philosophical Dissertation* by Radicati's contention that matter existed eternally. More difficult to ignore, however, is the foundational argument of the *Twelve Discourses* that Christ's teaching had renewed the original Laws of Nature. It is true that Radicati compared Christ with Lycurgus, but this was because Lycurgus alone among human legislators

²⁴ *Twelve Discourses*, Discourses IV-V.

²⁵ Berman, *A History of Atheism*, pp. 93-5, treats Radicati as an example of the deliberate 'suppression' of atheism.

had instituted equality through the community of goods and women.²⁶ Christ's role was unique, as Radicati presented it, because in renewing the Law of Nature he had redeemed man from original sin, and placed him in a state of grace. By virtue of Christ's place in their argument, the *Twelve Discourses* have an irreducibly religious character. This was Franco Venturi's original interpretation of Radicati's thought;²⁷ if it has since been set aside in favour of materialist interpretations, it seems to me that Venturi's interpretation retains its validity. The *Philosophical Dissertation upon Death* may well be among the most radical of the intellectual consequences of religious heterodoxy in the period up to 1740. But when it is read alongside the *Twelve Discourses*, it is more plausible to regard it as an expression of heterodoxy than of outright unbelief.

III

David Hume began his essay 'Of Suicide' by observing that men's reluctance to seek the refuge of death was one of the many cruel consequences of superstition. Since philosophy offers a sovereign antidote to superstition and false religion, he would accordingly 'endeavour to restore men to their native liberty, by examining all the common arguments against suicide, and shewing, that that action may be free from every imputation of guilt or blame; according to the sentiments of all the antient philosophers.'²⁸ Only in a note at the very end of the essay did Hume purport to

²⁶ *Twelve Discourses*, p. 8. Radicati developed the comparison in *Nazarenus et Lycurgos mis en parallèle*, which he published along with the French version of the twelve *Discours* in the *Recueil des pièces curieuses* in Rotterdam in 1736. On this, Venturi, *Alberto Radicati di Passerano*, pp. 233-4.

²⁷ Venturi, *Alberto Radicati di Passerano*, in particular his wonderful final chapter, 'Deismo, cristianesimo e democrazia perfetta'. For an account of the genesis of this book, see my 'Enlightenment without "origins"? From *Radicati di Passerano* to *Utopia e riforma*', in Manuela Albertone (ed), *Il Reubblicanesimo Moderno. L'idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi* (Naples, 2006), pp. 131-154.

²⁸ David Hume, 'Of Suicide', in *Two Essays I On Suicide II On the Immortality of the Soul*, by David Hume Esq., Now first printed (Edinburgh, for C. Hunter, 1789), p. 5. Also in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, revised edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 'Essays

consider whether the arguments he derived from the ancient philosophers might be applicable to Christians as well as heathens. But this was disingenuous. For the arguments which Hume organised the essay to answer were precisely those based on the three Christian duties, to God, to our neighbours, and to ourselves.²⁹ Suicide, Hume would show, was no transgression of any of these.

In the case of our duty to God, he questioned the sense of the objection that suicide disturbed the laws of matter and motion by which divine providence orders the universe. Men were no different from any other animals in being subject to those laws, and in having full authority to use their prudence and skill, as far as their power extends, to alter the operations of nature to ensure their survival. By the same token, man had free disposal of his own life, and might lawfully employ the power with which nature has endowed him to end it.

Be it animate or inanimate, rational or irrational, 'tis all a case: It's power is still derived from the supreme creator, and is alike comprehended in the order of his providence. When the horror of pain prevails over the love of life: When a voluntary action anticipates the effect of blind causes; It is only in consequence of those powers and principles, which he has implanted in his creatures. Divine providence is still inviolate, and placed far beyond the reach of human injuries.³⁰

It was equally mistaken to object that providence has placed man in a particular station, like a sentinel, which, if he deserts it, he is guilty of rebellion against his almighty sovereign. Providence may have placed man at present in 'this chamber';

withdrawn and unpublished', p. 580. Subsequent references will be to this modern edition, which is based on the proof-copy of the suppressed 1755 version of the essay, to have been included in the *Five Dissertations*.

²⁹ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment. A Study of the language of religion and ethics in England 1660-1780 Volume II Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 299, where she points out that these were the three duties set out in the Latitudinarian (not Calvinist) tract *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658). Hume had referred to this as a counterpoint to Cicero's *De Officiis* in *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

³⁰ 'Of Suicide', p. 584.

but anyone may leave it when he judges proper, without the imputation of deserting his post.³¹

Suicide is no more a breach of our duty to society. A man who retires from life does society no harm; he only ceases to do good. He is certainly not obliged to do a small good to society, at the expense of a great harm to himself. As for our duty to ourselves, it is evident that age, sickness or misfortune may render life a burden. Such is our natural horror of death, however, that we never have recourse to it from trivial motives; we can therefore be sure that only those cursed with ‘an incurable depravity or gloominess of temper’ will adopt the remedy of suicide.³²

In his concluding note, Hume expressed confidence that suicide is as lawful under the Christian dispensation as it was to heathens. There was not a single text of Scripture prohibiting it. On the contrary, ‘that great and infallible rule of faith and practice’ has left us, in this case, to ‘our natural liberty’. The commandment not to kill evidently referred to the killing of others; and in any case ‘all the law of Moses is abolished, except so far as it is established by the law of nature’. Christians and heathens were therefore on the same footing; Hume’s arguments covered both.³³

The language of Hume’s essay is that of studied moderation. He was happy to invoke ‘the supreme creator’, and to discuss the order of divine providence. But his presentational manoeuvres, confining himself to the arguments of ancient philosophers, but applying them to a Christian account of our duties, are an indication that his words cannot simply be taken at face value. Reference to Hume’s other writings on religious questions suggests that he did not give familiar terms the force a Christian would expect. Interpretation of Hume’s thinking about religion is of course a complex and contentious issue, over which modern scholars disagree, sometimes

³¹ ‘Of Suicide’, p. 585.

³² ‘Of Suicide’, pp. 586-8.

³³ ‘Of Suicide’, pp. 588-9n.

sharply. What follows is necessarily only a summary of what seems to me to be the most plausible interpretation of Hume's position, as it bears on the issues raised by the essay on suicide.

The most general issues concerned the existence of a creator and the operation of a divine providence in the universe. Hume's fullest discussion of these issues would be found in the 'Dialogues of Natural Religion' which he withheld from publication during his lifetime. But he had addressed the central questions of intelligent design and our knowledge of providence in the last but one of the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* in 1748; and before that he reflected at length on what we can know about the world in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Our understanding of the order of the universe, Hume argued, is derived from observation alone. We think that what happens in it is caused and determined, in the sense that we observe patterns of constant conjunction between occurrences, and have developed explanations of these in terms of laws of matter and motion. But we can ascribe no qualities to 'Nature' beyond what we observe; 'Nature' itself adds nothing to our explanations. Reflecting more directly on whether the order of nature showed evidence of intelligence and design which must be ascribed to a 'rational intelligent being', Hume questioned whether this could ever be established by the rules of constant conjunction. Even allowing that the suggestion was possible, nothing further could be inferred about the attributes of the supposed author of nature.

The religious hypothesis, therefore, must be considered only as a particular method of accounting for the visible phenomena of the universe: But no just reasoner will ever presume to infer from it any single fact, and alter or add to the phenomena, in any singular particular.³⁴

³⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (the title given to the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* from 1756), ed. T.L. Beauchamp, (Oxford, 1999), Sect xi, para 18.

Warburton later described these as ‘Epicurean arguments against the being of a God’, and suggested that in the ‘Natural History of Religion’ Hume was retreating towards a naturalist theism, admitting a divinely created order.³⁵ But this was either optimistic or tactical: Hume never identified a satisfactory reason to conclude that there was a creator, or an overseeing providence.

When it came to Hume’s treatment of morals, by contrast, Warburton admitted that there was no cause for hope. Hume attached no moral significance to the existence of God, still less to the figure of Christ. From the supposed existence of providence, he argued, we can draw no inference about how we should behave; we have no reason to infer that it will distribute justice among men, either now or in the future.³⁶ Warburton complained that Hume constructed his ‘Natural History of Religion’ from every ancient testimony except the Bible;³⁷ in fact, Hume referred to Moses in passing as one of the ‘inspired writers’ who had transformed the deity of a particular nation into the creator of the world.³⁸ But he made nothing special of Christ. In the essay suppressed along with that on suicide, Hume briskly dismissed the metaphysical, moral and physical arguments for an immortal soul; here and elsewhere he observed how little men act as if they care about what may befall them in a future state, when they have so much to concern them in the present. Fears of a future world are artfully cultivated by those who seek power and riches in this one.³⁹ As Hume had explained at length in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, our moral values are formed according to the worldly standard of the ‘useful and agreeable’. We arrive

³⁵ [Warburton and Hurd,] *Remarks on Hume’s Natural History of Religion*, pp. 8-9.

³⁶ Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, xi, 20-22, 27.

³⁷ [Warburton and Hurd,] *Remarks on Hume’s Natural History of Religion*, pp. 24-5.

³⁸ David Hume, *Four Dissertations* (London, printed for A. Millar, 1757): *I The Natural History of Religion*, sect VI, p. 48.

³⁹ ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’, printed from the corrected proof of the 1755 printing, in David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E.F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), pp. 590-98. The essay sharpened and simplified arguments in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. I, Part 4, sect. 5 ‘Of the immateriality of the soul’. (I have used the edition by D.F. and M.J Norton, (Oxford, 2000).)

at these values by a process of sympathy and mutual estimation, and maintain them by human conventions, which over time become custom.⁴⁰ It is these ‘useful and agreeable’ values, Hume then maintained in the ‘Natural History of Religion’, which maintain society – not the unsociable, hypocritically self-denying values of monotheistic religions like Christianity. We are indeed the better for living as sociable atheists.⁴¹

Argued in these terms, Hume’s understanding of the world and of human moral behaviour was not a product of religious heterodoxy. It dispensed with religion altogether. Hume was an unbeliever. His unbelief was almost explicit in important component arguments of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and evidently implicit in its whole structure. There is justice – if also cliché – in the recent depiction of the *Treatise* as ‘the jewel in the crown of the radical Enlightenment’.⁴² Its arguments were carried on, supplemented, and elaborated in the *Philosophical Essays* and the ‘Natural History of Religion’; when finally published, the *Dialogues of Natural Religion* sealed Hume’s case against a belief in God and the superiority of Christian values. If Radicati’s *Philosophical Dissertation upon Death* had been a consequence of religious heterodoxy, Hume’s essay on suicide was as surely a consequence of unbelief. But it was artfully expressed as well as a willingly postponed consequence: Hume was a prudent rather than a rash unbeliever.

⁴⁰ *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. III ‘Of Morals’.

⁴¹ *Four Dissertations I The Natural History of Religion*, esp. pp. 103-17. This interpretation, and that of Hume’s moral philosophy in the *Treatise*, is developed in my *The Case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 289-302, 308-16.

⁴² Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise. Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (Oxford, 2008), p. 278, italics the author’s.

IV

Hume's prudence was not simply timidity, however. If we turn, finally, to consider the relation between Radicati's heterodoxy, Hume's unbelief, and their respective ideas of liberty, it will become clear why Hume thought he did not need to be imprudently explicit in his attacks on religion.

Both Radicati and Hume invoked man's 'natural liberty' in their defences of suicide. In apparently similar terms, both suggested that we are naturally at liberty to preserve or to end our lives. But neither made this fundamental to their answers to the religious objections to suicide. Although he did not do so in the *Philosophical Dissertation*, Radicati could have related the idea of natural liberty to that of 'natural right'. In the tenth of his *Twelve Discourses*, he made Spinoza's connection between man's natural power and his right, and observed that the individual's exercise of his natural right is regulated by his desire and strength. Should the desire to live weaken, the argument implied, the individual might rightfully decide not to continue to do so.⁴³ But even if natural liberty were rendered as natural right, its contribution to the argument on suicide was limited. Since Nature's laws were all-determining, reference to 'natural liberty' simply indicated that a man's ending his life would not be a breach of them. Hume could not equate natural liberty with natural right, since he had no concept of the latter; but his account of causation left no more room to value natural liberty as the expression of free will. The 'natural liberty' to end one's life was simply the assurance that such an act would not contravene the order of nature.

The efforts of the two thinkers to make suicide a matter of public discussion also presupposed another freedom – the liberty to publish opinions of which the guardians of Christian orthodoxy disapproved. Both men recognised that they were

⁴³ *Twelve Discourses*, Discourse X, pp. 189-95.

fortunate to be living where there was a large measure of toleration. Early in the *Twelve Discourses* Radicati reassured himself that he might publish without danger, being in ‘a blessed country’ where men are allowed to make use of their reason.⁴⁴ In the introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume observed that recent improvements in reason and philosophy in England ‘can only be owing to a land of toleration and of liberty’. Nowhere else, he added in an early essay, was the liberty of the press so great.⁴⁵ By this he and Radicati meant that they lived in a society in which the civil magistrate and the law, rather than the clergy, determined the limits to freedom of expression. Radicati, as we have seen, conceived of a civil sovereign in Hobbesian terms, and regarded it as essential that the sovereign have authority over the church and its clergy. (Though Radicati was writing of the Roman Catholic Church, he gave no reason to suppose that his principles were inapplicable to England.) Hume could not argue in quite these terms, having no place for the concept of sovereignty. But he was perfectly clear that only ‘the steady resolution of the civil magistrate’ would uphold the principles of toleration, ‘in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots’.⁴⁶ He acknowledged that civil liberty, and even toleration, had been championed by religious enthusiasts. But the enthusiasts’ confidence that they spoke the word of God for themselves, without the mediation of clergy, made them dangerous allies – as the history of the Civil War would confirm.⁴⁷ Hume therefore defended the idea of an established clergy, for all forms of government, free, mixed, or monarchical. Giving equal religious liberty to all sects would simply encourage their clergy to compete with each other by bidding up their

⁴⁴ *Twelve Discourses*, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁵ *Treatise of Human Nature*, ‘Introduction’, para. 7; ‘Of the Liberty of the Press’ (1741), in *Essays*, pp. 9-13.

⁴⁶ *Four Dissertations I The Natural History of Religion*, p. 61.

⁴⁷ ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ (1741), in *Essays*, pp. 78-9, followed by *The History of Great Britain* (1754), in the edition by Duncan Forbes (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 502-3.

particular interpretations of Christian doctrine. An established clergy, by contrast, would exert themselves only to restrain their congregations within their own bounds. Over time, they would bore the people into indifference to all doctrine.⁴⁸

For all the anti-clericalism with which they were expressed, these arguments did not amount to a case for unlimited toleration. In fact, Radicati and Hume were arguing from the same basic position as their persecutors, Bishop Gibson and the Rev. Dr. Warburton. Both sides would leave it to the civil magistrate to decide the proper extent of toleration and liberty of the press, and they agreed that the magistrate should support an established clergy. The orthodox, the heterodox, and the unbeliever all stood on the same ground of civil toleration and Erastianism. This being the case, Hume was consistent as well as prudent in his willingness to withhold his most explicitly irreligious works from publication.

But Hume had more to say on the subject of civil liberty in particular. Among his first essays was one, 'Of Liberty and Despotism' (1741), which not only defined civil liberty, but presented it as the supreme political value of modern society. Civil liberty was liberty under the law. Though it had developed in 'free governments', or republics, it did not require that the people participate in government to ensure its continued existence. It was equally to be found in modern, 'civilized' monarchies. Despite the English prejudice against monarchy, and the French monarchy in particular, civilized monarchies as much as republics were now '*a government of Laws, not of Men*'. Hume's summary of the benefits of such a government was wonderfully succinct. 'Property is there secure; industry encouraged; the arts

⁴⁸ The argument is most clearly put in the 'Digression concerning the ecclesiastical state' early in Hume's account of the Reformation in the *History of England under the House of Tudor* (1759): *The History of England*, in six volumes, based on the edition of 1778, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), III, pp. 135-6. Hume recommended that there be an established (Presbyterian) clergy in his 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth' (1752), *Essays*, p. 520.

flourish.⁴⁹ Covered by these few words, however, were two momentous developments. One was the ever more intensive cultivation of the arts and, especially, the sciences, improving human understanding. The other was the growth of commerce, within and between nations. Commerce stimulates the industry and thus increases the wealth of a country's inhabitants, diffusing its rewards among all ranks of society.⁵⁰ These developments were not simply beneficial in themselves. Improved understanding allayed men's fears, explaining what had hitherto seemed terrifyingly inexplicable. It thus diminished the need for priests to offer religion as a substitute for knowledge, and ceremonies as a way propitiating a mysterious deity. Even more directly, industry and commerce improved men's material condition in this world, obviating the need for promised consolations in the next. Men who enjoyed the benefits of a modern, commercial society would be even less inclined than they had been to regulate their conduct by the supposed rewards available in a future state; instead they would recognise and value what was useful and agreeable in the present.

To Hume philosophy and commerce were twin antidotes to superstition, and both were made possible by civil liberty. This was why an unbeliever like himself ought to be prudent in the expression of his irreligion, and accept that his freedom to publish might be limited by the law and the civil magistrate. Scandal only damaged a cause which was advancing by other less direct but much more efficacious means. Even if the magistrate determined that the law should check the freedom to be irreligious, the existence of civil liberty would advance the ends of irreligion far more surely than any unbeliever's writings, by encouraging the non-religious pursuits of philosophy and commerce. This was why Hume was prepared to suppress his essay

⁴⁹ 'Of Civil Liberty' (the title the essay was given from 1758 onwards), *Essays*, pp. 87-96, esp. p. 94, italics Hume's or his printer's. On Hume's understandings of liberty, Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975) remains fundamental.

⁵⁰ 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' (1742); 'Of Commerce', 'Of Refinement in the Arts' (both first published in the *Political Discourses*, 1752); in *Essays*.

on suicide. It was the difference between Enlightenment, as Hume exemplified it by the mid-eighteenth century, and the earlier, radical Enlightenment so bravely pursued by Radicati.