CHAPTER 7

Natural Theology as Superstition: David Hume and the Changing Ideology of Natural Inquiry¹

Tamás Demeter

Summary

As is frequently emphasized, it was a common conviction of early modern natural philosophers that God had written two books, the Bible and the Book of Nature, and that studying the latter was to study God through his creation. Early modern natural philosophy and modern science are partly distinguished by the former’s intimate relation to God: natural philosophers frequently talked with God in mind even when they were not directly talking about him. This is clearly true of many of Hume’s contemporaries. In this essay I wish to focus on sections X and XI of Hume’s first Enquiry, and to argue that their arguments are complementary if read in this context. The former argues against the possibility of founding knowledge claims on revealed religion; the latter argues against the possibility of acquiring knowledge about transcendent matters on the basis of natural inquiry. By challenging the cognitive authority of religion, Hume undermines the dominant ideology of natural inquiry that made sense of contemporary cognitive practices by at least implicit reference to God. Hume’s work is therefore ideological in this context: he works to distance cognitive practices from religious epistemic ideals, and argues for replacing them with secular methodological standards. This is the legacy which he contributes to the emerging self-image of modern natural science.

Introduction

Natural theology, or physico-theology as it is sometimes called, was unquestionably an important part of early modern natural inquiry. The need for a

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discipline aimed at an understanding of God through the study of his creation arose from the widespread conviction that the world is the product of God’s handwork. As such, God’s intentions, attributes, and purposes were taken to be reflected, to some significant degree, not only in the Bible but also in his creation: God had written two books to be studied by different means, i.e. the Bible and the ‘Book of Nature’. As two books ascribed to the authorship of God, knowledge about the world perceived as God’s creation had to be reconciled with knowledge contained in Holy Scripture perceived as God’s word. In this enterprise the resources of natural philosophy and theology had to be combined so as to reach a joint cognitive purpose: a Christian understanding of the world.

As Stephen Gaukroger points out, this aspiration was especially strong among the ‘Royal Society apologists’ who, in the aftermath of Robert Boyle and Thomas Sprat, ‘were talking of natural philosophy in terms of a religious office, and natural philosophy was taken as a non-partisan way—that is, one free of sectarian confessional issues—of engaging religious questions of divine nature and purpose’. Andrew Cunningham, in a similar vein, sees the role of natural theology in early modern natural inquiry as so central that on this basis he denies the continuity of natural philosophy and modern science. Natural philosophy is about God even when its practitioners are not talking about him, a feature entirely uncharacteristic of modern science: ‘no-one ever undertook the practice of natural philosophy without having God in mind, and knowing that the study of God and God’s creation—in a way different from that pursued by theology—was the point of the whole exercise’. And even if John Henry’s verdict in the debate surrounding Cunningham’s thesis may very well be true, namely that ‘[n]atural philosophers, after all, were not theologians, and would have seen it as a betrayal of their natural philosophical principles to invoke God’s direct intervention in their explanations’, the conviction that natural philosophers were studying God’s creation provided the basic ideological framework of early modern science: this was a background presupposition

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