Hume’s Spiritual Crisis

and the Ambiguity of Ancient Philosophy

David Burchell
University of Western Sydney

Spiritual crises and philosophy
In a celebrated moment at the end of the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature* the young David Hume pauses to muse upon the obscure psychic ailment - that famous ‘philosophical melancholy and delirium’ - which dogs his quest to found the new science of morals upon some certain ground. In prose which contrasts sharply with his preceding tone of philosophical equanimity, Hume reflects upon the pitifully inadequate equipment of the human mind, and compares it unfavourably with the immensity of the ocean of ignorance with which he is confronted. He is ‘affronted and confounded’ by the ‘profound solitude’ in which his philosophy places him, and fancies himself ‘some strange uncouth monster’, expelled from the warm glow of human society, and ‘left utterly abandoned and disconsolate’. Rather than establish certainty in a world of mere appearances, reflection seems condemned over and over to ‘entirely subvert itself’, leaving him with no moorings whatever. This sense of pure vertigo, of spinning in the abyss, hurtles Hume into ‘the deepest darkness’, a rough passage wherein he is deprived of all his faculties.

Still, relief is near enough at hand, if only you are capable of giving yourself up to it. The knots tied by reason’s fingers, though un-entangeable by reason, can be cut by the sword of Nature. Play a game of backgammon, chat with friends for a few hours, Hume assures us, and you will find abstract speculation has been rendered ‘cold, strained and ridiculous’. Your mind’s eye recovers its focus, your limbs recover their sense of balance, and a healthy if unsystematic air of scepticism enters your nostrils. Then you are free to ‘indulge a reverie’ in your chamber or walk alone by the riverside with your mind collected and your appetite restored. The trick is simple: where reason is allied to appetite and inclination, intellectual ambition to a healthy desire for esteem and self-love, and seriousness of intent with carelessness of manner, our nature and our philosophical yearnings will be in equipoise.
Several years before, in the draft of a letter traditionally thought to have been addressed to a London doctor, Hume had provided a somewhat different clinical account of the course and symptoms of his philosophical ‘distemper’. As a teenager, he wrote, he had developed an overwhelming attraction towards the pursuit of philosophical discovery. And so around his eighteenth birthday he sank himself - initially, at least, with great contentment - in study and reflection. After a few months of this, however, he detected a growing ‘distemper’: a coldness and lack of passion descended upon him, making it impossible to carry on. His doctor diagnosed these symptoms as manifestations of melancholia, ‘the disease of the learned’, and prescribed him a complicated regime of wine, bitters, anti-hysteric pills and horse-riding. This happy regimen led him to acquire ruddy cheeks, a lively appetite and a quick digestion. Yet whenever he turned his mind to his former reasonings, his intellectual incapacity returned, and he discovered himself capable of proceeding only by continually interrupting his train of thought, interrupting the ‘stretch of view’ which it occasioned, and ‘refreshing his eye’ by turning it to other objects. In the end he had concluded that his distemper was aroused by two things, ‘study and idleness’, and that it was dispelled only by the two antidotes of those, ‘business and diversion’. And so (he tells his correspondent) he proposes to throw himself into a life of business and diversion - and is heading post-haste to Bristol to begin a new career in commerce.2

The young Hume’s letter ends on this hopeful if slightly anxious note. We are able to pick up the story, however, thanks to the celebrated short autobiography penned by the old Hume in the last months of his life, when he was plagued by the attentions of pious souls intent upon observing the wretched end of an unregenerate pagan. A few short months into his new life in Bristol, the older Hume tells us, the young Hume had discovered the merchant ‘scene’ there quite unsuitable to his temper, and had fled once more - this time across the Channel to France, there to resume his philosophical studies. Indeed, according to the older Hume, his goal in crossing to France was to prosecute his studies in ‘a country retreat’, in the manner of the ancient philosophers. Here, the older Hume tells us, he not only penned the Treatise, but also established his ‘plan of life’, ‘steadily and successfully pursued’ over the succeeding four decades - to live frugally so as to maintain his economic independence, and to focus the whole of his life solely upon his literary studies.3 Hereafter the older Hume’s autobiography winds peaceably on, in its celebrated manner, outlining its protagonist’s successive rebuffs at the hands of the critics and fortune, and his own imperturbable responses to them. And it concludes with his famously unruffled account of his current morbid symptoms and calmly-
awaited imminent demise. In short, the Hume of the autobiography is the very model of the ancient philosopher - serene, detached from the passions, ready and willing to return his divine spark to the immortal flame or ascend into the One.

In short, we have here three variant accounts - possibly each rather well-rehearsed - of the spiritual crisis of a philosopher struggling to come to terms with the relationship between philosophy and the world. As it happens, none of the accounts is entirely biographically consistent with either of its brethren. The account in Hume’s early letter suggests a crisis arriving in his early adult years - a crisis dispelled only by a departure from a life devoted to philosophy to one immersed in common life. The account in the Treatise appears to rehearse a crisis arrived at - in ‘real time’, as we might say - in act of writing itself. My Own Life, on the other hand, presents the writing-period of the Treatise as a period of peaceable repose away from the hustle and bustle of negotium. It is difficult to see how all three can be, strictly speaking, factually accurate.

If there is a single common thread between all three accounts it is this, decidedly un-Platonic, thought: that philosophy is not ‘a way of life’, whole and complete, so much as a vocationally-specific attitude towards life, somewhat like the ruddy materialism of the peasant or the restless calculations of the merchant. By the same token, the vocation of the philosopher is not a ‘life’ unto itself, a life of spiritual freedom and autonomy, but rather an esoteric form of existence dependent or even parasitic upon the presence of other, routine and un-esoteric, forms of existence, without which philosophy would eat itself like a lizard swallowing its own tail. To become a philosopher is to take upon oneself a vocation, but it is also to assume a persona which - even for the sake of one’s own sanity - it is necessary to take off again, the better to re-absorb oneself in common life. Indeed, as the three distinct but related morality-tales each emphasise in their different ways, the life of a philosopher is a kind of performance, the success or failure of which is only really able to be judged once the curtain has fallen and the mask of the philosopher has been taken off. The reader is inevitably put in mind of Hume’s unflattering portrait in his essays of ‘the Platonist’, where with ‘pompous phrase and passionate expression’, the modern Platonist ‘assum[es] the title of a philosopher and man of morals’, and ‘offers to submit to the most rigid examination’ his life of ‘seeming virtue’. Nonetheless, it’s easy to mistake the point of Hume’s performance of spiritual crisis in the Treatise - just as it’s easy to mistake the point of the life-story in My Life. Hume isn’t
renouncing the philosophical life, nor is he saying that all the elemental truths of existence are to be discovered in the minutiae of everyday life, in the hurly-burly of the town square or the smoke rising from a coffee-cup in the coffee-house. Make no mistake about it: it’s precisely the philosophical-ness of philosophical reflection - its lofty disinterestedness, its freedom from the bonds of base popular prejudice - that attracts Hume, just as his criticism of philosophy is unmistakably a philosopher’s criticism. The famous off-the-cuff remark of the young Hume to the ageing Francis Hutcheson could stand for the mature Hume as well: ‘a metaphysician may be very helpful to a moralist, though I cannot easily conceive these two characters united in the same work’. It is the role or office (the ‘character’) of the philosopher to advocate a morality of social convention and ‘common life’ - and yet for a philosopher to attempt to delineate such a morality in its practical detail would be in (to borrow Hume’s phrase) ‘poor taste’.  

Everyone quotes Hume’s famous phrase to the effect that ‘philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodised and corrected’. Far less often do they quote the immediate context of the phrase. The speaker is not Hume himself, but the character of the philosopher. And the purpose of the reflection is not to demean the philosophical life, but rather to sustain it. Left to wander after its own lights, philosophy will lose itself in the vast desert of Pyrrhonian doubt. It can thrive only within the borders of common reason.  

The art of the true philosopher is to be able take on and put off his philosophical persona at will: when his throat is parched he drinks from the common well, and then, his strength renewed, he continues on his ‘researches’.

**Philosophy and the persona**

As the organisers of this seminar were no doubt mischievously aware, the very notion of a philosophical ‘persona’ is shot through with little shards of irony - in roughly the same manner that a jewel, turned from side to side, apparently reflects bolts of light in every direction. Why? Well, let’s take it one facet at a time. In the first place, in the Latinate culture of the early-modern intelligentsia and the church, the persona unmistakably connoted mask-play and the theatre, and the oratorical and rhetorical traditions associated with them. Ever since the time of Plato’s assault on the Sophists a certain style of academic philosophy had been determined to renounce the ancient rhetorical tradition, both on philosophical and moral grounds, as a morass of ambiguity, indeterminacy and even outright dishonesty. Ever since Augustine’s *City of God* church philosophy had deliberately and pejoratively associated the
persona, and its multiple moral allegiances, with the Roman heathen religion and its purely human and sin-soaked morality. On this view, philosophy, the love of truth, had a single voice and sought a single path to truth. It had one face, while rhetoric had two - or even several.

Christian theologians had a particular sensitivity towards the persona as a model of personality and identity. It was not merely a matter of the two-facedness of rhetorical conceptions of personhood. There was also the small matter of the personality of the Christian God - which was undoubtedly multiple, and yet for all that quite seamless and perfectly consistent, as a millennium or more of complex Christian scholarly argument had endeavoured with much sweat to prove. To renounce the stage-image of the persona had required the establishment of elaborate chains of reasoning reaching upwards towards the divine essence and downwards towards the realm of mere epiphenomena and appearances. You could almost go so far as to say that the neo-Aristotelian and neo-Platonic inheritance of the schools, from Boethius to Aquinas, was in good measure a product of the urgent need to render the multiple personae of the Christian God ‘one and indivisible’. Even today we tend to forget that the most theologically subversive aspect of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, according to many contemporaries, was not Hobbes’ assault on the authority of the established church, nor even his assault on the status of Scripture, but rather his insistence that the multiple personalities of the Christian God were so many ‘representations’ of the Godhead, and that this model of representation served also to define the role of the Church and its ministers in the human world.⁸

Further, according to one highly influential image of the philosophical life, the persona offended against the philosopher’s very sense of self. In ancient Roman law and common life, the persona had denoted a specific social role, on the assumption that one’s social roles could be multifarious - and that none of them held an in-principle moral priority over any other, unless it was one’s primal duty to one’s city and country (an allegiance which, of course, all the ancient philosophical schools taught one to renounce). And yet the *sine qua non* of the philosophical life, seen through the prism of the ideal-types of the ancient philosophical schools, was that ‘the love of truth’ was a first-order life-priority, besides which all other life-priorities could hardly begin to compete. It was a matter of moulding the entire self around the singular mission of the discovery of truth. Since the philosopher alone had true insight into the really meaningful facts of human existence, he alone was mandated to dismiss and
ignore all that - from the point of view of the heavens, as it were - was inessential in it. This, precisely, was why it was acceptable or even virtuous for the philosopher to ignore the plight of one’s city or one’s neighbour, to harden oneself to the point of unfeelingness even to the death of one’s wife or one’s favourite child - or, come to that, to masturbate like a dog in the marketplace. If Diogenes’ philosophical self had been nothing more than a persona, social embarrassment and mere conventional morality would surely have withered his seminal powers.9

The neo-Roman understanding of the persona - implicit whenever the term was rendered in its latinate form - was at bottom a socio-legal concept, in that it suggested both the range of duties expected of men in their public and private roles as citizens, and the positive legal sanctions that might serve to bind them to their duties. As such it offended against the spiritual underpinnings of some of the more pervasive and influential early-modern philosophical notions of personality. For many of the most influential currents in early-modern philosophy, of course - and here Locke is the obvious exemplar - moral personality is a matter of identity and responsibility: when you meditate to act, and then act, you assume responsibility for your actions in your own person, and your legal personality (like the divine personality, in this respect at least) is one and indivisible in its culpability and fittingness for punishment. (Which of course is why the concept of a ‘multiple personality disorder’ is so profoundly unsettling to our legal common-sense, as well as to our legal doctrines.)10 In this sense the modern notion of legal personhood is a decidedly Christian (or, if you like, even Protestant) concept: you are responsible in front of the law for your actions in the same manner that your are responsible before God, and in each case punishment affects the whole person and preserves it (dead or alive) at the same time.

In ancient Rome, by contrast, legal personality had been a relative fact, based upon one's current position within a formally-defined hierarchy of statuses - the status of freedom (or its lack), the status of citizenship (or its absence), and the status of command over a family or subordination within it. Only the paterfamilias possessed full legal personality in our sense of the word: other free men and women possessed what we might call partial personality - more or less so relative to each other's status. Punishment by the law involved the loss of one, two or all three of these statuses - and in each case after this capitis deminutio the individual was legally recognized as having become a different person, or else as having ceased to be a person at all. In the course of a lifetime one might shift across the entire range of statuses, and
both the degree and the character of one's legal persona would alter accordingly. Further, if you look closely at a Roman tract on practical morality such as Cicero's *De Officiis*, it is clear that Cicero regards moral personae and legal personae as to a considerable extent complementary. Your moral 'duties' (to use our term) towards others invoke your legal responsibilities towards your dependents, your colleagues, and your fellow-citizens as citizens. Arguably the only Roman moral duty which is not also a legal duty is one’s duty towards one’s friends. And so it perhaps should not surprise us that for the Romans *amicitia* was the most spiritual and abstract of all forms of social and inter-personal allegiance - far more so than marriage or even fatherhood.

In all of these respects, then, the notion of the persona as a social, moral, legal and theological fact presents itself as a potential affront to some of the more cherished assumptions of the vocation of the philosopher, as they had been inherited from the ancient philosophical schools, via the Medieval seminary and the early modern philosophical conventicle alike. It offends on multiple levels: it undermines the primal dignity of the philosopher’s vocation as the core of his self; it detracts from the status of philosophy as the first and foundational source of true knowledge about the human, physical and natural worlds; and it compromises the primal autonomy of the philosophy vis a vis the social and moral encumbrances of routine social life. Viewed as a persona, the vocation of the philosopher is nothing more than another life-task, to be weighed up against other life-tasks like marriage and fatherhood, doing your job conscientiously, minding your own business, or refraining from crossing the road against the lights.

By the same token, of course, the idea of the philosophical life as a persona (as opposed to as a vocation) had an irresistible attractiveness to those - heretical or dutiful, freethinking or conforming alike - who wished to tame or subordinate the over-reaching claims of philosophy and theology in the interests other goals or ends. And so across the long and complex history of early modern moral philosophy one can detect a series of familiar (even predictable) counter-manoeuvres against the pretensions of philosophy as prima philosophia - manoeuvres which almost always involve some attempt to circumscribe the kingdom of philosophy within an empire of secular duty, or to turn the all-embracing vocation of the philosopher into a specific, social-limited role. Cicero in the ancient world, Hobbes and Pufendorf in the seventeenth century, and arguably also Hume in the eighteenth - all deliberately seek to turn ‘the love of truth’ into a specific kind of social duty, a duty that may
be trumped by higher social duties such as the duty to preserve life and liberty, the duty to preserve society and the social order that sustains it, even the duty to preserve peace, tranquillity and good order.

**Personae of office**

As a matter of historical fact, the idea of the philosopher as a purpose-specific persona, rather than as an overarching vocation, wasn’t a free-standing conception in its own right so much as the byproduct of one particular method of utilising philosophical habits of thought in the practical world - a method which had a long and honourable ancestry, albeit one almost entirely neglected by philosophers nowadays. The most convenient label for this style of ethical argument is the ethics of ‘office’, and the most convenient method of summarising it in textual terms is to describe it as borrowing from the language and style of thought of one of the most practically influential texts from the ancient world - Cicero’s *De Officiis* or ‘On Offices’.

Cicero’s conception of ‘office’ was naturally ‘personal’, as it were, because it followed the familiar contours of Roman law and social convention, in which the persona played a central role. According to Cicero, my ‘offices’ are those ‘duties’ (the word is misleading but difficult to avoid) which attend to me as a matter of who I am and where I am placed in the world. I have ‘offices’ as a citizen and a magistrate, as a husband and father, as a gentleman or even a trader, and as a member of the human species. Each of these offices calls from me a specific kind of performance of my personality as a citizen, father and so on, and in order to make the transition from one or other of these roles to the next I have to put on or take off the ‘mask’ of that role. What makes for a complete and seamless performance of personality is the gift of moral consistency, such that it is impossible to tell which mask I am wearing at any moment. And yet, given my own traits of character and the individual life-situations in which I am placed, my performance will be an individual and inimitable one.\(^\text{13}\)

By defining the ethics of office in this fashion I’m not meaning to be exhaustive, of course - as Conal Condren has demonstrated at length, ‘official’ styles of ethics took many forms and were transmitted through a range of genres of writing - literary as much as philosophical, mundane as well as abstruse. Nevertheless, when philosophical writers on ethics wished to dignify the ethics of office with the status of a philosophical concept, it was generally either to Cicero or to one of his many post-classical imitators that they turned. More than this, though - for a millennium and a half classically-trained scholars, tutors and courtiers had
adapted Cicero’s little text for a wide variety of ethical and literary purposes, to the extent that it had become part of the ethical common-sense of the lettered elite - much as highly specific psychological notions of memory, guilt or identity haunt the imaginings of millions today, even if they’ve not so much as opened the covers of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*.

This ‘official’ ethics took a variety of forms, and occupied sometimes radically different social milieux. It could be found, in fact, in some rather unlikely places. From Ambrose to Aquinas, the monastic-theological tradition had adapted *De Officiis* in order to delineate the vocations of the ministry and the novitiate - allowing the dignity of worldly offices to the vocations of the church, even if the vocations of parishioners remained un-enumerated.\(^{14}\) Outside the confines of the monastery, ‘personalist’ styles of ethics are commonly found in the literatures of advice and what we might call today self-help - such as the literary essays of Addison and Steele\(^ {15}\), or the handbooks and treatises that enumerated the duties of particular professions and vocations, from the minister to the lawyer to the merchant. Literally dozens of such volumes were published over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and you can find them glossed and reprinted well into the nineteenth. A ‘personalist’ ethics could be found too - suitably modified for the highly pragmatic purposes of the genre - in the civility and courtesy literatures used to train the non-aristocratic gentlemen elites of the early modern European states. Erasmus’ epoch-making little handbook on civility is elaborated in good measure from certain passages of *De Officiis*, as - in an entirely different manner - are goodly sections of Castiglione’s *Courtier*, as well as large slabs of later courtesy texts by Antoine de Courtin and others.\(^ {16}\) Finally, in the seventeenth century styles ‘official’ ethics that associated the ‘offices’ of social life with specific social personae reappeared in statist and anti-theological political tracts, most notably Hobbes’ *De Cive* and *Leviathan* and Pufendorf’s *De Jure Naturae* and *De Officio Hominis et Civis*. For Hobbes and Pufendorf alike an ethics founded in social duties attached to role-specific personae formed the moral basis of their counter-attack against the metaphysical-theological doctrines of the competing religious sects in the religious wars, and their successors.

Cicero’s ‘Offices’ was arguably the most widely-published and distributed Latin text of the early-modern period. When these other handbooks and tracts are taken into account, ‘official’ ethics of various kinds is arguably the mostly overlooked practical moral doctrine of early modern Europe. Yet, with the aforementioned exceptions of Hobbes, Pufendorf and Hume, one struggles to find a single philosopher of note from the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries who treats Cicero’s little tract seriously as a philosophical document - let alone giving credence to the more popular genre literatures it spawned. And those who were at the time taken seriously have vanished from the philosophical history-books. When Kant fought his final battle against the contagion of ‘popular philosophy’ in the latter eighteenth century his opponent (and in Kant’s mind, at least, his potential nemesis) was an ardent Ciceronian moral philosopher by the name of Christian Garve. The literature on Kant’s moral philosophy nowadays fills library shelves, yet you can comb the English-language textbooks in the history of eighteenth century philosophy today without even finding Garve’s name in the index.

Ancient and modern philosophy

In a famous throwaway line in his letter to Francis Hutcheson, Hume responds to Hutcheson’s criticism that natural abilities cannot be virtues (since virtue resides in the intention to good, or benevolence) with the observation that the notion of a ‘mixed’ moral character depends upon a plurality of virtues - or else virtue could be measured only by ‘degrees of benevolence’. And he adds that with this in mind he draws his ‘catalogue of virtues’ from ‘Cicero’s Offices, not from the Whole Duty of Man. I had, indeed, the former book in my eye in all my reasonings’. Hume’s meaning is clear enough: Cicero’s Offices was, after all, the epitome of a practical moral tract focussed on the social duties, where the performance of duty is habitual and conventional, and does not rely for its efficacy chiefly upon good intentions or a pure heart. Furthermore, the ‘Offices’ was pre-eminently an essay in what Hume would have called the morality of ‘character’ - by which he meant not that seamless, all-of-piece ‘character’ which so stirs the enthusiasms of modern neo-Aristoteleans, but rather ‘character’ as the complex, for-and-against, assemblage of traits, instincts and inclinations that comprise the moral constitution of the ordinary person, the person who in Cicero’s words will never be a sage, and who is doing very well indeed if they even approach towards virtue. Finally, Hume fully understands ‘character’ to be itself divisible into moral departments. In an appendix to his essay on The Principles of Morals Hume pointedly compares Cicero’s thoughts on morality where he writes ‘in imitation of all the ancient moralists’, from those passages where he writes on virtue ‘not in the character of a philosopher, but in that of a statesman and man of the world’. And in his essays on the ‘Platonist’ and the ‘Sceptics’ he repeatedly invokes ‘the vast variety of inclinations and pursuits’ that serve to make us, as individuals, fitted for specific offices and courses in life. By contrast The Whole Duty of Man stands here for what might be called the morality of
good intentions, where virtue is measured not by its boldness or the good effects it brings, but by the strength of the good sentiments that animate it.

And yet the effect of the distinction is still surprising. Hume is here nailing his colours to the mast, not only of ancient ethics as opposed to modern - but to an entire apparatus of ancient ethical culture, based around ‘character’ and performance, that seems at odds with his eminently modern self-perception as a moralist and metaphysician living in the shadow of the modern experimental philosophy.

In part, that may be a result of the way we’ve come to divide ancient and modern philosophy ourselves. On the whole, we tend to assume a dichotomy between the two defined by the emergence of the experimental natural sciences in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: in this division, the prime difference between ancient and modern philosophy is that between a philosophy of reflection and introspection, and one of the study of the facts of the natural and human worlds so far as they can be established by one or other doctrinal fusion of observation and reason. At times Hume seems to more or less entirely share this preconception. As Donald Livingston puts it, for Hume the ancients are but children in the world of metaphysics, since their speculations are more or less entirely devoid of knowledge of the real nature of things. And so ‘the ancients’ spend volumes attempting to define the relationship between being and substance, substance and essence, substance and subsistence, when these lofty chimera can be dispelled in modern philosophy by such rudimentary instruments as the air-tight seal of an air-pump, or the gaze of a microscope. On the other hand, for Hume the ancients were supreme in the realm of morals, since moral philosophy in the ancient manner requires no more than a knowledge of the observed facts of human nature and social intercourse - and since the ancients, as heathens, were untouched by the Christian theological need to place metaphysics at the centre of moral philosophy. Ancient morality is a conventional, social morality defined by the needs of friendship, fellow-citizenship and good order: it has no truck with modern spiritualist preoccupations with good intentions and a pure will.

Yet, as these last remarks suggest, the distinction between ancient and ‘modern’ philosophy has to be more complex than our received pre-science/post-science dichotomy can allow. As JGA Pocock’s reflections on Gibbon remind us, in important respects for the early-moderns the ‘modern’ world of ideas begins not with the Quattrocento, or Copernicus, or Christopher
Columbus, as the nineteenth and twentieth century common-senses had it, but with the birth of ‘modern’ speculative philosophy in the Medieval schoolroom. In this sense ‘modern’ philosophy might not constitute progress, but rather a kind of regress, in which the worst tendencies of ancient speculative philosophy are revived, only to be reduced to a new and more dogmatic form. As Livingston also observes, it is the fusion of Christianity and metaphysics in the Medieval schoolroom which for Hume creates both ‘modern’ Christianity and modern philosophy - since in turning Christianity into a ‘philosophical system’ the theologians at once gave religion the character of a science and philosophy the manner of a theology.

Of course, this association of modern Christianity with ancient metaphysics adds another layer of complication to the modern/ancient philosophy distinction. When Hume said that the ancients were but ‘children’ in metaphysics but still ‘the best models’ in morals, in a sense what he meant was that the ancient metaphysical schools, being purely speculative in their orientation, had begotten the ‘childlike’ frame of mind under which modern Christian metaphysical philosophy still laboured. Conversely, ancient morals, being essentially a practical discipline founded in the experience of common life and informed by the realities of Roman law, had exhibited a maturity of understanding that modern moral philosophy, taught as it was as a department of metaphysics, conspicuously lacked. And yet this is true only if one considers ancient metaphysics and ancient morality as two entirely distinct species of thought. It requires - what for the modern academic philosopher is almost unthinkable - the presumption that the true and typical ancient morality is the morality of Cicero and the other ancient practical moralists (like Horace, or Tacitus, or even Plutarch) - rather than the narrow range of ethical tracts (predominantly Aristotle’s two treatises) that constitute ancient ethics in the academy today. For Hume speculative moral philosophy is essentially a modern invention, and is itself a product of the metaphysic-isation of philosophy in general at the hands of the Medieval schools.

Monkish morality
And so for Hume the systematisation of Christianity as philosophy and the decline of moral philosophy as a spring of action in the practical world are two parallel movements. Christian moral philosophy is by definition speculative - since we are required to act in the world as God would wish us to do, while never being able to be certain in our own minds what exactly it is that God wishes for us. This - and not the role of monks in its formulation -
provides the key to the ‘monkishness’ of Christian virtue. It’s monkish first and foremost because under its spell, like monks, we can’t act without introspection, and we are forced to resolve mundane matters of social and inter-personal decision on the basis of abstract and ultimately irresolvable speculation. However, Hume doesn’t stop here. The problem of Christian moral philosophy is not its abstractness per se - not its metaphysicality, in the common-and-garden sense of the term - but the character of its abstractness. Since Christian virtue is virtue in the face of God, and not one’s fellow-men, it follows that not its social ‘useful’ qualities but the intention to do good which is the crucial issue.

However, since intention and execution can never truly be joined together in a seamless psychological gesture, it is only natural that in practical, popular Christianity true moral beauty should be accorded to the intention alone. In the process it comes to appear that it is the act of observance commemorated by doing good, rather than the effects of that observance, which matters most. Morality ceases to be fellow-feeling and manly sobriety, and becomes instead a species of superstition - like the votaries of the ancient religions, or the miracle-worship of modern popular Catholicism. And so Hume’s attack on the ‘monkish virtues’ turns from criticism into burlesque, in the manner of Gibbon’s most jocular Christian-baiting moments. The monkish virtues are not just a-social, or even anti-social - they’re actively esoteric and perverse. The problem is not that the monks lead people to do bad things in the world, but that they lead people to associate true morality purely with a calculus residing in another world, so that their actions and decisions seem to be played out in a parallel universe, like the suburban sado-masochist who imagines themselves to be a Greek galley-slave or a French nun.

And yet there’s a kind of sleight of hand here, however - a sleight of hand adroit enough to elude those readers who are following, so to speak, Hume’s hands rather than his face. The problem evidences itself most clearly when you juxtapose Hume’s reflections on Christian metaphysics with his natural-historical raillery on Christian morality. Ancient religion is for Hume a matter of crude and unabashed superstition, which no intelligent person could take seriously. And so the Egyptian gods multiplied exponentially in alleyways without causing theological anxiety, while Cicero and his contemporaries gave dutiful observance in public to the same observances they ridiculed in the safety of their own homes. Indeed, since ancient religion was merely a matter of observance and social ritual, it could easily be subordinated in practice to a purely social morality, whose higher goods were self-evidently more
ennobling than the grubby auguries and sacrifices of religion-superstition. Hence Hume’s famous observation that a ‘traditional, mythological’ religion is less harmful than a ‘systematic, scholastic’ one, since its fantasies sit lightly on the mind, and its guiding narratives require no philosophical makeweight.26

When we turn to the second part of his natural history of religion, however, we find that the counter-example to ‘traditional, mythological’ religion is not at all the ‘systematic’ philosophy of the schools, but rather the equally superstitious nostrums of popular Christianity. And so the fault of popular Christian morality is not that it requires the subordination of humdrum practical ethics to a speculative ethics derived from the schoolroom, but rather that it substitutes for sober, well-ordered ‘virtue and good morals’ a tawdry gallery of ‘frivolous observances’, ‘rapturous ecstasies’ and ‘mysterious and absurd opinions’.27 We have moved, in short, from the schoolrooms of Paris to the parish churches of Rome, from substance and subsistence to the bleached bones of the saints. It’s not slipperiness pure and simple, of course - since popular Christianity is made by Hume to echo the perversity of the cloister. Rather than simply performing one’s social duties to one’s family, friends and country, Hume suggests, popular Christianity invents moral tasks which are worthy simply by virtue of having no other end than their performance. When he is finally pushed to give an example, though, Hume inevitably reaches back into the cloister again. Rather than paying back a debt, he suggests, the good popular Christian prefers to show his virtue by giving himself a good whipping. Suddenly the saint’s healing bones have melted away, and we’re back in the monk’s torturous cell, replete with joyous welts and mute rapture.

Office and Christian Morals

There is no mistaking the unrestrained ebullience of Hume’s satire of Christian morals in the ‘Natural History’: it’s the ebullience of a man who has cornered his prey and has resorted to teasing it, the better to strip away its dangerous mystique.28 What exactly is the prey’s species is a little more difficult to determine. Hume’s attack on Christian moral metaphysics is centred on its hopeless philosophical-ness: it attempts to found on reason and intention a faculty that can in practice only be discharged out of a compound of inclination and habit.29 His attack on popular Christian morality, on the other hand, makes it little more than a popularised version of the same tendency, so that the excesses of popular religious superstition are made to follow the foibles of monks. As a result it becomes unclear - here as
in other aspects of Hume’s criticism of Christianity - whether it is the metaphysicality of Christian ethics which is at issue, or its Christianness.

And yet here’s the rub. In practice the ‘conventional morality’ of eighteenth-century Britain was a decidedly Christian conjoint. Politeness and good manners were understood to be at once in accord with Christian precepts, and broadly in tune with a conception of the conception of personal duty that was at once ‘official’ and ‘personal’ in aspect. As late as the latter nineteenth century one can find a Ciceronian ethics of ‘office’, a dutiful Christian personalist morality and a preoccupation with the complexities of character in so conventionally Christian a figure as the novelist Anthony Trollope. In this light Hume’s contrast of Cicero’s ‘Offices’ and The Whole Duty of Man seems a little disingenuous. Hume himself confessed that his mother had reared him on the Whole Duty, and while he himself developed an 'unsurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning' (he gives the examples of Virgil and Cicero), his habits of sobriety, calm and sobriety had been in large measure inculcated through its precepts. And while the Whole Duty is indubitably a devotional work, and scriptural in its basis, it has to be acknowledged that its catalogue of duties ‘to oneself and one’s neighbours’ is in all essentials a list of ‘offices, many of which could have been transcribed out of Cicero.

Viewed from this aspect Hume’s criticism of Christian morality might seem a tad metaphysical itself. At times there’s a suspicion (which his lack of empirical specificity does little to disprove) that Hume’s invocation of a ‘personalist’, ‘office’-based morality is in part a philosophical gesture - a way of easing a sceptical metaphysics out of his methodological, as well as spiritual, difficulties. Even in his literary essays, it has to be said, Hume rarely descends into moral specificity - even if he invokes it. Even in ‘The Sceptic’, his most ‘Ciceronian’ of performances, he is incapable or unwilling to enumerate the ‘vast variety of pursuits and inclinations’ of which he speaks. It’s as if, still, for the moralist and the metaphysician to meet would be in poor philosophical taste.

At the very least, Hume the moralist was a rather poor prophet. As we know with the benefit of hindsight, the prime threat to a ‘conventional’ morality in the century after Hume’s death came not from Christian zealots, but from the apostles of a purely interior morality - whether of the Kantian variety or the merely hedonistic. Indeed, Christian morals and ‘conventional’ morality came to be seen as in some respects coterminous - so much so that the Edwardian
cultural critics of ‘eminent Victorians’ such as Trollope imagined themselves to be killing both birds with the one stone. We know - or think we know - what Hume meant when he said that ‘philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodised and corrected’. Yet it’s not too hard to see how the same thought, in Kant’s hands, should turn into the belief that the pure, innocent ‘common reason of man’, stripped of its ‘sensible springs’ and scarified by the scourge of the philosopher’s right reason, should become ‘the pure conception of duty, unmixed with any foreign addition of empirical attractions’ which alone was worthy of the name moral metaphysics.34 Or to put the same point another way, while Hume’s eye was on Christian metaphysics, it was a rationalist spirituality that slipped by to claim the moral high ground.

Endnotes


13. Further on the persona in Cicero, see my 'Civic personae: MacIntyre, Cicero and moral personality’, *History of Political Thought*, vol XIX no. 1, Spring 1998, pp 101-118

14. For two classic accounts of the influence of Cicero’s *De Officiis* in the Christian clerical tradition, see N.E. Nelson, ‘Cicero’s *De Officiis* in Christian Thought, 300-1300’, *Essays and Studies in English and Comparative Literature* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1933), and Raymond Thamin, *Saint Ambroise et La Morale Chrétienne au IVe Siècle: Étude comparée des traités 'Des Devoirs' de Cicéron et de Saint Ambroise* (Paris, Libraire de L'Académie de Médecine, 1895).


16. I have summarised and discussed this early-modern ‘official’ vernacular literature in a forthcoming paper, ‘Things to do with Cicero’, originally delivered to a seminar at Rutgers University. For two examples of the extensive ‘official’ literature of practical moral advice, see Giovanni Della Casa, *De officiis inter potentiores et tenuiores amicos* (Frankfurt, Andreus Wechelus, 1580) and Danielis Sauterius, *De officiis mercatorum* (Louvain, Ioannis a Dorp, 1615).


18. Cf Jerome Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). Not only does Schneewind entirely ignore the ‘popular philosophers’: he fails to even acknowledge the existence of a moral tradition derived from Cicero’s little treatise, and credits Cicero instead with the revival of the natural law tradition (even though the tract he cites in support of this claim was not republished until the nineteenth century.)


25. This is a point well-made by Stephen Paul Foster in his *Melancholy Duty: The Hume-Gibbon Attack on Christianity* (Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1997), ch. 5.


31. See, inter alia, Ruth ApRoberts, *The Moral Trollope* (Ohio University Press, 1971), esp. chs. 3 and 4. Trollope wrote a two-volume biography of Cicero, focussing on his role as a moralist. His *The Way We Live Now* (whose title is borrowed from one of Cicero’s letters) is a kind of novelistic explication of *De Officiis* on the grand scale.


33. The ‘Essay on Morals’ claims to be nothing more than a catalogue of the social virtues, with the purpose of determining their springs of action. In practice, however, Hume discusses in detail only the loftiest of the social virtues - justice and humanity. Hume, *Enquiries*, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, sections 2 and 3, esp. pp. 178-89.