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PROPHETS OF SECULARISM: HUME
BEFORE BENTHAM?
REPLY TO SCHOFIELD

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Professor Schofield argues that Bentham can be considered an outright ‘prophet of secularism’ – *i.e.*, a prophet of that conception whereby ‘what is morally right should be based on whatever promotes the well-being of sentient creatures in the physical world, to the exclusion of all considerations derived from a belief in the supernatural’ (p. 1). He examines in detail the arguments Bentham offered in his writings on religion. What emerges is a systematic project by Bentham, in line with the tradition of radical Enlightenment, the aim of which is to unmask the Christian religion as solely a form of political power, and thus to oppose its influence in public life, starting from sexual morality. As Professor Schofield clearly shows, Bentham demolished piece by piece the grounds for the authority of Christian religion. In his work *Not Paul, but Jesus*, which Professor Schofield discusses, Bentham attacked the doctrine of the Church as it appears in Paul’s teachings, maintaining that it doesn’t correspond at all to the teachings of Jesus – who, far from being the son of God, was rather for Bentham a revolutionary politician. According to Bentham, Paul’s strategy is based on four doctrines: the ‘magnification of faith,’ its opposition to Jewish law, the portrayal of God as a terrifying being, and the doctrine of asceticism. Bentham believed that such deceptions have the sole purpose of exploiting the weaknesses of human nature. They represent the backbone of the political designs of Paul, whose goal was to set himself up as the leader of the newborn Christian church and to turn its followers into obedient minions. By revealing Paul’s concealed intentions, Bentham proved to be a relentless critic of the Christian religion; by denouncing its intrinsic evil, he can rightly be called ‘prophet of secularism.’

This is surely so; but Bentham wasn't the only, nor the first one. Before him, in fact, David Hume had embarked on a very similar philosophical project to the one Professor Schofield attributes to Bentham. Hume's philosophy also can be read as an organic and structured criticism of Christian religion and of its false dogmas – a 'moral atheism' which Hume developed along the whole of his philosophical production, from *A Treatise of Human Nature* and the two *Enquiries*, through the *Essays*, up to the works specifically devoted to religious themes such as *The Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. (see Holden 2010; O'Connor 2001; Phillipson 2011; Russell 2008.) The points of contact between Hume and Bentham, and the correspondences in the ways they proceeded in their arguments, are numerous, so much so that it seems that Bentham was directly influenced by Hume. I would like to further explore these similarities, by referring to some examples from Professor Schofield's discussion.

When he argues that for Bentham, given his rigorously empirical approach, 'to speak about God, his attributes, or his activities, was to speak nonsense' (p. 8), one seems to hear the echo of Hume's *Treatise*, where it is said that 'We in reality affirm, that there is no such thing in the universe as a cause or productive principle, not even the deity himself; since our idea of that supreme Being is deriv'd from particular impressions, none of which contain any efficacy, nor seem to have any connexion with any other existence,' with the result that 'we have no idea of a being endow'd with any power, much less of one endow'd with infinite power' (Hume 2007, bk. 1, pt. 4, sect. 5, par. 31). Moreover, when Bentham mentions the 'doctrine of chances' to show how faith relies on belief and persuasion, what comes to mind is Hume's attack on the belief in miracles and in a future state as presented in sections 10 and 11 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Hume 1999). For Hume too, in fact, by reasoning in terms of the 'probability' that such beliefs correspond to something real, given the null empirical evidences we have in their favour, it was possible to show that they are just superstitions. Further, like Bentham, Hume believed that, precisely because human beings don't have any evidence in their hands, they keep on *believing* such absurdities, and end up being controlled and subjugated by priests, divines, or other 'enthusiasts', solely for political purposes. (See also 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,' Hume 1987.) Both Hume and Bentham believed that this can be explained by examining the deficiencies internal to the mechanisms of human mind; faith denies judgement, and can affirm itself by counting on those aspects of human

mind such as credulity, love for distinction, the need to be praised. Furthermore, what Bentham said about the principle of asceticism – the obsession for sacrifice, the desire to pursue a life of pain – closely recalls Hume’s criticism of the so-called ‘monkish virtues.’ ‘Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense,’ Hume asks, and then replies: ‘because they serve to no manner or purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment?’ (Hume 1998, sect. 9, par. 3.) Monkish virtues reveal themselves to be vicious for Hume because they are neither agreeable nor useful either to those who have them, or to those who are connected to them. Given Hume’s four criteria for singling out virtues and vices, monkish virtues end up being considered negatively; they are ‘artificial’ forms of life which represent only a source of pain, which are promoted with the sole aim of curbing the will of individuals and morally degenerating their characters, so that they can be made obedient to the dictates of the church. (See “A Dialogue” in Hume 1998, par. 57; see also the description given in “On the National Characters,” Hume 1987, of the corrupted character of the priest.) To conclude, one last point on the acceptability of homosexuality. Just like Bentham, Hume too regarded it as admissible. It is true that there are passages in the texts – though very few, in all truth – which suggest Hume might have disapproved of homosexuality as a vice (Hume 1998, sect. 5, footnote 17; sect. 8, par. 12);¹ nonetheless, I believe they ought to be dismissed marginal, though infelicitous, lapses of style. Conversely, the Humean ethical perspective taken as a whole cannot fail but push in the direction of the full recognition of the naturalness of one’s being homosexual, and of the fact’s insignificance in terms of morality. One thinks specifically of the considerations he made in “A Dialogue” about the fact that in highly refined societies like classical Greece and ancient Rome homosexuality was considered a normal practice. Human nature, Hume observed, can express itself in many ways, all morally acceptable. From a moral point of view, sexual preferences in themselves don’t have any importance at all; what counts morally is only to have characters which are useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others.

¹ I would like to thank Gianfranco Pellegrino for having brought my attention to these two passages.

The philosophical projects of Hume and Bentham, therefore, resemble each other in many aspects. I wonder if Bentham was aware of this, and, if so, how much he effectively learned from Hume's teachings. I would be interested to hear what Professor Schofield thinks about this. Be as it may, Bentham surely remains – together with Hume – one of the greatest prophets of secularism, and it is the merit of Professor Schofield to have shown us this so well.

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