# <TITLE>“An authority from which there can be no appeal”: The place of Cicero in Hume’s science of man

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## <T>ABSTRACT: Hume’s admiration for the Roman philosopher and statesman, Cicero, is well-known. Yet scholars have largely overlooked how Hume’s interpretation of Cicero – initially as a Stoic, and subsequently as an academic sceptic – evolved with Hume’s own intellectual development. Moreover, scholars tend to focus on Hume’s debts to Cicero with regard either to his epistemological scepticism or his philosophy of religion. This essay suggests instead that Hume’s engagement with Cicero was at its most intense, and productive, when evaluating the relationship between morality and religious belief. Closer attention to the place of Cicero in Hume’s writings illuminates our understanding of Hume’s intellectual development, particularly in the crucial pre-*Treatise* years. It also, however, shines light on Hume’s interpretation of the history of occidental philosophy (not least the consequences of its engagements with Christian theology), and on how Hume saw his own work to relate to this history.

## <T>KEYWORDS: Cicero, Hume, Christianity, moral philosophy, scepticism, natural theology

## <A>Introduction: eighteenth-century Ciceros

<T>The European reputation of the Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) arguably reached its zenith in the early decades of the eighteenth century.[[2]](#endnote-2) To take the British case in isolation, Cicero was frequently offered as the ideal politician by both supporters and critics of the ministry (Browning 1982: 35–66, 210–56; Miller 1994). Whilst always guided by a clear sense of what was in the national interest – and willing to take draconian action as and when necessary (*salus populi suprema lex esto*) – Cicero exhibited the pragmatism required of all who deal in the messy business of politics. He was neither a disillusioned ‘realist’ engaged in Machiavellian power politics, nor a utopian ‘idealist’ who sought to impose abstract visions of a just political order onto recalcitrant real-life societies.[[3]](#endnote-3) As a philosopher, meanwhile, Cicero was held to exhibit similarly good judgement. In an age in which the previous authority of Aristotle and Plato was placed under scrutiny – and as the seeming revival of Epicureanism in the fields of natural, moral and religious philosophy was generating deep unease – Cicero was offered as an antidote.[[4]](#endnote-4) The continental tradition of modern natural jurisprudence, which came to occupy a central position in university curricula in Scotland from the 1700s, claimed ancestry from Cicero’s writings, and particularly from his influential handbook of ethics, *De Officiis*.[[5]](#endnote-5) Grotius and Pufendorf professed to follow Cicero in identifying the primary purpose of justice (and of its political machinery of enforcement) as the protection of private property – whilst prudently marginalizing thorny questions of how such property might more equitably be distributed.[[6]](#endnote-6) Cicero was similarly held to be a moderate proponent of Stoic moral philosophy, softening its rigours whilst critiquing the Epicureans for banishing God from the world and reducing all human interactions to calculations of self-interest or self-love.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Even those critical of aspects of the natural jurisprudential tradition, such as Francis Hutcheson, did not seek to dethrone Cicero; instead, they advanced an alternative interpretation of Cicero’s philosophy.[[8]](#endnote-8) In an age characterised by febrile theological controversy, furthermore, both the moderate defenders and the freethinking assailants of Christian doctrines and institutions drew heavily upon Cicero. Deists such as Anthony Collins and John Toland presented Cicero as advocating a rationally demonstrable religion of nature that had no need for illumination by revelation (East 2017). In response, broadly latitudinarian Christian apologists in both England and Scotland laboured the harmony between Cicero’s ethical insights in *De Officiis* – which defended the moderate pursuit of worldly comfort – and the moral teachings of the Gospels (Rivers 2000; Stuart-Buttle 2019: 149–78). In short: most agreed on Cicero’s importance (and relevance) for the modern age; but their myriad disagreements were to a considerable extent articulated through divergent accounts of how Cicero ought properly to be interpreted.

This admittedly schematic overview sets the scene for this essay, which focuses on Hume’s intellectual debts to – and invocations of the authority of – Cicero in his development and defence of his ‘Science of MAN’. This is, of course, not new terrain. For the most part, however, scholars have tended to focus on Hume’s debts to Cicero in two, seemingly separable areas: his epistemological scepticism, as articulated most compellingly at the end of Book I of the *Treatise* (*T* 1.4.7); and his philosophy of religion, as developed in a work – the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* – that was modelled unmistakeably on Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*.[[9]](#endnote-9) Yet the quotation I’ve taken for my title is drawn from the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), which Hume considered to be ‘of all my works, […] incomparably the best’ (Hume [1777]: xxxvi). Hume cast this verdict, James Moore argues, because he considered the *Enquiry* to fulfil an ambition shared by many others in the European republic of letters: to rewrite (and update) Cicero’s *De Officiis* (Moore 2002).[[10]](#endnote-10) In a footnote added to the 1767 edition, Hume declared in uncharacteristically oracular fashion that ‘in a debate, which is chiefly verbal, [Cicero] must, on account of the author, carry an authority, from which there can be no appeal’ (Hume [1751]: 106 n.72). This is a ‘breathtaking’, and question-begging declaration, seemingly attributing to Cicero’s writings a quasi-scriptural infallibility (Rivers 2000: 299). After all, if scholars tend to agree that the *Enquiry* is the most tightly wrought of all of Hume’s works, it is so primarily because Hume felt emboldened here – as was conspicuously not the case in the *Treatise* – to marginalize all topics of discussion which he held not to be directly relevant to the question at hand: that of identifying the true foundation of morals (Harris 2015: 250–65). At practically every point in the *Enquiry* where Hume is explicit in avoiding such marginal (‘verbal’) issues – such as whether pride is good or bad; whether natural abilities are entitled to the denomination of virtues; whether morality is primarily founded in reason or sentiment; and whether one might move beyond utility and agreeableness to identify a ‘higher’ standard of moral rectitude (the *honestum*) – he directly invokes Cicero’s incontestable authority. He does so on the grounds that Cicero in moral philosophy, like Newton in natural, was committed to explaining the phenomena he studied with recourse to the fewest possible principles. As this implies, in 1751 Hume appeared to offer Cicero as a pioneer of his own ‘Science of MAN’, which focused on experience and observation and avoided unverifiable hypotheses. Hume might have boasted that, in the *Treatise*, he aimed at nothing less than a ‘total alteration in philosophy’ – a claim to originality supported, on the face of it, by that work’s conspicuous lack of references to other philosophers.[[11]](#endnote-11) In repackaging its insights in more palatable form in the *Enquiries*, and in developing its implications for religion in the *Dialogues* and ‘Natural History of Religion’ (1757), Hume qualified such claims to originality by presenting Cicero explicitly as his predecessor.[[12]](#endnote-12)

This essay probes two questions raised by Hume’s more explicit invocation of Cicero’s authority from the later 1740s. The first is whether there are grounds to take Hume at his word: that is, to think that Hume’s science of man, in its initial conception and development, was indebted to Cicero in broadly the way that he later implied. For all that Hume invoked Cicero’s authority extensively in these later works, Cicero was cited directly just once in the *Treatise*: so can Cicero *really* have informed Hume’s thinking in the most formative period of his intellectual development (the 1730s)? Peter Loptson suggests not: Hume’s invocations of Cicero from the later 1740s were primarily pragmatic and need not challenge the claim that Hume was contemptuous of ancient philosophy *tout court*. In writing for a polite, classically educated readership, Hume merely recognised the need to present his unpalatable arguments in an appealing garb (Loptson 2012). Aaron Garrett broadly accepts this argument, whilst emphasising that Hume also found in Cicero a model of the *libertas philosophandi*. On this account, Hume was inspired not by any particular philosophical doctrines that he may have found in Cicero’s work, but rather by the model of philosophical inquiry and debate provided by Cicero in his dialogues (Garrett, forthcoming).[[13]](#endnote-13) Both Loptson and Garrett, I think, miss the most distinctive aspect of Hume’s presentation of Cicero: namely, that Hume draws upon Cicero to articulate and justify his more general contempt for ancient philosophy – and, *mutatis mutandis*, for modern philosophy, given its debts to classical authorities. Hume saw Cicero to be immune from the kinds of intellectual and affective pathologies – not least the unreasonable desire for certainty where it cannot be had – that lead most philosophers astray. Hume’s admiration for Cicero, I argue, was founded primarily, though not exclusively on what Hume took to be Cicero’s unique philosophical methodology and on his development of certain specific philosophical doctrines. Whereas Hume (like most of his contemporaries) initially read Cicero as a Stoic, and particularly hostile to Epicureanism, from the early 1730s it seems that he interpreted him as a constructive critic of *both* Stoicism *and* Epicureanism: as the leading representative, that is, of an alternative philosophical tradition – academic scepticism.[[14]](#endnote-14) This brings me to the second question, which concerns what Hume’s reverence for Cicero (and apparently only for Cicero) can tell us about his broader perspective on the history of western philosophy – and of what Hume held his own contribution to it to be. This essay, then, aims to convince the reader that an attentiveness to the place of Cicero in Hume’s writings illuminates our understanding of Hume’s intellectual development, and helps us more accurately to recapture his objectives in writing across the myriad subjects of which he treated.

## Part I: *The place of Cicero in Hume’s intellectual autobiography*

Hume’s earliest surviving correspondence, which dates from the immediate post-university period, and his later reflections on these years are striking. This is not so much because they portray an intense young man finding intellectual and affective sustenance and stimulation in Cicero. Rather, when compared to Hume’s later works, they indicate a markedly different, even contradictory *reading* of Cicero. The young Hume, it is clear, found in Cicero the ‘painter’, rather than the ‘anatomist’ of human nature, who presented philosophy as the vehicle of self-cultivation and *medicina mente*. Like many of his near-contemporaries in Scotland, including Hutcheson, Hume looked to Cicero, Virgil and other ancient philosophers and poets for a more ethically enriching curriculum to that offered by the universities.[[15]](#endnote-15) This is attested by a letter to his childhood friend, Michael Ramsay of 1727, which describes Hume’s concerted attempts to acquire Stoic *apatheia* (tranquillity of mind) through a cultivated contempt for those worldly things that are subject to the capricious winds of fortune. Hume perused ‘sometimes a Philosopher, sometimes a Poet; wch change is not unpleasant nor disserviceable neither; for what will surely engrave upon my mind a Tusculan Dispute of Cicero’s de aegritudine lenienda [on the relief of distress] than an Eclogue or Georgick of Virgils; the Philosophers Wiseman, & the Poets husbandman agree in peace of mind, in a Liberty & Independancy on Fortune, & Contempt of Riches, Power & Glory’.[[16]](#endnote-16) In his letter to an unidentified physician of 1734, Hume portrays his post-university reading in near-identical terms: ‘I was after that left to my own Choice in my Reading, & found it encline me almost equally to Books of Reasoning & Philosophy, & to Poetry & the polite Authors’.[[17]](#endnote-17) The memory remained fresh when he came to write his brief autobiographical sketch, ‘My Own Life’, in 1776: ‘My studious disposition, my sobriety, and my industry, gave my family a notion that the law was a proper profession for me; but I found an unsurmountable aversion to every thing but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning; and while they fancied I was poring upon Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors which I was secretly devouring’ (Hume [1777]: xxxiii). In reading Cicero’s works, and especially the dialogue *Tusculan Disputations*, as fully consistent with the ideals of Stoic philosophy, the young Hume is conspicuous only by his conventionality. Like so many others, Hume found in Cicero, Virgil and perhaps in that recent reviver of the ethical ideals of classical Stoicism – the third earl of Shaftesbury – a philosophical regimen that might allow for the independence of fortune and avoidance of perturbation that he so evidently craved.[[18]](#endnote-18)

In his letter to the physician, Hume famously proceeds to describe the prolonged mental crisis that subsequently engulfed him – and to attribute this, in large part, to his attempt to exercise the arduous self-discipline prescribed by his favoured Stoic moralists, including Cicero:

There was another particular, which contributed more than any thing, to waste my Spirits & bring on me this Distemper, which was, that having read many Books of Morality, such as Cicero, Seneca & Plutarch, & being smit with their beautiful Representations of Virtue & Philosophy, I undertook the Improvement of my Temper & Will, along with my Reason & Understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Far from offering medicine for the mind, Hume found that they precipitated distemper and anxiety. From this bitter personal experience, Hume drew the conclusion that their moral philosophies were predicated on misapprehensions about both human nature and the purpose of philosophy. Hume turned violently against Stoicism and its ideals. In so doing, it appears that he was assisted by an encounter with a ‘new Scene of Thought’, which ‘seem’d to be open’d up’ to Hume in 1729, and to provide a degree of intellectual sustenance that the Stoic moralists could no longer offer.[[20]](#endnote-20)

There has been considerable scholarly debate as to what this ‘new Scene’ may have been: all of it hampered by the lack of decisive evidence. Norman Kemp-Smith’s suggestion that it indicated Hume’s encounter with Hutcheson’s philosophy is implausible, because Hume subsequently recognised Hutcheson to endorse precisely those elements of Stoic philosophy – not least its ‘Warmth in the Cause of Virtue’ – that he now rejected (Kemp-Smith 1941: 12–13).[[21]](#endnote-21) It is much more probable that Hume refers here to his discovery of Pierre Bayle, and perhaps Bernard Mandeville: both of whom advanced a scepticism about the human condition, and the limits of human reason, that was articulated through a sustained mockery of the Stoic moralists (Tolonen 2013: 155–7; Robertson 2005: 256–61). This is supported by Hume’s claim, in 1732, that he was finding ‘Diversion & Improvement’ in Bayle; and the comparison between English and French politeness he drew in a missive sent from Rheims in 1734 bears strong resemblance to Mandeville’s discussion in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* (1732).[[22]](#endnote-22) Either way, Hume implies that this ‘new Scene’ led him to an intellectually invigorating critique of all that he had previously held dear, and resulted not least in ruminations about the limits of natural theology in a notebook that he subsequently consigned to the flames.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Yet even if Bayle and Mandeville offered inspiration here, John Robertson’s claim that Hume’s encounter with their writings provided ‘the germ of the *Treatise*’ is too quick (Robertson 2005: 256). Hume’s letter to the physician makes it clear that, if these philosophers ‘transported’ him briefly, his unqualified enthusiasm for their insights was short-lived.[[24]](#endnote-24) Their scepticism may have acted as a solvent to his previous certainties; but they provided him with little assistance once he set his mind to ‘consider *seriously*, how I shou’d proceed in my Philosophical Enquiries’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Given that Hume, in his later writings, quite explicitly presents Mandeville as a neo-Epicurean, and Bayle as following the Pyrrhonian sceptics, neither are excluded from Hume’s insight in 1734 that recent debates in moral philosophy had generated a great deal more heat than light. This is because its central interlocutors had followed the dogmatic ancient sects in erecting their theories on groundless hypotheses regarding human nature and the end of man: whether following the Stoics in defending natural human benevolence and sociability, and divine providence (Shaftesbury, Butler, Hutcheson), or the Epicureans or Pyrrhonians in emphasising self-love, natural unsociability and the conspicuous lack of evidence for divine order in the world (Hobbes, Bayle, Mandeville). Moreover, in his later writings Hume makes it abundantly clear that he considered Mandeville to be an ingenious, but ultimately superficial thinker: a verdict that the *Treatise* offers us no good reason to think Hume had not already reached by the mid-1730s.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Hume informed the physician that this exhausting philosophical crisis, alternating between doubt and conviction, unbelief and belief, had finally resulted in his determination to find ‘some *new* Medium, by which truth might be established’ – one predicated on a rejection of ancient philosophy:

I found that the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity, labor’d under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend. This therefore I resolved to make my principal Study, & the Source from which I wou’d derive every Truth in Criticism as well as Morality.[[27]](#endnote-27)

It was *this* insight that provided the ‘germ’ that eventually gave rise to the *Treatise*. The introduction of Newtonian methodological insightsto moral subjects was intended precisely to transcend the fruitless debates between the dogmatic ancient philosophical sects, and now between their modern disciples:

Here, therefore, moral philosophy is in the same condition as natural, with regard to astronomy before the time of *Copernicus*. The antients, tho’ sensible of the maxim, *that nature does nothing in vain*, contriv’d such intricate systems of the heavens, as seem’d inconsistent with true philosophy, and gave place at last to something more simple and natural. To invent without scruple a new principle to every new phaenomenon, instead of adapting it to the old; to overload our hypotheses with a variety of this kind; are certain proofs, that none of these principles is the just one, and that we only desire, by a number of falshoods, to cover our ignorance of the truth. (*T* 2.1.4.7/ SBN 282)

But how total was this rejection? How completely did Hume disavow the guidance of classical philosophy? Hume’s profession to pursue a ‘new Medium’ between the dogmatic positions staked out by the dogmatic late Hellenistic philosophical sects (and their modern admirers) itself speaks a Ciceronian language: after all, in his dialogues Cicero’s aim was precisely to critique the Stoics and Epicureans, whilst observing that the Pyrrhonian sceptics were themselves guilty of a similar dogmatism.[[28]](#endnote-28) In his later writings, Hume would indeed identify his own philosophical approach quite explicitly with Cicero as the leading member of the New Academy (the academic sceptics): witness Section XII of the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (1748), along with the second *Enquiry* entire. But there are good reasons to think that Hume’s rejection of final causes from moral philosophy, from the early 1730s, was already informed by and through a close engagement with Cicero. If Cicero was partially responsible for precipitating Hume’s intellectual crisis, then, his writings also seem to have provided the resources that allowed Hume to understand, articulate and transcend it. Cicero the Stoic induced only despair and frustration; Cicero the academic sceptic and critic of Stoicism (and especially its defective account of moral motivation), however, he pointed the way forward. *Tusculan Disputations* remained a favourite work, but now for radically different reasons. Hume’s veneration for Cicero, it follows, only increased: Cicero was now the exception that proved the rule that ancient moral philosophy, like natural, was practically worthless – and so too a modern moral philosophy that built upon its erroneous claims.

That Hume now accorded a unique value to Cicero as the primary, and perhaps sole pioneer of a philosophical tradition (academic scepticism) with which he identified his own approach is strongly suggested by his defence of a draft of Book III of the *Treatise* from Hutcheson’s criticisms. With remarkable boldness, Hume informed Hutcheson – very much his senior – that he had fallen into precisely the same errors as his Stoic guides, by arguing (against neo-Epicureans like Hobbes and Archibald Campbell) that man’s *summum bonum* lay in virtue, not happiness; in acting in ways that *ought* to be praised by all, even if they failed to meet with reward in this life:

I cannot agree to your Sense of *Natural*. Tis founded on final Causes; which is a Consideration, that appears to me pretty uncertain & unphilosophical. For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or Virtue? For this Life or the next? For himself or for his Maker? Your Definition of *Natural* depends upon solving these Questions, which are endless, & quite wide of my Purpose.[[29]](#endnote-29)

One reason for Hutcheson’s mistakes, Hume suggested, was that he had misread the ancient philosopher whom he venerated most highly, Cicero, as a *Stoic* – as Hume himself had once done. Hutcheson, like so many others, assumed that in the dialogue *De finibus* Cicero supported the Stoic arguments developed by Cato in Book III, who maintained that virtue could be (and ought to be) its own reward; whereas in Book IV, Cicero (in *propria persona*) exposed the absurdity of this account of moral motivation:

You are a great Admirer of *Cicero*, as well as I am. Please to review the 4th Book, *de finibus bonorum & malorum*; where you find him prove against the *Stoics*, that if there be no other Goods but Virtue, tis impossible there can be any Virtue; because the Mind woud then want all Motives to begin its Actions upon: And tis on the Goodness or Badness of the Motives that the Virtue of the Action depends. This proves, that to every virtuous Action there must be a Motive or impelling Passion distinct from the Virtue, & that Virtue can never be the sole Motive to any Action. You do not assent to this; tho’ I think there is no Proposition more certain or important.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Hume returned to this point, and amplified it, in his 1742 essay ‘Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences’: declaring that Cicero’s critique of the Stoic, Cato – rather than merely of the Epicurean, Atticus – was so vehement as to transgressthe rules of decency that ought to be adhered to in philosophical dialogue (Hume [1742a]: 128–9). Hume informed Hutcheson that, in his treatment of morality in the *Treatise*, ‘I desire to take my Catalogue of the Virtues from *Cicero’s Offices* […]. I had, indeed, the former Book in my Eye in all my Reasonings’. This was a work in which Cicero quite explicitly marginalized the question of man’s true end and purpose (the *summum bonum*), eschewed the quest for a definition of the *honestum*, and instead foregrounded utility and agreeableness in his non-teleological account of both morality and justice. Hume’s reason for taking a similar step was, on his reading, also Cicero’s. In Book I of the *Treatise*, as in Cicero’s *Academica*, Hume laboured the limited reach of reason – a debt to Cicero later acknowledged in his *Letter from a Gentleman* of 1745, and more fully still in the *Philosophical Essays*.[[31]](#endnote-31) In Book III, meanwhile, as in Cicero’s *De Officiis*, Hume drew attention to how processes of socialisation and habituation (rather than philosophical reflection in isolation from society, or the cunning of self-love) enable us to exercise self-command and judgement in our dealings with others.

If Hume’s ‘new Medium’ was able to deny both that self-loving individuals are by nature *unsociable* (the neo-Epicurean position) or benevolent and *sociable* (the neo-Stoic claim), then Cicero had (on Hume’s reading) charted a very similar course. Unlike the dogmatic sects by which he was surrounded, Cicero offered a ‘natural, unforced interpretation of the phaenomena of human life’ that was broadly consistent with Newton’s methodological dictates, and avoided polemical extremes (Hume [1751]: 54). There is every reason to think that Hume’s new ‘Science’ took shape through a self-conscious engagement with Ciceronian insights – rather than Hume only invoking Cicero’s authority for pragmatic reasons from the later 1740s. This interpretation raises questions of a recent scholarly debate, in which some have maintained that Hume ought to be understood as a follower of Hutcheson within a broad neo-Stoic lineage, and others that he is better placed alongside Bayle and Mandeville in a neo-Epicurean tradition.[[32]](#endnote-32) Yet Hume quite explicitly took issue with both philosophical traditions, even as he recognised (indeed, foregrounded) the revival of these late Hellenistic philosophies in his own age. Instead, Hume’s ‘new Medium’, charting a course between what he considered to be the excesses of the neo-Stoic and the neo-Epicurean positions whilst steering clear of a total (Pyrrhonian) suspension of judgement, followed in Cicero’s footsteps as an academic sceptic. Here it is salutary to recall the obvious, but important point that the works of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers sat alongside more modern productions on early modern bookshelves: they retained an immediacy that we may now find hard to appreciate, and could act as important stimuli for intellectual inquiry and innovation.[[33]](#endnote-33)

## Part II: *The revival of sectarianism: Hume’s history of philosophy*

This was all the more true, for Hume, because Cicero had lived in a pre-Christian age. If Christian apologists such as Erasmus and Locke could express an unreserved admiration for Cicero’s moral philosophy, they nonetheless alighted upon *De Officiis* to indicate how *even* Cicero, the most impartial of inquirers, had struggled to identify the true foundations and content of the moral law by means of reason alone. Cicero showed the limits of moral philosophy, thereby illustrating where Christ’s revelation had delivered truths that reason alone had proved incapable of discovering (Rabil Jr 1988; Stuart-Buttle 2019: 19–88, 159–60). Hume’s perspective, however, was different: if the second *Enquiry* can plausibly be read as a rewriting of *De Officiis*, then its clear objective was to illustrate that moral *theology* – which understood the moral quality of human actions in the light of God’s will for His creatures – had deformed the study of ethics. This draws our attention to one of Hume’s most insistent interests: in the history of philosophy, and in the ways in which, from its inception, proponents of Christianity had availed themselves of the dogmatic late Hellenistic philosophies in order to defend their cause.[[34]](#endnote-34)

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume observed that ‘nothing’ could be ‘more contrary’ than academic scepticism to ‘the supreme indolence of the mind, its rash arrogance, its lofty pretensions, and its superstitious credulity’. By ‘confining to very narrow bounds the enquiries of the understanding, and renouncing all speculations which lie not within the limits of common life and practice’, this philosophy did not flatter any ‘irregular passions’, and – given human weakness – it therefore failed to gain more than a ‘few partizans’ in any age (Hume [1748]: 35–6). It aimed solely at truth, not triumph. By contrast, the other late Hellenistic philosophies flattered precisely these ‘irregular’ passions, most notably the prideful desire of philosophers to profess to understand and explain what they could and did not. This explains why Hume evidently considered the Ciceronian age to be degenerate: most of its philosophers were animated by pride, not by the desire for truth. This, Hume continued in the *Enquiry*, explained why late Republican Rome provided fertile soil for the growth of Christianity: the ‘pertinacious bigotry’ of Christian theology, which might be thought ‘so fatal to philosophy, is really her offspring, who, after allaying with superstition, separates himself entirely from the interest of his parent, and becomes her most inveterate enemy and persecutor’ (Hume [1748]: 100). Here, Hume again develops a point first made in ‘Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences’, where he had argued for the benefits of ‘interruptions in the periods of learning’ as necessary for ‘breaking the progress of authority, and dethroning the tyrannical usurpers over human reason’. Hume had in mind the triumph of Christianity, which had resulted in the tyranny of just one philosophical school: the Peripatetic, which medieval scholastic theologians found most amenable to their cause. Short-term pain – the extinction of free inquiry and the passion for truth – nonetheless promised to result in long-term gain: with the ‘revival of learning’ at the Renaissance, philosophers were finally freed to seek truth disinterestedly, with little danger that the bigoted sects of the Ciceronian age would once again acquire any authority. At the Renaissance, Hume implies, all philosophers might have become academic sceptics – and proto-Newtonians – like Cicero (Hume [1742a]: 123).

That the promise of the Renaissance was, in the event, not realised is suggested by the four essays that immediately followed ‘Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences’ in 1742. Entitled ‘The Epicurean’, ‘The Stoic’, ‘The Platonist’ and ‘The Sceptic’, they strongly suggest that a ‘blind deference’ to the ‘different ideas of human life and happiness’ taught by the late Hellenistic sects had returned with a vengeance in recent centuries. This was primarily due to the irruption of theological controversy from the early sixteenth century: if the Renaissance had freed philosophy from the dictatorship of Aristotle, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation had once again enslaved it to that of Epicurus, Zeno, Plato and Sextus.[[35]](#endnote-35) Hume was not alone in offering such an interpretation. Thomas Sprat’s explanation, in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667), of why experimental natural philosophy had only made progress in recent decades had advanced much the same point – and in such similar language that it seems possible, at least, that Hume drew from this source. At the Renaissance, Sprat argued, philosophers had finally ‘renounc’d the Authority of *Aristotle*’, and were thereby liberated to examine the natural world freed from the blinkers imposed by ancient philosophy. Instead of embracing this liberty, however, they revived the other ancient schools, and thereby subjected themselves (and mankind) to the ‘*Tyranny*’ of Epicurus, or Democritus, or Philolaus, until Francis Bacon finally showed the shortcomings of ancient natural philosophy *tout court* (Sprat 1667: 34–5). Hume’s ‘Science of MAN’, clearly enough, promised to liberate moral philosophy in precisely this way, by developing the claim made against the other sects by ‘The Sceptic’: that ‘there is nothing, *in itself*, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection’ (Hume [1742b]: 160–62).[[36]](#endnote-36) Hume’s aim in the second *Enquiry* was assuredly to vindicate this contention; and, as will be seen shortly, the ‘Natural History’ and *Dialogues* explored its devastating implications for the truth-claims of monotheistic religions (not least Christianity).

If, on Hume’s presentation, Cicero was in his own day a lonely voice in the wilderness, endeavouring to convert his bigoted Stoic and Epicurean friends to true philosophy, then Hume’s identification with Cicero suggests a similar mission on his part. This is attested by his letter to James Balfour of 1753, and by the ‘Dedication’ that introduced his *Four Dissertations* (Hume 1757a: ii–iii). In both, Hume proposed to renew ‘the happy times, when’ – despite their disagreements on purely speculative questions – ‘Atticus and Cassius the Epicureans, Cicero the Academic, and Brutus the Stoic, could, all of them, live in unreserved friendship together’.[[37]](#endnote-37) Given that, for Hume, the Ciceronian period was one in which most philosophers embraced a ‘pertinacious bigotry’, this is hardly a flattering portrayal of the intellectual culture of supposedly enlightened Scotland. More pressingly, however, Hume recognised his contemporaries to refute a point on which the interlocutors of Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* had broadly agreed: namely, that the question of the nature and attributes of God *was* a purely speculative (or ‘verbal’) one, with no meaningful practical implications. For all that the revival of the ancient sects showed the continuities between the Ciceronian and the modern ages, this was for Hume a fundamental point of discontinuity.

As Hume emphasised in the second *Enquiry*, ‘religion had’ – and was recognised to have – ‘very little influence on common life’ in ‘ancient times’: philosophers of all stripes could engage in debates on religious questions without fearing that, in doing so, they were endangering ‘the peace and happiness of society’ (Hume [1751]: 122). Moreover, and whatever their speculative opinions, all could endorse the national Roman religion, which as Hume observed in the ‘Natural History’ was purely ‘*traditional*’ and ‘*mythological*’: it alleviated the populace’s superstitious anxieties regarding divine power without challenging the ideas of morality and justice that had developed on account of their experienced communal utility and agreeableness (Hume [1757b]: 75–6). In sharp contrast, in a Christian age ‘philosophy of all kinds, especially ethics, have been more closely united with theology than ever they were observed to be among the heathens’ (Hume [1751]: 108–9). Far from considering religious speculation to be of no practical consequence, Hume clearly understood that most of his contemporaries would subscribe to Pamphilus’s opinion, at the outset of the *Dialogues*, that the belief in a theistic (and specifically Christian) deity was ‘the surest foundation of morality, and the firmest support of society’ (Hume [1779]: 5). As a ‘*systematical, scholastic*’ religion, Christianity laid claim – as the ‘*mythological*’ polytheistic Roman religion had not – to a foundation in reason; and, as a moral theology, it maintained that religious belief was the *sine qua non* for social order and moral conduct. This had made it possible for Christian philosophers to declare, with Locke, that ‘the taking away of God, *even only in thought*, dissolves all’ – a contention that would have made little sense to the ancients (Locke [1689]: 426, italics added). In this respect, for Hume Christianity corrupted men’s affections and understanding in profound and pathological ways: precisely because morality was, as Hume emphasised in the second *Enquiry*, entirely confined to human life and human relations.

This distinction between ancient polytheism and Christian monotheism helps us to understand why Hume considered Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* – like *De Officiis* – to require updating for the modern age. In *De Natura Deorum*, as in his dialogues on moral subjects, Cicero subjected the arguments of the Stoics and Epicureans to sustained critique. As we have seen, on Hume’s account Cicero had not pulled his punches in his moral dialogues: indeed, so savage was this critique in *De Finibus* that it transgressed the bounds of decency. Yet *De Natura Deorum* was different. For all that Cicero’s academic sceptic, Cotta, laid into the Stoic, Balbus with relish, and (for Hume) had much the better of the exchange, at the end of the work Cicero himself – who was reporting the debate – declared that Balbus’s discourse ‘approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth’ (Cicero 1933: 3.40.95).[[38]](#endnote-38) Hume implied that Cicero’s reasoning here was readily comprehensible. Cotta suggested, as would Hume, that morality was confined to human life; and he drew the obvious conclusion that this precluded any vision of God as possessed of moral attributes, and as the legitimate object of piety, gratitude and reverence. If so, however, all religion would be destroyed; and because the Roman religion was of obvious public utility, and benign in its moral consequences, Cicero – a statesman as well as philosopher – refused to endorse such a devastating conclusion (Cicero 1933: 1.2.3–4). Polytheistic religion akin to the Roman, as Hume never tired of emphasising, ‘sits so light on men’s minds, that, though it may be as universally received [as monotheism], it happily makes no such deep impression on the affections and understanding’ (Hume [1757b]: 75–6). Notwithstanding his repeated mockery of its doctrines in private or in his legal pleadings, Cicero understandably refused to undermine the national religion publicly: it served a useful purpose (Hume [1757b]: 71; 75). Christianity, in marked contrast, professed to teach individuals how to act, as well as what to believe: it asphyxiated their minds, and corrupted their hearts. Cicero would have viewed it very differently indeed. This explains why it is the naïve Pamphilus, and not Hume himself who reports the debate in the *Dialogues*: the most obvious structural point on which it departs from its Ciceronian model. Consequently, the naïve youth Pamphilus’s final declaration of his preference for his tutor, Cleanthes’ Christian Stoicism carries little weight. Hume’s own silence at the conclusion to the *Dialogues* is deafening when compared to Cicero’s explicit judgement at the end of *De Natura Deorum*, and its implication clear enough: namely, that Hume endorses Philo’s fundamental contention that *even if* there may be some intelligent first cause, this proposition ‘affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance’ (Hume [1779]: 101–2). This is the conclusion, we are invited to consider, that Cicero would have drawn had he lived in a Christian age. The ‘Science of MAN’, erected upon Ciceronian foundations, affirmed a point that Cicero had, for Hume, already grasped, but felt no need to labour explicitly in his own day – that religion has no place whatsoever in true moral philosophy.

## *Conclusion: challenging Hume’s Cicero*

In the introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume declared that the ‘Science of MAN’ offered insights that were of seminal importance not only for a proper understanding of morality and politics, but also natural theology. Similarly, in his correspondence with Hutcheson in 1740, Hume declared (rather threateningly) that their shared understanding of morality as a matter of sentiment, not reason, carried ‘very momentous’ implications for the relationship between religion and ethics.[[39]](#endnote-39) Had Hume included his discussion of miracles, a particular providence and a future state in the *Treatise* – rather than removing them prior to sending the manuscript to Joseph Butler – then these consequences would have been made very apparent. That Cicero likely offered resources that guided Hume’s interpretation of that relationship from the mid-1730s is supported – beyond the evidence provided already in this essay – by Hume’s letter to William Mure of 1743.[[40]](#endnote-40) Here Hume observed, in good Ciceronian fashion, that we are naturally attuned to experience ‘love and gratitude’ towards others ‘for whatever is benevolent and beneficial’. Hume continued that, even as the deity might possess these attributes of benevolence and beneficence in the highest degree, as an ‘invisible infinite spirit’ who is practically ‘unknown to us’ we simply will not feel about him as we do our neighbours. Hume’s example is telling: even a ‘remote ancestor, who has left us estates and honours’ is sufficiently ‘unknown to us’ as to fail to stimulate any considerable affection or gratitude. Given the infinitely greater chasm separating mankind from a deity, Hume took it as evident that the deity simply cannot be ‘the natural object of any passion or affection’.

Hume’s example of the remote ancestor is lifted, without acknowledgement and with subtle tweaking, from Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*.[[41]](#endnote-41) There, the academic sceptic, Cotta, observed that both morality and justice are ‘the offspring of human society and of the commonwealth of man’. He continued that ‘the divine bestowal of reason upon mankind is not in itself an act of beneficence, like the bequest of an estate’. So long as our benefactor is sufficiently close to us, we feel sentiments of gratitude and love towards them; in marked contrast, we experience no such sentiments towards a deity (Cicero 1993: 3.28.71). From this Ciceronian insight, Hume drew two conclusions. First, that a man ‘may have his heart perfectly well disposed towards every *proper* and *natural* object of affection, friends, benefactors, country, children, etc., and yet from this circumstance of the invisibility and incomprehensibility of the deity may feel no affection towards him’. Second, insofar as he did profess to feel such affection towards God, it was improper, unnatural, and would result in the proportional diminishment of his attachment to the natural objects of those affections (his fellow humans).[[42]](#endnote-42) Here again we see how, reflecting on the implications of his theory of human nature and morality in the *Treatise*, Hume drew upon Cicero to tease out their ‘momentous’ implications for moral theology of a Christian stripe.

For all that it has frequently been overlooked by more recent scholars, the importance of Cicero to Hume’s moral theory was widely appreciated by his contemporary critics in England and Scotland. From Hutcheson to James Beattie and beyond, those critics recognised that to challenge the reading of Cicero as an academic sceptic was one, powerful means of undermining Hume’s broader philosophical conclusions (Moore 2002). To do so, most endeavoured to reclaim Cicero for a broadly Stoic ethical theory which, they argued, was readily amenable to revealed Christianity – rather than unremittingly hostile to it, as with Hume’s presentation of academic scepticism. In 1745, Hutcheson refuted the view of ‘*some very ingenious men*’ who mistook *De Officiis* ‘*as intended for a compleat system of morals or ethicks*’, whereas ‘Cicero *expresly declares, that the doctrine concerning* virtue, *and the* supreme good, *which is the principal* <*and most necessary*> *part of ethicks, is to be found elsewhere*’: in ‘de finibus, *and* Tusculan questions’, where, as in *De Officiis*, ‘*he follows the* Stoicks’ (Hutcheson 1747: ii–iii).[[43]](#endnote-43) So much for Hume’s argument to the contrary in his exchange with Hutcheson about *De Finibus* just a few years previously. Hume’s bête noir, Beattie, advanced a very similar case in 1770: ‘Cicero seems to have been an Academic rather in name than in reality’, and ‘when the subject of his inquiry is of high importance, as in his books on moral duties, and on the nature of the gods, he *follows the doctrine of the Dogmatists, particularly the Stoics*; and asserts his moral and religious principles with a warmth and energy which prove him to have been in earnest’ (Beattie 1770: 243–4).

Determining Cicero’s ‘real’ philosophical commitments might appear to us – or those of us who are not classical scholars, at any rate – to be a question of very limited consequence. As I’ve tried to show, however, to Hume and his contemporaries it was recognised to carry implications that were ‘very momentous’ indeed: implications that Hume’s ‘Science of MAN’ intended, from the very first, to make unignorable. Understood in this way, it is far from clear that Hume’s more direct invocation of Cicero’s authority from the later 1740s was primarily intended to make his arguments more palatable to his contemporary (and overwhelmingly Christian) readers. Nor, indeed, is it so clear that Hume turned to Cicero as a means of inviting his fellow philosophers to (polite) debate. If Cicero had been ‘cavalier’ in his treatment of the Stoic, Cato, the same might surely be said about Hume’s dismissive treatment of his neo-Stoic interlocutors throughout his philosophical writings. We might, moreover, be missing something important in ascribing these rather placid intentions to Hume. Hume’s Cicero, like Hume himself, did not suffer fools gladly: bad reasoning had to be critiqued, and the ‘pertinacious bigotry’ of those who professed themselves philosophers, exposed. This was a Cicero, and a scepticism, with sharp edges.

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2. ## . Gawlick (1963) remains valuable. For the later, precipitous decline in Cicero’s standing, see Cole (2013).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . For a provocative interpretation of Machiavelli’s own debts to Cicero, see Colish (1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . For the turn to Cicero to respond to Hobbes’s perceived Epicureanism, see Parkin (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Straumann (2015) offers a superb account of Grotius’s debts to Cicero. For the centrality of Pufendorfian natural jurisprudence in the Scottish university curricula from the 1700s see Heydt (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . For Cicero’s place in the emergence of an ‘entitlement theory of justice’ from Grotius to Nozick via Locke, see Wood (1988). For an alternative tradition of thinking about justice and property – predicated upon a more positive evaluation of the agrarian law of the Gracchi, drawing on Jewish sources, and hostile to Cicero, see Nelson (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Not least in Scotland: Robertson (1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . For Hutcheson’s ambivalent relationship to the modern natural jurisprudence tradition, see Moore (1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . On the former, see especially Buckle (1999) and Wright (1986). Cicero’s presiding presence in the *Dialogues* has been widely recognised, but particularly valuable are Battersby (1976), Fosl (1994) and Price (1964). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . An ambition expressed by Voltaire and Montesquieu – and an objective the importance of which Locke’s friend, William Molyneux, continually impressed upon him. The present author is deeply indebted to Moore’s stimulating and provocative essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Hume to Henry Home, 13 Feb. 1739, in *LDH*, i. p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Hume cites or mentions Cicero just once in the *Treatise*, as against three times in the *EHU* and fifteen in the *EPM*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . I am grateful to Aaron Garrett for sharing a pre-proof version of his forthcoming essay with me (and academica.edu). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . For a summary of academic scepticism as developed by Arcesilaus, Carnaedes and Cicero, see Long (1986), pp. 88–106, 229–31. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Hutcheson noted that, as a student at Glasgow (1710–17), his most valuable lessons took place outside of the classroom, ‘where I absorbed the first elements of the search for truth, where I tasted to the full the immortal sublimities of Vergil and Homer, the delights, tasteful charm, elegant wit, the jest and humour in Xenophon, Horace, Aristophanes and Terence, and likewise the abundant elegance and scope of Cicero’s writings in all branches of philosophy, as well as the copious polemical fervour in his pleadings’ (Hutcheson [1730], §2, pp. 125–6). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Hume to Michael Ramsay, 4 July 1727, in *LDH*, i, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Hume to [a physician], Mar./Apr. 1734, in *LDH*, i, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Hume had procured a copy of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* by 1726 (Harris 2015: 37–51), a publication which exercised a pervasive influence on the younger generation of Scottish philosophers in this period (Rivers 2000: 153–237). For the demanding (and classicizing) character of Shaftesbury’s moral philosophy see Stuart-Buttle (2019), ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Hume to [a physician], Mar./Apr. 1734, in *LDH*, i, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Hume to Hutcheson, 17 Sept. 1739, in *LDH*, i, pp. 32–33. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Hume to Ramsay, Mar. 1732, in *NHL*, pp. 11–12; and to the same recipient, 12 Sept. 1734, in *LDH*, i, pp. 19–21. Mijers (2012) has established that Bayle’s collected works were circulating in Scotland in the late 1720s; for the Mandevillean resonances of Hume’s second letter see Tolonen (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Hume to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, 10 Mar. 1751, in *LDH*, i, pp. 153–4. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Making a similar point, Brandt (1997) observes acutely that we ought always to be suspicious when Hume uses phrases like ‘it *transported* me*’* or ‘*inflam’d* [my] Imaginations’, which smack of philosophical enthusiasm (rarely a good thing, for Hume). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . Hume to [a physician], Mar./Apr. 1734, in *LDH*, i, p. 16 (italics added). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . ‘Is it not very inconsistent for an author to assert in one page, that moral distinctions are inventions of politicians for public interest; and in the next page maintain, that vice is advantageous to the public? And indeed it seems upon any system of morality, little less than a contradiction in terms, to talk of a vice, which is in general beneficial to society’ (Hume [1752]: 280). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Hume to [a physician], Mar./Apr. 1734, in *LDH*, i, p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. If, as classical scholars suggest, Hume’s subsequent portrayal of Pyrrhonian scepticism bears little relation to the writings of Sextus Empiricus on which it was supposedly based (Annas 2000), there is a good reason: namely, that Hume followed Cicero in caricaturing this form of scepticism for polemical purposes. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . Hume to Hutcheson, 17 Sept. 1739, in *LDH*, i, pp. 32–5. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . Socrates and Cicero, Hume declared, had similarly ‘carried their Philosophical Doubts to the highest Degree of Scepticism’, whilst nonetheless recognizing that such extravagant scepticism ‘by destroying *every Thing*, really affects *nothing*, and was never intended to be understood *seriously*’ (Hume [1745]: 425-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . For an overview, and references to the relevant literature, see Turco (2007). This debate is related to a broader development in recent work on the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy, which focuses on the revival of these two late Hellenistic traditions (Dew 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . A point beautifully expressed, and handsomely vindicated, by Kors (2016), p. 49 and *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . For an invigorating interpretation of Hume’s history of philosophy see Livingston (1998). Hume’s critique of the revived, dogmatic late Hellenistic philosophies, as he subtly insinuated, had profound implications for contemporary Christian apologetic. In recent years, Philo observes in the *Dialogues*, ‘our sagacious divines have changed their whole system of philosophy, and talk the language of Stoics, Platonists, and Peripatetics, not that of Pyrrhonians and Academics’ (Hume [1779]: 16). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . On Hume’s four essays, see Harris (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . This is not to say that the Sceptic ‘represents’ Hume; merely that, on this specific point, he expresses a lament that Hume articulates elsewhere *in propria persona*. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . Hume to [James Balfour], 15 Mar. 1753, in *LDH*, i, p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . Hume observed that in *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero was ‘unwilling to determine any thing on that head [religion] among the different sects of philosophy’. ‘Unwilling’, as Hume emphasised, need not indicate that Cicero was *incapable* of having ‘said something decisive on the subject, and [to] have carried every thing before him, as he always does on other occasions’ had he chosen to do so: Hume [1742a], p. 129 n. H (this footnote was withdrawn from 1768). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. . Hume to Hutcheson, 16 Mar. 1740, in *LDH*, i, pp. 38–40. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. . Hume to Mure, 30 June 1743, in *NHL*, pp. 10–14. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. . A point missed by Thomas Holden, who nonetheless offers a rich reading of this letter that accords with my own (Holden 2010: 65–7). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. . Hume to Mure, 30 June 1743, in *NHL*, pp. 10–14 (italics added). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. . I draw from the English translation of Hutcheson’s *Philosophiae Moralis Institutio Compendiara* (1742), although this passage only appeared in the 1745 edition of the Latin text. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)