**Title:** The notorious Dr. Middleton: David Hume and the Ninewells years

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# **The notorious Dr. Middleton: David Hume and the Ninewells Years**

**Abstract:** In his brief autobiography, Hume recalls how the publication of the heterodox Anglican clergyman, Conyers Middleton’s *Free Inquiry* caused a ‘furore’ in England in 1748, whereas his own *Philosophical Essays* were ‘neglected’. This has secured Middleton a very marginal place in Hume scholarship. This essay argues that Middleton’s importance at a crucial stage of Hume’s intellectual development, during the Ninewells years (April 1749 **–** July 1751), was more significant than has been allowed. On his return to Ninewells, Hume reflected on the reasons for Middleton’s success. Section I considers the nature of Middleton’s contributions to English philosophical-theological debate. In Section II, it is argued that this English context illuminates our understanding of both the manner and the matter of Hume’s writings from the Ninewells years, which show a marked concern with the heathen philosophers’ treatments of the relationship between morality and religion. Here, the similarities between Gibbon’s situation in the 1760s and Hume’s from the late 1740s are foregrounded: a period in which both authors confronted the challenge of translating their philosophical insights into an English ‘idiom’. The essay concludes by offering some broader reflections on why intellectual historians have tended to dismiss, rather than to explore the Hume-Middleton connection.

**Keywords:** Christianity, miracles, Locke, Gibbon, deism, Enlightenment historiography

## **Introduction: Middleton, Hume and the Ninewell Years (1749–51)**

The name of Conyers Middleton (1683–1750) appears with relative frequency in works devoted to David Hume and his philosophy. Sometimes Middleton even enjoys a mention in the main body of the text,[[1]](#footnote-1) although his primary habitat is the footnote.[[2]](#footnote-2) There may be some confusion as to Middleton’s Christian name – Conyers, or Thomas?[[3]](#footnote-3) – but scrupulous accuracy will be observed with regard to the date of the only one of his publications with which he will be identified: the *Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the Earliest Ages* appeared in December *1748*, even as the title-page says *1749*.[[4]](#footnote-4) The reason for this punctiliousness, and for Middleton’s cameo appearances more generally, is Hume’s mention of the heterodox Anglican clergyman in the brief autobiographical sketch he composed on his deathbed in 1776, ‘My Own Life’. Hume tells us that, having published in London his *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* in April 1748 in absentia, he returned from Turin in December confidently expecting to be greeted (or assailed) by a furore, primarily on account of Essay X, ‘Of Miracles’. Instead, ‘I had the mortification to find all England in a ferment, on account of Dr. Middleton’s Free Enquiry, while my performance was entirely overlooked and neglected’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Middleton tends to be exhumed by Hume scholars with a view to justifying the ways of an inevitably secularised providence – if he was once considered to have something more interesting to say than Hume, happily this injustice has been amply rectified by time – and promptly returned without ceremony to his long repose in lasting oblivion.[[6]](#footnote-6) The author has nonetheless worked hard for the footnote, a tedious labour which others are at all costs to be spared: the *Free Inquiry* is ‘philosophically uninteresting, and boring, reading’;[[7]](#footnote-7) or – to say the same thing with greater respect for the earnest labours of the long-departed – it is a ‘*lengthy* and *competent* historical investigation’,[[8]](#footnote-8) which ‘(*somewhat* sadly) has fallen into obscurity’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The ‘late reverend and learned Conyers Middleton, D.D.’[[10]](#footnote-10) might excitedly have prepared himself for disinterment upon hearing that a clerical and conservative English Enlightenment had been discovered, and one that potentially shed light on aspects of Hume’s thought to boot. Indeed, his one-time friend William Warburton, who once expressed the wish that their works might ‘always be read together’, was resurrected as one of the two central figures of that Enlightenment.[[11]](#footnote-11) Yet Middleton had to bide his time: seemingly not meriting inclusion in this Enlightenment on his own account,[[12]](#footnote-12) it was only once it led to a reconsideration of the importance of the English context for the intellectual biography of its second central figure, Edward Gibbon – who unlike Warburton had remained immune to death and decay, and who was very explicit about the importance of Middleton’s writings to his intellectual development – that Middleton was invited to the discussion.[[13]](#footnote-13) Perhaps Conyers/Thomas would not have minded waiting too much. A famously convivial soul, when living he had expressed a wish to ‘spend a day philosophically’ with the deist, Thomas Chubb, although whether he would have enjoyed two centuries in his company is anyone’s guess.[[14]](#footnote-14) But the bicentennial of Middleton’s death was cruelly marked by the departure of ‘CHUBB, MORGAN, COLLINS, MANDEVILLE and BOLINGBROKE’, along with the ‘wretched TOLAND, TINDAL [and] TILLARD’[[15]](#footnote-15) from their shared grave, as they were raised to Summerland as the improbable apostles of secular modernity.[[16]](#footnote-16) To be sure, Middleton was sometimes considered among their number; but for the most part his fate was to be neither clerical nor conservative enough for an English Enlightenment defined in these terms, nor sufficiently progressive and secular to be placed among the heroic freethinkers within a radical English Enlightenment.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The story is not, however, all doom and gloom. Middleton was briefly recalled from his subterranean exile and asked to assist his country – as his hero, Cicero, had returned to Rome in triumph in 57 BC[[18]](#footnote-18) – for one glorious decade in the sun, from the mid-1860s to the mid-1870s. The claim that he made, repeatedly but in vain, throughout his life was taken a little more seriously – that if Erasmus, Chillingworth, and other liberal-minded souls who considered Christ’s moral teachings to be the most fundamental part of the religion that took his name were considered ‘orthodox’ (as they ought to be), then so too was he.[[19]](#footnote-19) This eirenic, broadly Erasmian (or Arminian) tradition, as it was developed within the post-Reformation Church of England, was even held by some to reveal a mode of thought which ‘in the present day would be called liberalism’.[[20]](#footnote-20) And, for the first and last time, he found himself a central character in an intellectual history of the period in which he lived, alongside Hume, and which offered to make sense of his contemporary fame and to explain why it was merited.[[21]](#footnote-21) But those authors who had recalled Middleton from oblivion subsequently faced oblivion themselves. Their conviction that Middleton (and eighteenth-century English religious culture more broadly) had something to say to their own day was their downfall. A new orthodoxy declared that historical objectivity cannot co-exist with such a keen sense of the continuities between past and present;[[22]](#footnote-22) or, as the present was now held to be a secular age, only secular historical thinkers, or historical thinkers who could be made to appear secular, were of interest.[[23]](#footnote-23) Happily, however, a biannual lecture series was established in honour of one of Middleton’s Victorian scholars, Leslie Stephen, shortly after his death in 1904, in Cambridge – Middleton’s alma mater, and his home for most of his life; and in 1982 an historian who was intrepidly committed to drawing instructive analogies between past and present and communicating them to a lay audience was invited to speak.[[24]](#footnote-24) Fittingly, Hugh Trevor-Roper chose Middleton as his subject; and although Middleton had to be patient,[[25]](#footnote-25) because the lecture was not published until 2010, since that date he has found himself the focus of several studies.[[26]](#footnote-26) These say relatively little about the Hume connection, and it is to be feared that few Hume scholars have read them. But as already mentioned, Middleton is brought into indirect dialogue with Hume – as the exigencies of interpreting a third figure, Gibbon, may dictate – in surely the most remarkable work of intellectual history produced this century, J.G.A. Pocock’s *Barbarism and Religion* (1999–2015).[[27]](#footnote-27)

This essay makes the case for according Middleton a more central place in Hume’s intellectual development. It argues that the ‘disappointments’ suffered by Hume in the 1740s, which culminated in the neglect of the *Philosophical Essays* in 1748, encouraged him to reconsider how he might more successfully engage the leading figures within an English intellectual culture that was overwhelmingly preoccupied with theological controversy. This led Hume to reappraise *both* the ‘manner’ *and* the ‘matter’ of his writings upon his return to his family’s country estate, Ninewells in April 1749.[[28]](#footnote-28) The following two years were remarkably productive, by any standards: Hume ‘read over almost all the Classics both Greek and Latin’;[[29]](#footnote-29) he ‘cast’ Book III of the *Treatise of Human Nature* ‘anew’ in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751); he composed the *Political Discourses* (1752); and he completed drafts of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1779) and ‘the Natural History of Religion’ (which appeared in the *Four Dissertations*, 1757).[[30]](#footnote-30) This essay argues that with the partial exception of the *Political Discourses*, for which there is an obvious European context, it is by placing them primarily within an English framework of debate that Hume’s other works of this period – and, indeed, his study of the classics – are most helpfully explicated.[[31]](#footnote-31) The more specific claim is advanced that Middleton’s writings played an important and neglected role in alerting Hume to the distinctive ‘rhythms’ of English intellectual culture.[[32]](#footnote-32) Here the operative word is ‘writings’, in the plural: evidence, albeit of a circumstantial kind, is adduced for the claim that Hume read, and found instructive, other of Middleton’s works besides his contribution to the miracles debate.

The argument proceeds in two stages. Section I offers a rather summary overview of the character of Middleton’s contributions to English philosophical-theological controversy, with a view to rendering more plausible the claim that they stimulated Hume’s interest on his return to Ninewells. Here, the Victorian historians of ideas who endeavoured to reclaim the first half of the English eighteenth century from the enormous condescension of posterity, notably Mark Pattison and Leslie Stephen, remain instructive guides. Their conviction that this period was crucial for the self-understanding of their own age enabled them to grasp, albeit selectively, its fundamental intellectual impulses.[[33]](#footnote-33) Both emphasised that the vexed relationship between natural and revealed religion – and between philosophy and history – lay at the heart of English theological and philosophical debate in this period, due not least to the ambiguous intellectual bequest of John Locke.[[34]](#footnote-34) One aspect of Locke’s legacy, neglected by these Victorian scholars, was to turn attention to ancient Greece and Rome, to ask how far the heathen philosophers had been able to grasp fundamental truths in morality and religion – and, it follows, to determine the extent to which the Christian revelation either affirmed, enlarged upon, or contradicted that knowledge. This question was central to the deist controversy. Middleton, as had Locke, accorded particular importance to Cicero in his attempt to address it.[[35]](#footnote-35) If an exclusive focus on the *Free Inquiry* suggests that Middleton’s primary objective was to subject the external evidence for revealed Christianity to concerted critique, then his earlier writings – most notably the *History of the Life of Cicero* (1741) – disclose a similarly critical evaluation of the philosophical foundations of natural religion. Section II considers Hume’s concerted interrogation of natural religion and the claims of moral theology in the works composed at Ninewells between 1749 and 1751. Hume foregrounded, very explicitly and quite deliberately, his debts to Cicero in those publications, which further substantiates the claim of this essay that Middleton deserves more than a footnote in Hume’s intellectual biography. The essay also asks whether, given how uncomplainingly Middleton and Hume have lent their assistance to scholars in their elucidations of Gibbon’s thought and intellectual development, Gibbon – a man with a keen sense of the reciprocal obligations of friendship – might repay the favour.[[36]](#footnote-36) Gibbon’s situation in England in the 1760s was in striking respects akin to Hume’s in the late 1740s: his earliest work was mostly conceived and written in France, and met with little interest in England; and, in his memoirs, Gibbon is disarmingly frank in confessing the strength of his desire for a literary reputation in his homeland. This thirst for fame, Gibbon recognised, was most likely to be satisfied by engaging with issues that preoccupied the self-appointed defenders of Anglican orthodoxy. Here, he follows Hume’s account in ‘My Own Life’ very closely; and in Gibbon’s case it is clear that this concern helped to determine both the style and the substance of his subsequent English publications.[[37]](#footnote-37) The same, this essay suggests, was true for Hume; and the example of Gibbon renders more plausible the claim that Hume might have found in Middleton’s writings a source of amusement and instruction.

## ***I: Middleton and the tendencies of religious thought in England, 1688–1750***

In a seminal essay of 1860, which provided the inspiration for Leslie Stephen’s *English Thought* (1876), Mark Pattison argued that the character of eighteenth-century English philosophical-theological debate underwent a decisive shift around 1750. The deist controversy had remained concerned with the ‘internal’ (moral) evidence for the truth of Christianity, and in doing so it probed tensions that were inherent within Locke’s moral theology. From mid-century, however, this shifted to an exclusive preoccupation with the ‘external’ (historical) proofs offered in defence of revealed truth.[[38]](#footnote-38) Stephen accepted this periodization and drew the obvious inference that Middleton’s *Free Inquiry* had precipitated this mid-century development.[[39]](#footnote-39) On Stephen’s account, Middleton gave the deist assault on sacred history its most forceful articulation; and the orthodox frittered away the next few decades by amusing themselves (and no-one else) by placing the historical ‘witnesses’ to Christianity’s truth on trial and exonerating them with consummate ease. Middleton was, fortunately, no longer around to place *them* on trial; and when his disciple, Gibbon, did so three decades after Middleton’s death, they predictably had no answer. For Stephen, Middleton and Hume were the two most ‘remarkable men’ in mid-eighteenth-century England, because they saw – as the ‘shallow’ freethinkers could not, and the cowardly orthodox, with the notable exception of Joseph Butler, would not – the full implications of the deist controversy for the credibility of natural and revealed religion.[[40]](#footnote-40) Middleton’s achievement was to grasp that the history of the Church had to be included within the history of ideas and opinion.[[41]](#footnote-41) For Stephen, as later for Trevor-Roper, Middleton had dissolved sacred into profane history, and thereby ‘anticipate[d] the fundamental principles of historical criticism’, because he grasped ‘the essential continuity of history’. It was for this reason that he was the ‘true precursor of Gibbon’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Yet it was Hume, not Middleton, who grasped the fundamental presupposition of Locke’s moral theology, which had animated the pre-1750 debate. This was Locke’s conviction that natural and revealed religion were interdependent; they must stand or, as Hume decisively proved – to the agnostic Stephen’s satisfaction, at least – fall together. For Stephen, Middleton had fatally weakened the foundations of revealed religion, but he had left untouched the deists’ claims that reason could establish a natural religion unencumbered by the manifest contradictions of orthodox Christianity. It was Hume who ‘alone among contemporaries followed logic wherever it led him’, because he was ‘absolutely free from theological presuppositions’. Middleton ‘closes the deist controversy’, but ‘Hume’s scepticism completes the critical movement in Locke’.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Stephen’s interpretation, like Trevor-Roper’s, dismisses Middleton’s continual protestations that his aim in his works was to mediate between the deists and their orthodox antagonists, and thereby to reconcile ‘the Gospel with the Dictates of right Reason, the Revealed with the Natural Law’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Middleton’s published writings no less than his rich archive of unpublished papers and correspondence confirm this commitment to re-establishing the harmonious interdependence between natural and revealed religion which was foundational to all of Locke’s thought.[[45]](#footnote-45)

For Locke, as Pattison observed, ‘Christianity is a *resumé*of the knowledge of God already attained by reason, and a disclosure of further truths’; and although these ‘further truths could not have been thought out by reason, […] when divinely communicated, they approve themselves to the same reason which has already put us in possession of so much’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Reason (natural revelation) and Scripture (the record of supernatural revelation) form part of one harmonious system: they are mutually reinforcing. It is, it follows, no easy task – and a potentially perilous one – to try to determine with too great a degree of precision whether particular truths about God and our duties to Him under natural law were initially discovered (or discoverable) by reason, or delivered by supernatural revelation.[[47]](#footnote-47)

From the early 1690s onwards, however, the ‘sufficiency of natural religion became the turning point’ of the deist controversy.[[48]](#footnote-48) Following the publication of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke was pressed directly by orthodox critics such as Edward Stillingfleet, and indirectly by the selective appropriation of his epistemological claims by John Toland, to make it clearer where, precisely, revelation had delivered truths that reason alone was incapable of discovering.[[49]](#footnote-49) In this respect, the title of Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) was misleading, because its objective was to show that Christ’s revelation was *necessary*, even as reason was then adequate to the task of affirming the truths it delivered. This attempt ‘to construct the bridge which should unite the revealed to the natural [religion]’ required considerable delicacy. Locke had to substantiate what, secure in his own Christian convictions, he confidently presupposed – that ‘natural religion is insufficient as a light and a motive to show us our way, and to make us walk in it’, yet ‘it is sufficient as a light and a motive to lead us to revelation, and to induce us to embrace it’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The logic of Locke’s argument made the task more delicate still. The truths delivered by revelation had immediately recommended themselves to reason, and later generations of theologians all too easily assumed that such truths had been discovered by reason and could be demonstrated by philosophical argument. ‘Many’, as Locke argued in the *Reasonableness*, ‘are beholden to revelation, who do not acknowledge it’, and this now included deists who erroneously considered the Gospels to be, at best, merely the republication of the religion of nature.[[51]](#footnote-51)

To establish the scope and limits of natural theology Locke turned to the ancient world, and more specifically to the Ciceronian age. The clearest evidence for the reasonableness and necessity of the Christian revelation was furnished by the ‘*defective*’ moral theories of the heathen philosophers. Deprived of the light of supernatural revelation, they had been incapable of discovering the foundations of moral obligation (in the will of God), and the true motives for living virtuously (in the thirst for righteousness and salvation). This showed, Locke declared, ‘that humane reason unassisted, failed Men in its great and Proper business of *Morality*’.[[52]](#footnote-52) This was unsurprising, because in ancient Rome ‘Religion & Morality’ were erroneously considered to be discrete ‘provinces of knowledge’. It was only when Christ brought ‘by revelation from heaven the true Religion to mankind’ that ‘Religion & Morality’ were recognised to be ‘the *inseparable* parts of the worship of God’.[[53]](#footnote-53) The heathen philosophers, as Cicero’s dialogues attested, had ridiculed the national (pagan) religion as lacking a foundation in either reason or revelation; but they had not been able to discover, or to reach a consensus on, an alternative religion of nature which recognised God to be man’s Creator and moral legislator and grasped that He would hold His creatures accountable for their actions in a world to come. Cicero, however, was unusual, because his academic scepticism enabled him to identify and modestly to accept, rather than proudly to transgress, the limits of reason in moral-theological questions.[[54]](#footnote-54) The most important such question concerned the immortality of the soul.[[55]](#footnote-55) As Locke emphasised to Stillingfleet, Cicero had ‘examined all the arguments’ in favour of immortality which ‘his vast reading and great parts could furnish him with’. He *wanted* to assent to such a comforting and morally edifying doctrine, yet his sceptical modesty *compelled* him to doubt; he was ‘willing to believe the soul immortal, but when he sought in the nature of the soul itself something to establish this his belief into a certainty of it, he found himself at a loss’.[[56]](#footnote-56) The cautious sceptic Cicero had entertained the *hope* that there was a world to come, but it was ‘JESUS CHRIST alone who brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Tim. 1:10). This underpinned Locke’s warning, aimed at both the orthodox and their freethinking opponents: if reason ‘confirms’ the ‘truth’ of cardinal moral and theological tenets, it was a dangerous error to suppose that ‘we had the first certain knowledge of them from [reason], and in that clear Evidence we now possess them’.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The limits of natural theology to which Cicero drew attention, Locke emphasised, did not cast the ‘reasonableness’ of Christ’s teachings about another world into doubt. Cicero would immediately have accepted their truth based on the internal evidence in their favour: only the Christian scheme provided a coherent explanation of moral obligation and offered compelling inducements to mankind to live virtuously. Christ affirmed what Cicero himself suspected, and ardently wished for, but could not prove. The miracles worked (very sparingly) by Christ and the Apostles would have further ensured that Cicero’s reason – and that of all fair reasoners – would lend ‘its Suffrage to the Truths Revelation has discovered’. But miracles were of secondary importance: ‘the miracles were to be judged by the doctrine and not the doctrine by the miracles’.[[58]](#footnote-58) It was primarily the beneficial moral ends of those doctrines, teaching people of their duties to one another and to God and of the sanctions attending their performance, rather than the credibility of the testimony of those who bore witness to miracles that established their divine origins.

Locke’s pious scepticism stands in marked contrast to Samuel Clarke’s Newtonian brand of physico-theology as developed in his Boyle Lectures of 1704–1705, which was increasingly influential in Cambridge from the 1720s.[[59]](#footnote-59) This was the crucible in which Middleton’s mature thought took shape; and from the *Letter from Rome* (1729) onwards, Middleton sided with those who subjected Clarke’s purported ‘demonstration’ of the fundamental truths of natural religion to sceptical Lockean critique.[[60]](#footnote-60) As had Locke, Clarke invoked Cicero to ascertain the scope of natural religion. Clarke, however, claimed that the attributes of God and the existence of a future state were ‘strictly demonstrable to any unprejudiced Mind from the most uncontestable principles of Reason’, because reason could identify ‘eternal fitnesses’ in the natural and moral order.[[61]](#footnote-61) Cicero’s writings confirmed that ‘unprejudiced’ reason could acquire demonstrable knowledge of God, the law of nature and the eternal sanctions enforcing that law.[[62]](#footnote-62) In making this claim, the ‘bridge’ which Locke had carefully constructed to ‘unite’ natural and revealed religion appeared to collapse.[[63]](#footnote-63) In *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), Matthew Tindal asked the obvious question: if a heathen like Cicero had been able ‘easily’ to acquire demonstrable knowledge of natural law and its author, and if that law was eternal and immutable, then surely Christ in his ministry and teachings could have done no more than reaffirm it? The Gospel was the ‘republication of the religion of nature’, and the truths it disclosed could be discovered by Clarke’s ‘unprejudiced Mind’ reasoning on the nature of things.[[64]](#footnote-64) Christian doctrines which appeared to be ‘above’ or ‘contrary’ to reason had to be dismissed as the intrusions of self-interested priests who sought to capitalise on the superstitions of the vulgar.[[65]](#footnote-65) All wise men would embrace a rational religion of nature; yet they would recognise, as had Cicero and the ancients, the need to wink at a public religion which indulged the superstitions of the unphilosophical multitude and satisfied the imperatives of social control. They embraced, as it was argued had Cicero, the theory of double doctrine: in public they endorsed a national religion which they ridiculed in private.[[66]](#footnote-66)

This context explains why Cicero is such a presiding presence in all of Middleton’s works from the late 1720s onwards, culminating in the *Life* of 1741. These works subjected the freethinkers’ religion of nature, no less than their orthodox opponents’ religion of history, to comprehensive critique, on the basis that the deists’ ‘boasted light of nature’ was ‘perplexed by the same difficulties, for which they pretend to reject revelation’.[[67]](#footnote-67) Here it bears remarking that even the most self-consciously orthodox of Tindal’s critics, Daniel Waterland, was willing to accept two points: the evidence for revealed Christianity had to pass the test of reason, and Cicero could indeed show what an ‘unprejudiced Mind’ would make of that evidence.[[68]](#footnote-68) Waterland turned to sacred history, and to the writings of the early Church Fathers who bore witness that the delivery of its ‘mystical’ doctrines was accompanied by irrefutable signs of divine authorship (i.e. miracles).[[69]](#footnote-69) Had Cicero lived to read the testimonies of such credible witnesses, he would assuredly have accepted them as irrefutable proof of the divine origin of doctrines that might otherwise appear obnoxious to sense and reason.[[70]](#footnote-70) Middleton’s response to this claim was unequivocal, and clearly indebted to Locke. In shifting the focus to the ‘external’ evidence (witness testimony), Waterland began ‘at the wrong end’, because ‘’tis allowed on all hands, that if any narration can be shewn to be false; any doctrine irrational or immoral; ’tis not all the external evidence in the world that can or ought to convince us, that such a doctrine comes from God’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Waterland’s approach was ‘subversive of the very foundations of protestantism’, because it endeavoured to establish the truth of Christianity on the basis of authority and Church tradition – a tradition that was the preserve of Rome.[[72]](#footnote-72)

In turning to history, Protestants faced an invidious question, to which Middleton alluded in the *Letter from Rome* and posed directly in the *Free Inquiry*.[[73]](#footnote-73) All Protestants accepted that corruptions had been intruded into Christian ritual and doctrine, and that the Reformation had cleaved a crucial distinction between the infallible Word of God and the interpolations of the power-hungry Roman priesthood. But when, precisely? The evidence of miracles could hardly settle the question, because from the earliest Fathers onwards miracles were reported to attest to doctrines that were now universally accepted, by Catholics and Protestants alike, to be heretical.[[74]](#footnote-74) The freethinkers were right to claim that the history of the Church was a tissue of falsehoods and deceptions, perpetrated on the credulous multitude by an order of men – the clergy – who ‘have seldom scrupled to make use of a commodious lie’ to advance their corporate interest.[[75]](#footnote-75) That interest, Middleton emphasised, lay in the pursuit of temporal authority, which was predicated on their claim to a spiritual jurisdiction that was independent of the civil.[[76]](#footnote-76) The recent ‘retreat’ of Anglican apologists ‘into the woods & forests of Tradition, Councils, Fathers’ illustrated that they still hankered, like ‘our Ancestors of Old’, after the (illegitimate) authority which the Church of Rome claimed over its brethren.[[77]](#footnote-77) A categorical distinction, Middleton argued, had to be drawn between ‘our religion itself, & the history or tradition of it’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Isolating the Apostolic era from his strictures, Middleton argued that the same standards of source criticism had to be brought to bear on the materials of sacred and profane history. He added, however, that because ‘the greatest Zealots in religion’ and the ‘leaders of sects or parties’ had such strong motives to deceive, the claims of religious writers had to be subjected to a greater degree of scrutiny than other authorities – a lesson that was not lost on Hume and Gibbon.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Middleton’s claim that ‘the History of the Gospel, I *hope* may be true, though the History of the Church be fabulous’ needs to be set alongside his assertion, in the *Life of Cicero*, that the heathen philosopher’s belief in a perfectly good and just deity, who would reward or punish men in a world to come, was founded upon ‘hope’ rather than ‘assurance’.[[80]](#footnote-80) As an academic sceptic, Cicero proportioned his belief to the evidence, and the evidence was inconclusive. That Cicero ‘sometimes doubted, of what he generally believed’ attested to his intellectual honesty, in marked contrast to his Stoic and Epicurean friends, who craved (and professed to have found) certainty in all things. The most important truths in religion, even for ‘the few, such as himself, of enlarged minds and happy dispositions’, were ‘not discoverable’ without ‘great pains and study’, and even then ‘could not produce in them at last any thing more than a hope, never a full persuasion’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Cicero had been misappropriated not only by Waterland, but by Clarke and Tindal, both of whom erred in placing unlimited confidence in man’s ‘*infallible Reason*’ which, as Locke showed, was able only dimly to perceive truths in religion on the basis of probability, not certainty.[[82]](#footnote-82) Middleton nonetheless emphasised that philosophers of the Ciceronian age were quite right to probe theological issues to the bottom – in this sense, they were proto-Protestants; yet only Cicero had the intellectual humility, and the tolerance for uncertainty, to do so properly. In this period, all ‘[m]en of philosophic & inquisitive Minds were perpetually employed in searching & pointing out a quite different Rule & Guide of Life’ to that provided by a polytheistic religion which lacked any foundation in reason and philosophy.[[83]](#footnote-83) The aim of Cicero’s religious dialogues, however, was to critique the philosophical theologies they had produced, which were riddled with contradictions and absurdities.

Cicero thus showed that heathen philosophy offered no support whatsoever for the freethinkers’ claim that all wise men would agree on a religion of nature. Cicero, acknowledging the elusiveness of religious truth, considered Rome’s customary religion to be truly divine to the extent that it promoted ‘*publick peace* and the *good of society*’: it strengthened the affective bonds between Rome’s citizens by connecting them to their ancestors and shared history.[[84]](#footnote-84) Middleton was emphatic that Cicero had not endorsed double doctrine theory, because he recognised custom and tradition to provide what reason could not: a national religion, and a system of morality, which conduced to the collective happiness and well-being of the entire community. Indeed, Cicero was inveterately critical of the ‘absurd rigor’ of Cato’s Stoicism because it led Cato to seek to impose on other men opinions of how they ought to live, and of what they ought to believe, which were unnatural, as drawn from ‘the refinements of the schools’. Cicero’s moral philosophy, by contrast, tended to affirm rather than to contradict the judgments of common people as to what conduct was praiseworthy or blameable, and this was because he drew his insights from ‘nature, and social life’.[[85]](#footnote-85) For all that he probed the issue to the bottom, Cicero grasped that the question of the immortality of the soul was of limited practical consequence. He focused instead on ‘questions of morality; of more immediate use and importance to the happiness of man; concerning the true notions of virtue and vice, and the natural difference of good and ill’. This resulted in his moral handbook, *De officiis*, which represented ‘the most perfect system of Heathen morality, and the noblest effort and specimen, of what *mere reason* could do towards guiding man through life with innocence and happiness’ – a verdict which chimed, once more, with Locke’s.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Ultimately, for Middleton the firmest evidence attesting to the divine origins of the Gospel was that its moral teachings were in perfect harmony with Cicero’s. ‘I am not one of those rigid Casuists’, Middleton declared, ‘who think that our Appetites were planted in us merely to be cross’d & mortified; but am perswaded, that they may all be freely gratified; & were given us for the very purpose; as the instruments of happiness & pleasure to us’.[[87]](#footnote-87) As this suggests, Middleton’s Christianity was shorn of all moral radicalism. He was repelled by the doctrine of original sin, which implied that mankind’s affective and rational capacities had been irretrievably disordered by the Fall, and that without the unmerited assistance of divine grace ‘the very attempt & act of doing [good] has the nature of Sin’. ‘My mind’, he observed, ‘is of that sluggish, gross, & grouching kind, that it is not capable of soaring or raising itself beyond the narrow Bounds of Sense & Reason, & so attached to thinking of this World, that it cannot amuse itself with fanciful Inventions & Speculations not grounded on facts & realities’.[[88]](#footnote-88) For these reasons, Middleton took the Gospels to affirm the obligatory character of those moral duties which conduced to the happiness and well-being of human communities, and which had already recommended themselves to mankind. Here Middleton’s position was rather different to Locke’s, because he gave little indication that revelation offered a more certain foundation for moral knowledge than Cicero had been able to discover. Christ’s promise of salvation, to be sure, offered further support for the ‘hope’ that ‘Sense & Reason’ had afforded to Cicero that the virtuous would be rewarded in a world to come; but insofar as the rational Protestant proportioned his faith to the evidence, his Christian belief remained founded on ‘hope’ rather than on a ‘full assurance’. It remained, that is, a wavering faith: the honest individual would, even in a Christian age, confess with Cicero to sometimes doubting of what he generally believed. The practical implications of this doubt were, however, nugatory: as *De officiis* illustrated, the reciprocal duties of morality were considered to be obligatory by the socialised individual because they conduced to their community’s shared pursuit of comfort and happiness – and God made man to be happy, in the here and (perhaps) hereafter. If Locke’s ‘bridge’ between natural and revealed religion was rather precarious, Middleton’s was still more so, as he eroded the foundations on both sides of the divide. Middleton’s decidedly Ciceronian interpretation of the moral teachings of revealed Christianity had an obvious implication. True Gospel Christianity, it suggested, would be historically invisible: it would merely affirm the bonds of morality and justice that ought already to unite individuals in community, for reasons outlined by Cicero in *De officiis*.

## ***II: Hume at Ninewells: ‘true’ religion and the turn to Cicero***

By 1749, Hume was deeply frustrated at the perceived lack of critical engagement with his philosophical works in England. His *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741–2) might have been ‘favourably received’, but Hume had no desire to take on Addison’s mantle as a polite essayist.[[89]](#footnote-89) The *Essays* were intended, ‘like dung with marl’, to ‘bring forward the rest of my Philosophy, which is of a more durable, though of a harder and more stubborn nature’; and according to this criteria, Hume adjudged them to have failed.[[90]](#footnote-90) Even more gallingly from Hume’s perspective, he had in any case revised the *Treatise* with a consideration of its reception in mind, ‘castrating’ it by ‘cutting off its nobler parts’, and by this means ‘endeavouring to give as little offence as possible’ to contemporary philosophers such as Butler and Hutcheson.[[91]](#footnote-91) This, too, had failed, on two fronts: not only had the work not received ‘the approbation’ of ‘a few judges’ – it had not even been subjected to their ‘free censure and criticism’;[[92]](#footnote-92) and, in Scotland, it did not prevent Hume being considered an enemy to religion and excluded from a university position at Edinburgh in 1745.[[93]](#footnote-93) Hume’s response was to include excised parts of the *Treatise* – ‘some *Reasonings concerning Miracles*’, and a more concerted discussion of particular providence and a future state – as Essays X and XI in the *Philosophical Essays* (1748). This decision might be interpreted in two, potentially contradictory ways, which reflect a privileging of two different contexts. The first context is primarily Scottish, and reads the *Philosophical Essays* as testifying to Hume’s new resolution not to compromise his philosophy out of a concern for the sensitivities (or prejudices) of Hutcheson *et al.* – to publish and be damned.[[94]](#footnote-94) An alternative reading would privilege the English context. Hume, on this account, came to realise the distinctive character of an English intellectual culture – ‘a Babel of loud vociferation, coarse contradiction, and mean imputation’ – in which moral philosophy and theology were held to be inseparable, not least due to Locke’s influence.[[95]](#footnote-95) Hume’s ‘prudence’ (or ‘cowardice’) in ‘castrating’ the *Treatise*, rather than making it more *palatable* to English critics, merely allowed them to *ignore* it on the basis that it did not intervene directly in the theological debates which they considered to be of greatest philosophical interest.[[96]](#footnote-96)

The ‘mortification’ Hume claimed to suffer at Middleton’s hands in 1748 lends support to the latter interpretation, because it suggests that Hume expected (and desired) that the *Philosophical Essays* would cause a ‘ferment’ in England given the inclusion of the essays on miracles and a future state. In ‘My Own Life’, Hume professes that the ‘disappointments’ caused by the neglect of his *Philosophical Essays* ‘made little or no impression on me’. This is undoubtedly true at one level: Hume’s ‘two years with my brother at his country-house’, Ninewells were remarkably productive. On another level, however, it is questionable. Although Hume first discerned the ‘symptoms of a rising reputation’ whilst at Ninewells, Hume’s description of those ‘symptoms’ is revealing: ‘Answers by Reverends, and Right Reverends, came out two or three in a year; and I found, by Dr. Warburton’s railing, that the books were beginning to be esteemed in good company’.[[97]](#footnote-97) This substantiates the claim that Hume was, at mid-century, overwhelmingly concerned to secure literary fame in England, and that he recognised the ‘railing’ of clerical critics such as Warburton to be the surest indicator of success. This impression is reinforced by Hume’s rather elliptical account of the reception that greeted a work, the ‘Natural History of Religion’, which he composed at Ninewells, but which was only published in 1757 as part of the *Four Dissertations*:

In this interval [following the publication of the first volume of the *History of Great Britain*], I published at London my Natural History of Religion, along with some other small pieces: its public entry was rather obscure, except only that Dr. Hurd wrote a pamphlet against it, with all the illiberal petulance, arrogance, and scurrility, which distinguish the Warburtonian school. *This pamphlet gave me some consolation for the otherwise indifferent reception of my performance*.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In 1749 Warburton had considered administering ‘justice’ to ‘a little book called Philosophical Essays’, primarily on account of its ‘arguments against miracles’. Yet Warburton decided that the work did not merit his attention. It had attracted negligible interest, and if its author’s ‘own weight keeps him down, I should be sorry to contribute to his advancement to any place but the pillory’. Hume was, in short, too obscure to ‘deserve notice’: a verdict which, if known to him, would have confirmed Hume’s anxiety that his works were deemed so insignificant in England as not even ‘to excite a murmur among the zealots’.[[99]](#footnote-99) This raises two questions: the first of which Hume surely asked himself as he returned to Ninewells in April 1749, and the second of which ought to be posed by Hume scholars. First: why, despite his inclusion of the discussions of miracles and a future state – issues which, as Middleton’s work revealed only too clearly, were incendiary in the English context – did the *Philosophical Essays* still fail to incite Warburton and the ‘Reverends, and Right Reverends’ to respond? And second: why, by the mid-1750s, could Hume congratulate himself on having become the *bête noire* not only of Warburton, but of an entity – the ‘Warburtonian School’ – the existence of which historians from Pattison to R.W.J. Mills have attributed to Hume’s fecund imagination?[[100]](#footnote-100) That Hume took pride in this new status is evident: the reception of the ‘Natural History’ was ‘obscure’, but any disappointment this might have caused him (and Hume expresses little) was seemingly recompensed by the ‘consolation’ of being on the receiving end of a good thwacking from the Warburtonians.[[101]](#footnote-101)

Two tentative answers might be given to these questions. To the first: Hume’s ‘Of Miracles’ (Essay X), as David Wootton argues convincingly, remained overwhelmingly preoccupied with the issues of probability and testimony that characterised the French discussion.[[102]](#footnote-102) This is unsurprising, because Hume’s essay was initially drafted, along with the rest of the *Treatise*, at La Flèche.[[103]](#footnote-103) Something similar might also hold for Essay XI, ‘Of the Practical Consequences of Natural Religion’ which, as John Robertson emphasises, addresses the relationship between morality and religion from a decidedly Baylean perspective.[[104]](#footnote-104) It is noteworthy that although he toyed with refuting ‘Of Miracles’, Warburton did not so much as mention the essay which followed it. This is surprising given that Warburton’s magnum opus, the *Divine Legation of Moses* (1738–41), was committed to demonstrating that civil societies could not subsist if the doctrine of a future state were not publicly taught.[[105]](#footnote-105) Here again, it seems that Hume’s approach did not speak – or, at least, spoke only indirectly – to the terms of the English discussion: a discussion in which, as we saw, Middleton was an important interlocutor.[[106]](#footnote-106) To the second question: Hume’s ‘mortification’ at Middleton’s hands *did* make an ‘impression’ on Hume, insofar as it encouraged him to consider how he might more successfully articulate his philosophical insights such that his works could no longer be ignored by English clerical critics. Hume’s revisions to ‘Of Miracles’ in 1750 offer some support for this view, if we accept Wootton’s claim that they were undertaken ‘to take account of an English tradition’.[[107]](#footnote-107) Meanwhile it is significant that, in doing so, Hume borrowed material from Middleton’s *Free Inquiry*.[[108]](#footnote-108) In what follows, however, it is argued that three of Hume’s writings from the Ninewells years provide the strongest evidence for the claim that, on his return to Ninewells, he resolved to intervene directly in English philosophical-theological debates: the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, the ‘Natural History’ and the *Dialogues*. In both ‘manner’ and ‘matter’, these works differ significantly from Hume’s earlier writings. Meanwhile, just as Hume drew on the *Free Inquiry* to ‘take account of an English tradition’ in his revisions to ‘Of Miracles’, so there is reason to think that Middleton’s works were instructive to Hume as he sought to master a distinctively English philosophical idiom on his return to Ninewells.

Before providing evidence for this claim from Hume’s correspondence and publications, its broader plausibility is affirmed by the example of a younger contemporary, Edward Gibbon, who professed himself to be Hume’s disciple.

Gibbon, to an even greater extent than Hume, was immersed in Francophone intellectual culture at a formative stage of his intellectual development. He was exiled by his father to Lausanne following his youthful apostasy from ‘the Religion of my Country’ – a conversion to Catholicism in which, he later claimed, Middleton’s *Free Inquiry* played a rather paradoxical role.[[109]](#footnote-109) Gibbon’s autobiography, like Hume’s, openly avowed the strength of his desire for literary fame, especially in England. In a draft (B) revealingly entitled ‘My Own Life’, Gibbon touches upon a tension that is surely apparent in Hume’s intellectual biography. Gibbon’s involuntary exile afforded him a ‘seclusion from English society’ which was ‘attended with the most solid benefits’. It provided him with ‘a liberal acquaintance with the nations, the manners, and the idiom of Europe’ – and, most notably, with the French ‘idiom’.[[110]](#footnote-110) Gibbon expressly declared that ‘[s]uch as I am, in Genius or learning or manners, I owe my creation to Lausanne’. Be this as it may, however, Gibbon’s immersion in Francophone intellectual culture presented obstacles upon his return to England. It would be invidious to compare Gibbon’s first publication, the concise and breezy *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* (1761) to Hume’s *Treatise* in terms of their respective merits and importance. Yet there is a parallel. Even as, unlike the *Treatise*, it was published in French, Gibbon evidently hoped that the *Essai* would make his reputation in England, and he recalled his disappointment that it ‘was received with cold indifference’. Although, in retrospect, Gibbon was rather ambivalent about the merits of the *Essai*, he nonetheless concluded that its English reception owed more to the manner than to the matter of the work. Re-reading it nearly three decades later, Gibbon pronounced himself ‘not displeased’ with its ‘enquiry into the origin and nature of the Gods of Polytheism’, which itself bore traces of Hume’s discussion in the ‘Natural History’.[[111]](#footnote-111) This was an enquiry that he would subsequently pursue in works that generated a great deal of critical attention in England – the *Decline and Fall*, but also his earlier *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (1770) – thus showing that the subject-matter was of interest. The failure of the *Essai*, he concluded, was instead the result of the parochialism (or ‘pride and laudable prejudice’) of English literary culture, which precluded the easy ‘communication of idioms’ – a barrier revealed, rather than overcome, by the ‘blunders and baldness’ of the English translation of the work.[[112]](#footnote-112) Gibbon’s challenge from the early 1760s, like Hume’s from the late 1740s, was to translate his insights into an English ‘idiom’. In mastering this idiom, and thus generating the controversy and securing the fame he sought in his homeland, Gibbon was indebted to both Middleton and Warburton.

Hume considered Warburton’s ‘railing’ a sure symptom of one’s rising reputation in England, and Gibbon agreed. He took the initiative: the *Critical Observations* was deliberately intended to break ‘a lance against the Giant’s shield’, by critiquing Warburton’s interpretation in the *Divine Legation* of the sixth book of the Aeneid. This was part of a broader controversy concerned with the religious beliefs of the heathen philosophers in which, as we saw in Section I, Locke’s writings (and those of Cicero) occupied a central place. There is evidence that Middleton acted as one of Gibbon’s guides to the distinctive rhythms of this English debate. In Lausanne, Gibbon was afforded ‘the pleasing occupation of reading the best authors’, and the first such work to which he turned was ‘Dr. Middleton’s history [the *Life of Cicero*], which I then appreciated above its true value’.[[113]](#footnote-113) Gibbon’s statement allows for the possibility that Middleton’s undeniably polemical interpretation of Cicero – whom, like Locke, he used to show the extent and limits of natural theology – was important to Gibbon in the 1760s and 1770s, as he endeavoured to translate his insights from a French to an English ‘idiom’. After all, the invidious comparison drawn by Gibbon in the explosive closing chapters (15 and 16) of the first volume of the *Decline and Fall* (1776) between a tolerant, customary and worldly Roman religion and an intolerant, revolutionary and ascetic Christianity – and his account of the disastrous consequences for civil society of the displacement of pagan ethical naturalism by Christian moral theology – was itself undeniably polemical in intent.[[114]](#footnote-114) This point was, of course, apparent to Gibbon’s clerical critics, as was the extent of his debt to Middleton; but, in Gibbon’s case as in Hume’s, the apoplectic responses of ‘Reverends, and Right Reverends’ were infinitely preferable to the ‘cold indifference’ that greeted the *Essai*. Gibbon can hardly have been disappointed that ‘the name of Gibbon became as notorious as that of Middleton’.[[115]](#footnote-115) In responding to his clerical critics in the *Vindication* (1779), indeed, Gibbon was content to place himself with Middleton, and to identify his critics with Middleton’s own: ‘as the Works of Dr. Middleton may be found in every library, so it is not impossible that a diligent search may still discover some remains of the writings of his adversaries’.[[116]](#footnote-116) If, by the later 1780s, Gibbon expressed an ambivalence towards Middleton’s *Life of Cicero* – and, indeed, a remorse for his ‘contemptuous treatment’ of Warburton in the *Critical Observations* – he could now afford to do so.[[117]](#footnote-117) His earlier engagements with both Middleton and Warburton had served their purpose: they had established his reputation in the English intellectual world. Secure in his authorial persona as the historian of Rome, in the later volumes of the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon tacitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the criticisms of its first volume by approaching both paganism and Christianity in a more historical, and less polemical manner. In so doing he left Middleton, and to some extent Hume, far behind him.[[118]](#footnote-118)

Gibbon’s Memoirs offer far more to the intellectual historian than Hume’s brief ‘History of my Writings’ in ‘My Own Life’.[[119]](#footnote-119) Yet Hume’s autobiography makes clear his determination from mid-century to compel the clerical titans of the English intellectual world to engage with his works. Unlike Gibbon, Hume did not achieve this by launching a direct critical assault on Warburton, or by invoking the ‘notorious’ Middleton’s authority explicitly in his writings. Yet Hume’s claim that the Warburtonians’ derisory rejoinder offered ‘consolation’ for the ‘rather obscure’ reception of the ‘Natural History’ is suggestive. No less than Hume’s contemporaries, scholars have struggled to locate a context that can make intelligible Hume’s objectives in this essay.[[120]](#footnote-120) It is not outlandish to suggest that one such objective was precisely to bait Warburton and his disciples into responding in print. In this, it succeeded nearly too well: there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Warburton threatened Hume’s publisher, Andrew Millar, with criminal prosecution if he went ahead with the initial plan to publish it as part of the *Five Dissertations* in 1755.[[121]](#footnote-121) In the end, all turned out for the best: ‘muted’ though its public reception might have been, Hume got what he wanted – a lashing from the Warburtonians. Warburton was particularly piqued by Hume’s presentation of Cicero in the work: unsurprisingly, because it was strikingly similar to another recent interpretation with which he had already disagreed vehemently and publicly – Middleton’s.[[122]](#footnote-122)

Hume was averse to dedications, but he made an exception for the *Four Dissertations*, which contains the ‘Natural History’. In the dedicatory address (to John Home), Hume offered an idealised depiction of the Ciceronian age which is strikingly similar to Middleton’s in the *Life of Cicero*. Middleton emphasised that philosophers in this period were enabled to engage in ‘free inquiry’ into speculative questions. This liberty was not afforded to philosophers in a Christian age, as Middleton anticipated would be confirmed by the reception that greeted the publication of his work of that name in 1748. Middleton observed pointedly in the *Life* that the signal difference between the Ciceronian and the Christian age was that the ancient philosophers did not pronounce anathemas against one another ‘for differences of opinion, which, for the most part, are merely speculative, and without any influence on life, or the good or happiness of civil Society’.[[123]](#footnote-123) Middleton included the nature and attributes of God, and the existence of a future state, among these ‘merely speculative’ opinions. As Middleton emphasised, Cicero and his friends had probed these ‘opinions’ to the bottom, and failed to reach any agreement among themselves.[[124]](#footnote-124) The wisest among them, Cicero, had consequently embraced the customary social norms and ancestral public religion which had developed historically and which tied the Romans together in community. Hume’s dedicatory address strikes a similar chord, by drawing an unfavourable contrast between the ‘ingenuous and candid liberty’ of the Ciceronian period and more recent times:

Another instance of true liberty, of which antient times can alone afford us an example, is the liberty of thought, which engaged men of letters, however different in their abstract opinions, to maintain a mutual friendship and regard; and never to quarrel about principles, while they agreed in inclinations and manners. Science was often the subject of disputation, never of animosity. *Cicero*, an academic, addressed his philosophical treatises, sometimes to *Brutus*, a stoic; sometimes to *Atticus*, an epicurean.[[125]](#footnote-125)

In the ‘Natural History’ itself, Hume invokes Cicero to establish a particularly important conclusion, which is once more consistent with Middleton’s interpretation and unsurprisingly attracted Warburton’s ire. In the passage in question, Hume declared that ‘if there was ever a nation or a time in which the public religion lost all authority over mankind’ it would assuredly have been in the ‘*Ciceronian* age’, in which philosophers were free to probe speculative questions without fear or favour. Yet whatever ‘sceptical liberties that great man might use, in his writings or in philosophical conversation; he yet avoided, in the common conduct of life, the imputation of DEISM and PROFANENESS’. Even in the security of domestic life and private correspondence, ‘he was willing to appear a devout religionist’. A few pages later Hume repeats the point, noting that when it suited him in a legal trial Cicero treated ‘the doctrine of a future state as a ridiculous fable’ – and yet in the sanctity of his own home, he refused to ridicule it.[[126]](#footnote-126) For Hume as for Middleton, Cicero was no proponent of double doctrine theory: he did not endorse the national religion only in public, whilst in private holding to a purer religion of nature.

Cicero’s treatment of religion, Warburton agreed, was ‘contradictory’ – he sometimes defended, and at other times rejected, the doctrine of a future state. Yet Warburton argued that this was the result of precisely the ‘vanity, perverseness, and love of paradox’ of which Hume himself now stood accused.[[127]](#footnote-127) In the *Divine Legation*, Warburton claimed that Cicero showed the tendency to self-contradiction of all sceptical philosophy. Although he accepted Middleton’s contention that Cicero identified himself as an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian sceptic, for whom assent had to be proportioned to the weight of evidence, Warburton considered this to be a ruse. The Academics were, in fact, ‘mere sceptics’; and like the Pyrrhonians, they refused to assent to anything on point of principle, due to a love of paradox and a delight in their own rhetorical dexterity.[[128]](#footnote-128) Hume’s presentation, which appeared in a Section (XII) of the ‘Natural History’ entitled, ‘With regard to doubt or conviction’, offered an alternative way of understanding Cicero’s seeming inconsistency. For Hume, as for Middleton before him, Cicero’s conduct was neither ‘paradoxical’ nor ‘contradictory’. In the ‘shadowy regions’ of theology, in which ‘common sense’ and ‘experience’ offer little light, no individual is truly able to give their ‘assent’ to propositions that are scarcely intelligible by reason – including, of course, the doctrine of a future state. Insofar as they do lend their assent, this is always fleeting and uncertain, ‘some unaccountable operation of the mind between disbelief and conviction, but approaching much nearer to the former than to the latter’. Most ‘religionists’, however, refuse to accept this truth, and ‘make a merit of implicit faith’. Cicero’s endorsement, or mockery, of a future state and similar ‘matters’ did not indicate a regrettable lack of constancy so much as a frank acknowledgement of a lack of conviction. It is those who profess such conviction who merit the charge of hypocrites, because they ‘dare not avow, even to their own hearts, the doubts which they entertain on such subjects’. Meanwhile, on Hume’s account as on Middleton’s, Cicero had not erected the ‘throne’ of ‘infidelity’ because Roman paganism was a customary religion which cemented rather than fragmented the bonds between Rome’s citizens. As ‘a *traditional, mythological* religion’ rather than a ‘*systematical, scholastic*’ one, Roman paganism made no attempt to interfere with the ‘motives of justice and morality’ which determined the conduct of socialised individuals in Roman society.[[129]](#footnote-129)

As Hume declared in another essay which might date from the Ninewells years, ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’, the ‘chief source of moral ideas […] is the reflection on the interests of human society’.[[130]](#footnote-130) Christian moral theology, conversely, was predicated on the assumption that ‘human sentiments have place in the deity’, which allowed for the claim that the merit of human actions ought to be evaluated in the light of God’s supposed will. In the *Dialogues*, which were clearly modelled on Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, Hume showed that this assumption was unwarranted: it ascribed qualities to the deity ‘beyond what he has exerted in this universe’, but which ‘according to *human* sentiments’ were ‘essential parts of personal merit’.[[131]](#footnote-131) Meanwhile, another of Hume’s Ninewells writings, the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, was pre-eminently concerned to substantiate the claim that ‘the motives of morality and justice’ owed nothing at all to religious belief, and instead found their origin – and the criterion for their legitimacy – in ‘the reflection on the interests of human society’. Here, too, Hume very deliberately invoked Cicero’s authority: on the basis that, as Middleton had argued, Cicero in *De officiis* had drawn his insights in his ethical theory from his observations of ‘nature, and social life’.[[132]](#footnote-132)

The *Enquiry* is, as Harris notes, much more than a ‘recasting’ of Book III of the *Treatise*.[[133]](#footnote-133) In the *Treatise*, Hume focused attention on three questions which he now relegated to appendices: whether morality was founded in reason or sentiment (App. 1); whether ‘pride’ or ‘self-love’ could be deemed a legitimate motive to moral action (App. 2); and whether justice ought to be considered ‘natural’ or ‘artificial’ (App. 3). Meanwhile, Cicero is conspicuous only by his absence from the *Treatise*. This is not to say that Cicero was unimportant at an earlier stage of Hume’s intellectual development. As he informed Francis Hutcheson in response to his criticisms of Book III in 1739, he had drawn his ‘Catalogue of the Virtues from *Cicero’s Offices*’, and ‘I had, indeed, the former Book in my Eye in all my Reasonings’.[[134]](#footnote-134) Given how central the question of Cicero’s philosophical commitments was to the debates generated by Locke and Clarke – with both of whom Hume, no less than Hutcheson, engaged closely in the 1730s – Hume’s professed identification of his moral theory with Cicero’s in his correspondence with Hutcheson was already recognised by both parties to be significant.[[135]](#footnote-135) Yet in the *Treatise* itself, this debt to Cicero is left unacknowledged. Hume is instead cautious: the reader is invited to draw their own conclusion from Hume’s suggestive comment that the ‘virtues’ the importance of which he foregrounds – magnanimity and a love of fame – were usually denounced by ‘many religious disclaimers’ as ‘purely pagan and natural’.[[136]](#footnote-136)

In the *Enquiry*, by contrast, the nature of Hume’s claim about his moral theory’s ‘pagan and natural’ character is made unignorable, and his debts to Cicero foregrounded – or even exaggerated. Peter Loptson and Aaron Garrett suggest that Hume’s repeated invocations of Cicero in the *Enquiry* were intended to appeal to lay readers with classicizing tastes, and to model the civilized ways in which philosophical debate ought to be transacted.[[137]](#footnote-137) This, however, misses the rebarbative quality of those invocations, which were assuredly intended to antagonise rather than to placate – an interpretative claim which receives further support from Hume’s frank confession in ‘My Own Life’ that he actively sought controversy and clerical abuse. Just the most obvious example is Hume’s assertion that the dispute over whether pride is ‘good or bad’ is ‘merely verbal’, which few Christian readers would be likely to swallow easily. Hume similarly marginalized the question of justice – natural, or artificial? – as ‘merely verbal’. But the *coup de grâce*is then applied in a remarkable footnote: ‘CICERO, […] in a dispute which is chiefly verbal, *must*, on account of the author, *carry an authority, from which there can be no appeal*’.[[138]](#footnote-138) Here, as Isabel Rivers observes with an apt choice of adjectives, Hume ‘breathtakingly attributes a quasi-scriptural status’ to the writings of the heathen moralist.[[139]](#footnote-139) Meanwhile the structure of the *Enquiry* is itself indicative of a determination to draw a conclusion which, Hume claimed, was entirely consistent with Cicero’s in *De officiis*: the principles of utility and agreeableness, to oneself and to others, are adequate to the task of explaining why we consider some qualities and actions to be praiseworthy and others condemnable.[[140]](#footnote-140) Our concern for the opinion and esteem of others can explain why we internalise the moral norms that regulate the society in which we live and consider them to be obligatory for us. Hume now explicitly banished the *honestum* from moral philosophy and, as the frequent appeals to his ‘infallible’ authority made clear, he professed to follow Cicero in doing so: ‘whatever is valuable in any kind, so naturally classes itself under the division of *useful* or *agreeable*, the *utile* or the *dulce*, that it is not easy to imagine, why we should ever seek farther’.[[141]](#footnote-141)

As the foregoing indicates, Cicero occupies a presiding presence in Hume’s writings at Ninewells which all, with the partial exception of the *Political Discourses*, share a common purpose: to show that ‘the motives of morality and justice’ originate in a concern for the interests of human society (the *Enquiry*); to undermine the philosophical arguments adduced in support of moral theology (the *Dialogues*); and to establish that a theistic religion which presents God as mankind’s moral legislator, who will reward or punish them in a world to come, inevitably and systematically corrupts the natural functioning of our ideas of morality and justice (the ‘Natural History’). Middleton’s writings showed how incendiary these issues were in an English context in which theology and philosophy were considered inseparable – and how central Cicero was to the post-Lockean debates over them. But if Hume’s turn to Cicero was to some extent inspired by Middleton’s example, then his interpretation of Cicero enabled him to draw notably different conclusions. For Middleton as for Locke before him, Cicero was a proto-Christian. In *De officiis* Cicero focused primarily on the utility and agreeableness of virtue, to oneself and to others; yet on their accounts, Cicero remained aware of the need for a firmer grounding for morality – that is, for the *honestum*, which could explain the inherently obligatory character of virtue.[[142]](#footnote-142) Only the Christian God, understood as humankind’s creator and moral legislator, could provide this grounding; and even as, by means of reason alone, Cicero was able to entertain a ‘hope’ in such a divine being and in a future state of rewards and punishments, it had taken Christ to make men wise unto salvation. The harmony between natural and revealed religion was, Locke and Middleton argued, indicated by the harmony between *De officiis* and the Gospels. This explains why Locke, in his writings on education, maintained that impressionable novitiates ought not to be trusted to read any ‘other Discourses of Morality, but what he finds in the Bible; or have any System of *Ethicks* put into his Hand, till he can read *Tully’s Offices*’.[[143]](#footnote-143) *De officiis* showed the practical requirements of morality and the terrestrial motivations to virtue (most notably, the desire for esteem and reputation), and the Scriptures then explained what Cicero could not: why every human being is under an obligation, as God’s creature, to perform their duties.[[144]](#footnote-144)

In his Ninewells writings, Hume’s interpretation systematically repudiated any possibility of harmony between Ciceronian ethical naturalism and Christian moral theology. Hume’s Cicero, like Hume himself, did not pant after truths that reason seemed incapable of discovering. The ‘*useful* or *agreeable*, the *utile* or the *dulce*’ were alone sufficient to explain morality, with no need to ‘ever seek farther’; and theology was ‘a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery’ on which, at best, the philosopher might (like Cicero) fritter away an idle hour in inconclusive discussion with friends who shared an interest in merely speculative questions.[[145]](#footnote-145)

Yet Middleton’s influence is arguably most discernible in the delicate way in which Hume now articulated this deeply controversial conclusion. As many scholars have recently noted, in the *Dialogues*, and subsequently in the *History of England* (1754–62), Hume drew a distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ religion which raises interpretative challenges.[[146]](#footnote-146) Middleton offers one way of addressing these. For Middleton, as we have seen, there was a categorical distinction between what he called ‘the History of the Gospel’ and ‘the History of the Church’.[[147]](#footnote-147) True Gospel Christianity, on Middleton’s account, was primarily concerned with ethical rather than doctrinal conformity, teaching humankind of the reciprocal duties they owe to one another in society. Those duties were entirely consistent with what Hume called ‘the Catalogue of the Virtues’ as laid out by Cicero in *De officiis*. Yet almost from the moment of its delivery, Christ’s message was appropriated and distorted by an order, the clergy, whose claim to spiritual authority was the vehicle by which they pursued their desire for worldly power and riches. Their teachings flatly contradicted Christ’s, and Cicero’s: piety inhered in the scrupulous adherence to unintelligible doctrinal formulae, rather than to the moral law; charity required not mutual forbearance and love, but intolerance and violent persecution; and the definitions of virtue preached by the ‘crack-brain’d’, ‘mad’, and ‘enthusiastic’ monks of the fourth and fifth centuries demanded that men deny the ‘innocent Pleasures’ of friendship and conviviality in exchange for ascetic withdrawal from society, the allurements of which were the source of all corruption. True Christianity was entirely consistent with what Hume later termed ‘the interests of society’, whereas in the depraved form in which it had been instituted throughout the Christian world it had systematically violated those interests, which it considered illegitimate. As Middleton expressed this point: ‘I look upon the whole institution of monkery, from what age or Saint soever it drew its origin, to be contrary not only to the principles of the Gospel, but to the interests of all civil society, and the chief source of all the corruptions, which have ever infested the Christian Church’.[[148]](#footnote-148)

Hume put a very similar distinction to work in the first volume of his *History of Great Britain* (1754), which unsurprisingly – and pleasingly, from Hume’s perspective – generated controversy. In justifying his treatment of Christianity in the work, Hume protested that ‘the proper office of religion is to reform men’s lives, to purify their hearts, to enforce all moral duties, and to secure obedience to the laws and the civil magistrate’.[[149]](#footnote-149) This made ‘true’ religion an elusive quarry for the historian because, as Cleanthes is made to say in the *Dialogues*,such a religion ‘only enforces the motives of morality and justice’ and is therefore ‘in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives’.[[150]](#footnote-150) ‘True’ religion, then, would be historically invisible. The historical page was marked by ‘the adulterate species [of religion] alone, which inflames faction, animates sedition, and prompts rebellion’ and thus ‘distinguishes itself on the open theatre of the world’, and ‘the historian, therefore, has scarce occasion to mention any other kind of religion; and he *may* retain the highest regard for true piety, even while he exposes all the abuses of the false’.[[151]](#footnote-151) In Chapter 15 of the *Decline and Fall*, which, as his clerical critics swiftly observed, owed a great deal to Middleton, Gibbon advanced a nearly identical claim: the ‘theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity’, but the ‘more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian’ of ‘discovering the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence on earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings’.[[152]](#footnote-152)

For all that it was palpably disingenuous, Hume’s invocation of a ‘true’ religion which, as he well knew, his reader would associate with primitive Gospel Christianity allowed him to articulate his criticisms of Christianity and the clerical order with a degree of finesse that his writing previously lacked.[[153]](#footnote-153) A case in point is Hume’s notorious footnote attacking the clergy in ‘Of National Characters’ (1748), an essay that again reveals Hume’s increasing willingness (or even determination) to incur the wrath of clerical critics from the later 1740s. There, Hume’s articulation of his anticlericalism lacks the sophistication that characterises the Ninewells writings. Hume declared baldly that ‘all wise governments will be on their guard against the attempts of a society [the clergy], who will ever combine into one faction, and while it acts as a society, will for ever be actuated by ambition, pride, revenge, and a persecuting spirit’.[[154]](#footnote-154) Hume’s note scandalised, among others, Montesquieu, who reprimanded Hume in a letter dating from mid-May 1749, which he received shortly after he had returned to Ninewells. Montesquieu observed with studied understatement that in his essay, ‘vous maltraites un peu l’ordre eclésiastique’. Hume’s reply, written six weeks later, is not extant, which might explain why this exchange has received negligible attention in Hume scholarship.[[155]](#footnote-155) But a sense of its contents is disclosed in Montesquieu’s response of early September. This provides us with the firmest evidence we have that Hume, on his return to Ninewells, resolved to learn from his ‘mortification’ at Middleton’s hands, by turning to Middleton’s writings (in the plural). It is clear that, in justifying his disparagement of the clerical order, Hume had invoked the authority of one of their own: ‘*Dr*. Middleton’. Montesquieu reassured Hume that:

[…] la réputation du Mr le docteur Middleton est certainement venue jusqu’à nous […] et j’espère bien me procurer l’avantage de lire les ouvrages dont vous me parlez. Je sçais que Dr du Middleton est un homme éminent’.[[156]](#footnote-156)

We cannot know which of Middleton’s works Hume recommended to Montesquieu. It is, however, worth recalling that Gibbon, once freed in Lausanne to peruse ‘the best authors’, turned immediately to Middleton’s *Life of Cicero*, which had caused something of a literary sensation in Walpolean Britain, securing the subscriptions of the great and the good.[[157]](#footnote-157) Even as we lack firm corroborating evidence, it seems implausible that Hume, such a confessed admirer of Cicero, would not have read it.[[158]](#footnote-158) It was through his interpretation of Cicero, in the *Life* as in his other works of theological controversy, that Middleton was enabled to define the distinguishing characteristics of ‘true’ religion. By means of ‘sense and reason’ alone, Cicero in *De officiis* had identified the ‘universal Law or rule of conduct of man; the source of all his knowledge; the test of all truth’, and ‘all subsequent revelations, which are supposed to have been given by God in any other manner, must be tried and cannot be received as divine, any further than as they are found to tally and coincide with this original standard’.[[159]](#footnote-159) It is unsurprising that Hume expressed a willingness to make terms with such a ‘true’ religion, which would merely enforce the motives to morality and justice and affirm Cicero’s ‘Catalogue of the Virtues’ in *De officiis*. Yet as his polemical invocations of Cicero in his Ninewells writings made clear, Middletonian’s Ciceronian test was one that Christianity – and theistic religion more broadly – must inevitably fail to meet. Small wonder that Hume’s ultimate fantasy, as expressed in the final two years of his life, was to see ‘the Clergy sent about their business’ and their churches ‘converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses’.[[160]](#footnote-160) A more realistic solution to the problem of ‘false’ religion, which he shared with Middleton, was a rigorously Erastian settlement in church and state, which placed an ecclesiastical establishment of salaried clergy under the vigilant superintendence of the civil magistrate.[[161]](#footnote-161)

## **Conclusion**

This essay makes no claim to have provided irrefutable evidence to support the hypothesis that Hume turned to, and learned from, Middleton’s writings whilst at Ninewells. Although the correspondence with Montesquieu, in tandem with the otherwise puzzling features of Hume’s writings from these years, is suggestive, a hypothesis it must remain. My objective is more limited: to challenge the prevailing presupposition that a now-obscure Anglican clergyman like Middleton could not possibly have engaged Hume’s attention, and informed both the ‘manner’ and ‘matter’ of some of his most famous writings. Hume’s autobiography, limited though it is, reveals clearly enough that he grasped the need to present his philosophy in a way that spoke to his intended audience – and, from mid-century, the audience with which Hume appears to have been primarily concerned was English. As the recent scholarship on England’s clerical and conservative variant of Enlightenment has emphasised, English intellectual culture was distinctive. Its characteristic feature was what Hume recognised to be its insatiable appetite for theological controversy. That Hume delved into theological issues from mid-century, and proceeded to write a history of England in which the *Ecclesia Anglicana* occupies a central place, is less surprising if one takes his desire for a literary reputation in England seriously. This is not to say that Hume sold out: from the first, he made efforts to ensure that his writings would stand the best chance of being read, and taken seriously, in England, as his ‘castrating’ of the *Treatise* testifies. Yet Hume, like Gibbon two decades later, had to learn how to communicate effectively to English readers; and as he did so, his treatment of religion, and his articulation of his moral theory, became richer and more compelling.[[162]](#footnote-162) For this, Middleton might deserve some credit. Who, after all, could serve as a better guide to the distinctive rhythms of post-Lockean English theological-philosophical debate than the ‘notorious’ Dr. Middleton, whose ‘Works’ at mid-century were, unlike Hume’s own, to ‘be found in every library’?[[163]](#footnote-163)

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1. Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, rev. ed. (1954; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 522 n.116. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–2. Fogelin’s book was widely reviewed, and it is revealing that not a single reviewer appears to have picked up on the error. It is noted, however, by Timothy Crimmins, ‘Universal and profane: The historiographical consequences of natural religion’, *History and Theory* 59, no. 2 (2020): 227–54 (on 237 n.54). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Conyers Middleton, *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the Earliest Ages* (London: R. Manby & H.S. Cox, 1749). Public appetite had been whetted by Middleton’s *An Introductory Discourse to a larger Work, designed hereafter to be published…* (London: R. Manby & H. Cox, 1747), which had already generated a number of critical responses and partially explains the immediate public furore caused by the *Free Inquiry*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* [*EMPL*], ed. E.F. Miller, rev. edn (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), xxxi–xli (on xxxv). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R.M. Burns’s observation that Hume ‘would be gratified to learn that this state of affairs has long been completely reversed’ is a frequent refrain in the scholarship: R.M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 10–11. For an unusually nuanced interpretation, which poses the arresting question, ‘would Hume have felt that there was anything of substance in his essay that was not in Middleton’s *Free Inquiry* – or vice versa?’, see David Wootton, ‘Hume’s “Of Miracles”: Probability and irreligion’, in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M.A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 191–230 (on 220–21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71 & n.84. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Burns, *Great Debate on Miracles*, 10–11 (italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fogelin, *Hume on Miracles*, 1–2 (italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Most of Middleton’s previously published works, alongside many of his unpublished essays, were collected and printed by his literary executor John Heberden as *The Miscellaneous Works of the late Reverend and Learned Conyers Middleton, D.D.*, 4 vols. (London: R. Manby & H.S. Cox, 1752). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. William Warburton to Philip Doddridge, (?)Mar. 1741, in *The Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge*, ed. J. D. Humphreys, 5 vols. (London: H. Colburn & R. Bentley, 1829–31), 4: 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The two most seminal contributions to the scholarship on this English Enlightenment within piety make no mention of Middleton. Their respective authors have subsequently produced superb works on Middleton’s thought and context (see the next footnote), but it remains unclear (to me) whether they consider him to fit within the rubric of their English Enlightenments or, like the freethinkers, to remain apart from it: J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Clergy and commerce: The conservative Enlightenment in England’, in *L’età dei lumi: studi storici sul Settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*, ed. R. Ajello, E. Contese & V. Piano, 2 vols. (Naples: Jovene, 1985), 1: 523–62; and B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. B.W. Young, ‘“Scepticism in excess”: Gibbon and eighteenth-century Christianity’, *Historical Journal* 41, no. 1 (1998): 179–99; J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015); B.W. Young, ‘Preludes and postludes to Gibbon: Variations on an impromptu by J.G.A. Pocock’, *History of European Ideas* 35, no. 4 (2009): 418–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘I have pleased myself on the road [from Cambridge to Dorchester] with the thoughts of spending one day philosophically with Chub; whom, tho’ I never saw, I had a great inclination to be acquainted with for the sake of his writings’: Middleton to John, Lord Hervey, 25 Aug. 1733, in Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds [SRO], Hervey Papers, 941/47/7 (n. pag.). Along with other similarly compromising passages from his private correspondence, this was later published in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, 5 (Jan. 1761): 23–4, under the editor’s title: ‘The following extracts furnish an undeniable proof of the author’s genuine and particular sentiments’ – that is, of his deism. Thomas Gray remarked, after Middleton’s death, that his ‘house was the only easy place one could find to converse in at Cambridge’, and other reports confirm his conviviality: Gray to Thomas Wharton, 20 Aug. 1750, in *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. L. Whibley & P.J. Toynbee, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 1: 327–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. These ‘are names, which nobody hears, without laughing’: [Richard Hurd and William Warburton], *Remarks on Mr David Hume’s Essay on the Natural History of Religion* (London: M. Cooper, 1757), 76. It is ‘one of the nicer ironies of eighteenth-century intellectual history’ that Warburton – whose achievement it was to be predeceased by his literary reputation – also prophesied that Hume would share in the pitiable deists’ fate: Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*,211. Burke would famously celebrate these freethinkers’ ‘repose in lasting oblivion’ in 1790: Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790], in *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, ed. F. Canavan, 4 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 2: 105. Burke’s estimate of Hume’s intellectual gifts was decidedly more positive: see Max Skjönsberg’s contribution to this special issue, ‘The Hume-Burke connection examined’, *History of European Ideas*, Online First (Feb. 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The literature on deism and the ‘early Enlightenment’ is vast, but for four seminal contributions, see: Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1966–69), Vol. 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*; John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976); M.C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981); and J.A.I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For Middleton’s liminal position see Jan van den Berg, ‘Should Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), Principal Librarian in Cambridge, be regarded as a deist?’, *Notes & Queries* 56, no. 2 (2009): 255–7 (a helpful list of some of the works that have categorised Middleton as a deist is provided at 256 n.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Conyers Middleton, *The History of the Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, 2 vols. (London: J. Bettenham, 1741). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. James Fitzjames Stephen, ‘The Miscellaneous Works of Conyers Middleton’, *Saturday Review* 19, no. 485 (11 Feb. 1865): 171–3. Stephen also contributed essays on Hooker, Laud (a man whose liberal ideas sat uncomfortably alongside his political and ecclesiological tendencies), Jeremy Taylor, and members of the Falkland Circle at Great Tew such as Clarendon and Chillingworth. The essays were collected and reprinted in *Horae Sabbaticae*, 3 Series (London: Macmillan & Co., 1892). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Stephen, ‘Conyers Middleton’, in *Horae Sabbaticae*, 2: 349–66 (on 352–3); John Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1872). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*,2 vols. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1876). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The following was applied to Mark Pattison, but holds equally well for the Stephen brothers and Tulloch: ‘All of his historical work was written with the conditions of his own time firmly in mind; and that alone is enough to suggest that his objectivity was not complete’: Anthony Grafton, ‘Mark Pattison’, *The American Scholar* 52, no. 2 (1983): 229–36 (on 232). For a qualified case for the defence, see John W. Burrow, ‘Intellectual history in English academic life: Reflections on a revolution’, in *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, ed. R. Whatmore & B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For reflections on this development within intellectual history and the history of political thought (insofar as the two could now be distinguished), see B.W. Young, ‘Religious history and the eighteenth-century historian’, *Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2000): 839–68; and the essays inA. Chapman, J. Coffey, and B. Gregory (eds.), *Seeing Things their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The first Leslie Stephen Lecture was delivered in 1907. For Trevor-Roper’s insistence on the permeability of the boundaries between past and present, especially in the realm of thought, see Peter Ghosh, ‘Hugh Trevor-Roper and the history of ideas’, *History of European Ideas* 37, no. 4 (2011): 483–505; and the editor’s introduction, along with the essays by Colin Kidd and John Robertson, in *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Historian*, ed. B. Worden (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Between Stephen’s *English Thought* (1872) and the publication of Trevor-Roper’s essay in 2010, the only significant studies of Middleton known to me (outside of Gibbon studies) are: Vernon G. Elgin, ‘The eighteenth-century miracles discussion … with special reference to the writings of Conyers Middleton’ (D.Phil. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1960); Giuseppe Giarrizzo, ‘Fra Protestantesimo e deismo: le origini della moderna storiografia inglese sul cristianesimo primitivo. Fra latitudinari e ortodossi: C. Middleton (1683–1750)’, *Ricerche di storia religiosa*,1:1 (Rome, 1954): 151–199; Michael L. Snow, ‘Conyers Middleton, polemic historian, 1683–1750’ (D.Phil. diss., Columbia University, 1969); Ted A. Campbell, ‘John Wesley and Conyers Middleton on divine intervention in history’, *Church History* 55, no. 1 (1986): 39–49; and Robert G. Ingram, ‘“The weight of historical evidence”: Conyers Middleton and the eighteenth-century miracles debate’, in *Religion, Politics and Dissent: Essays in Honour of James E. Bradley*, ed. R. D. Cornwall & W. Gibson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 85–109. Giarrizzo also published studies of Hume and Gibbon, and Trevor-Roper reviewed the former positively in *History and Theory* 3, no. 3 (1964): 381–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. H.R. Trevor-Roper, ‘From deism to history: Conyers Middleton’, in *History and the Enlightenment*, ed. J. Robertson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 71–119. The following all acknowledge a debt to the foregoing: Pocock, *B&R*, 5: 219–30;B.W. Young, ‘Conyers Middleton: The historical consequences of heterodoxy’, in *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy, 1600–1750*, ed. S. Mortimer & J. Robertson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 235–65; Ingram, *Reformation without End: Religion, Politics, and the Past in Post-Revolutionary England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), Part II; [removed for blind review]; Ashley Walsh, *Civil Religion and the Enlightenment in England, 1707–1800* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020), ch. 5; and Crimmins, ‘Universal and profane’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For an attempt to take the measure of Pocock’s achievement see B.W. Young, ‘John Pocock’s *Barbarism and Religion*’, *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 2, no. 4 (2017): 431–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In ‘My Own Life’, Hume judged that the failure of the *Treatise* ‘had proceeded more from the manner, rather than the matter’ of the work, and declared that he had ‘cast . . . that work anew’ in the *Enquiries*: *EMPL*, p. xxxv. See, too, Hume to Elliot, Mar./Apr. 1751, in *The Letters of David Hume* [*LDH*], ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1: 158. For these years, see Harris, *Hume*, 248–304. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Hume to Elliot, 18 Feb. 1751, in *LDH*, 1: 152–3. For a reconstruction of the likely content of Hume’s classical studies see Moritz Baumstark, ‘Hume’s reading of the Classics at Ninewells, 1749–51’, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2010): 63–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For the suppression of the *Five Dissertations* in 1755, on which more is said below, see E.C. Mossner, ‘Hume’s “Four Dissertations”: An essay in biography and bibliography’, *Modern Philology* 48, no. 1 (1950): 37–57. In a letter to his publisher, Andrew Millar of 12 June 1755, Hume noted that the ‘Natural History’ was one of ‘four short Dissertations, which I have kept some Years by me’: *LDH*, 1: 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For the claim that Hume’s *Political Discourses* were primarily intended as a contribution to a broader European debate, see John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Franco Venturi, observing that England presents a paradox for historians of the Enlightenment, concluded that: ‘In England the rhythm was different’. Pocock credits Venturi’s comment for sparking his interest in England’s distinctively clerical and conservative variant of Enlightenment. See Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 132; and Pocock: ‘Clergy and commerce’, 525–29; *B&R*, 1: 6, 292–308. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. B.W. Young, ‘Knock-kneed giants: Victorian representations of eighteenth-century thought’, in *Revival and Religion since 1700: Essays for John Walsh*, ed.J. Garnett & C. Matthew (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 79–94 (on 93): ‘In attempting to understand eighteenth-century thought, the late twentieth-century scholar has to engage with the knock-kneed giants of the nineteenth-century, remembering their prejudices and blindspots, their battles and programmes, since their histories remain indisputably the best available synthesis of Hanoverian religion and philosophy’. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. In this respect, both would presumably have agreed with Pocock’s insistence, in more recent times, that Locke’s influence on eighteenth-century developments is more readily discernible in the fields of moral philosophy and theology than in political theory: J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Negative and positive aspects of Locke’s place in eighteenth-century discourse’, in *John Locke und Immanuel Kant: Historische Rezeption und gegenwärtige Relevanz*, ed.M.P. Thompson (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 45–61; and idem, ‘The myth of John Locke and the obsession with Liberalism’, in *John Locke: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar, 10 December 1977*, ed.J.G.A. Pocock & R. Ashcraft (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 3–24. The insight is substantiated more fully by a scholar appreciative of the merits of both Stephen and Pocock: Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For the importance of Cicero to Locke’s articulation of his moral theology, see [removed for blind review]. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hume is an important interlocutor for Pocock’s and Young’s studies of Gibbon, and the same is true for David Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For the challenge of reconstructing Gibbon’s intellectual development between 1765–72 see Peter Ghosh, ‘Gibbon’s dark ages: Some remarks on the genesis of the *Decline and Fall*’, *Journal of British Studies* 73 (1983): 1–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Mark Pattison, ‘Tendencies of religious thought in England, 1688–1750’ [1860], repr. in *Essays by the late Mark Pattison*,ed. H. Nettleship, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 2: 42–118 (on 47–50).  [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This explains Stephen’s declaration that Middleton ‘belongs to the transition to a later period’: Stephen, *English Thought*, 1: 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. ‘It was in society, and not in his study that [Butler] had learned the weight of the Deistical arguments’: Pattison, ‘Tendencies’, 77–8; Butler ‘does not doubt [the truth of Christianity] himself, but he sees, what others do not see, the difficulty of proving religion to others’: Stephen, *English Thought*, 1: 93–5. James Fitzjames Stephen advanced similar claims in his essays in *Horae Sabbaticae*. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Something for which Pattison himself called in 1860, with the Tractarians in his sights: ‘Tendencies’, 43–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Stephen, *English Thought*, 1: 263–4, 270–71. Trevor-Roper’s interest similarly lay in Middleton’s perceived role as a precursor to Gibbon, as he ‘filled a gap in his account of the genesis of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*’: John Robertson, ‘Intellectual history: “The religious origins of the Enlightenment”’, in *Hugh Trevor-Roper* (see note 24), 116–44 (on 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 1: 88, 43.  [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Middleton, ‘Apology for my Writings’ (*c*.1746), British Library Additional Manuscripts [BL Add. MS] 4478b (Birch Papers), ff. 26–45 (on f. 40r) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. I substantiate this claim more comprehensively in [removed for blind review]. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Pattison, ‘Tendencies’, 59.  [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hence Locke’s warning, in an early journal entry (*c*. 1661–2), that ‘the greatest caution should be taken lest, having trusted too much in our reason, we neglect faith, and, by not having given due regard to the mysteries of the gospel, we embrace philosophy instead of religion’: Public Record Office [PRO], 30/24/47/33, printed and translated in *Political Essays*, ed. M. Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 209.  [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Pattison, ‘Tendencies’, 59.  [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. For the controversy with Stillingfleet see Timothy A. Stanton, ‘John Locke, Edward Stillingfleet and toleration’ (D.Phil. diss., University of Leicester, 2002). For freethinking appropriations of Lockean epistemology see Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991–2000), 2: passim.   [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Pattison, ‘Tendencies’, 61.  [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* [1695], in *Writings on Religion*, ed. V. Nuovo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 200.  [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid, 195–6.  [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See Locke’s entry in his journal from 1698, entitled ‘Sacerdos’, in Bodleian Library, Film 77, p. 93; printed in *Political Essays*, ed. Goldie, 343–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Locke was by no means the first to interpret Cicero through the prism of a humanised piety, as the examples of John of Salisbury and Erasmus indicate: Cary J. Nederman, ‘A medieval Ciceronian: John of Salisbury’, in *The Ciceronian Tradition in Political Theory*, ed. D.J. Kapust & G. Remer (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021),35–54; and Albert Rabil Jr., ‘Cicero and Erasmus’s moral philosophy’, *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 8 (1988): 70–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Despite recognising that Warburton was ‘a convinced follower of John Locke’, Pocock misses the extent to which, in making the doctrine of immortality ‘a central feature of his claim for Christianity’, Warburton was probing an issue that Locke had made pressing in an English context: Pocock, *B&R*, 5: 230–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Locke, *A Second Reply to the Bishop of Worcester* (1697), in *The Works of John Locke*, 9 vols. (London: T. Longman et al., 1794), 3: 488–89. Here, Locke claims to be following Cicero’s lead in marginalising the question of the immateriality of the soul, the evidence for which he had already subjected to sceptical critique in the *Essay*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid; cf. *Reasonableness*, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Bodleian Library MS Locke f. 5, p. 38 (journal entry dated 3 Apr. 1680). A similar claim appears in the ‘Discourse of Miracles’ (*c*.1702), which was published in King’s edition of Locke’s *Works* in 1706. Middleton invokes Locke’s authority in the *Introductory Discourse* (1747). For discussion see M.A. Stewart, ‘Hume’s historical view of miracles’, in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, ed. M.A. Stewart & J.P. Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 171–200 (on 182). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Clarke’s lectures were subsequently published as *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (London: W. Botham, 1705) and *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* (London: W. Botham, 1706). For the increasing popularity of Newtonian physico-theology in Cambridge – but no mention of the Lockean backlash – see John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 5.  [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See the suggestive remarks in John Stephens, ‘Edmund Law and his circle at Cambridge: Some philosophical activity of the 1730s’, in *The Philosophical Canon in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Essays in Honour of John W. Yolton*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers & S. Tomaselli (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1996), 163–74; and the fuller treatment in Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, ch. 3. It is, of course, noteworthy that Hume’s *Treatise* was similarly concerned to critique Clarke’s moral theology, and drew upon Locke to do so.   [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Clarke, *Demonstration*, 14.    [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Clarke, *Unchangeable Obligations*, 104.   [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Pattison, ‘Tendencies’, 61.  [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London: s.n., 1730), esp. ch. XIV.  [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. As argued by John Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious: or, a Treatise Shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, nor Above It* (London: s.n., 1696). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Toland, ‘Clidophorus; or of the Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy’, in *Tetradymus* (London: Brotherton & Meadows, 1720), 86–125 (on 86); and for Cicero as the arch-proponent of double doctrine theory, see idem, *Cicero Illustratus* (1712), in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland*, 2 vols. (London: J. Peele, 1726), 1: 324–89. For Toland’s Cicero, see Katherine A. East, *The Radicalization of Cicero: John Toland and Strategic Editing in the Early Enlightenment*(Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).  [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Middleton to Archbishop Potter, ?7 Oct. 1740, in BL Add. MS 32457, f. 156v. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. On whom see Robert T. Holtby, *Daniel Waterland: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Orthodoxy* (Carlisle: C. Thurnam, 1966); and Ingram, *Reformation without End*, Part I. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. For this turn to history and the Fathers, see Robert D. Cornwall, ‘The search for the primitive Church: The use of early Church Fathers in the High Anglican tradition, 1680–1745’, *Anglican and Episcopal History* 59, no. 3 (1990): 303–29; and, more comprehensively, Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. As Waterland’s disciple, Zachary Pearce, claimed in his response to Middleton: *A Reply to the Letter to Waterland*(London: J. Watts, 1731), 8–13. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Middleton, *A Letter to Dr Waterland: Containing Some Remarks on his Vindication of Scripture: In Answer to a Book, Intituled, Christianity as Old as the Creation* [1731], in *Miscellaneous Works*, 2: 164; Middleton paraphrases a passage in Waterland, *Scripture Vindicated: In Answer to a Book intituled, Christianity as Old as the Creation* (London: W. Innys, 1730), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Middleton, ‘Apology’, BL Add. MS 32459, p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. The central arguments of the *Free Inquiry* were already in place by 1734, as attested by Middleton’s second reply to Waterland, which Hervey convinced him not to publish: ‘A Letter to the Reverend Dr Waterland on the Subject of Certain Principles Advanced in his Last Book Called *The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity*’ (1734), in BL Add. MS 32459, ff. 52–97.  [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Middleton’s favourite example was Millenarianism, and in this he was followed closely by Gibbon: *Free Inquiry*, in *Miscellaneous Works*, 1: 45–7, 60–61; and Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. D. Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1994), 1: 1.15, 467–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, 67.  [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. In developing this insight, Middleton owed a debt to Pietro Giannone’s *Istoria Civile del Regno di Napoli* (1723). Middleton was present in Rome when the furore caused by the publication of this work was at its height; and he appears on the list of subscribers which is prefixed to James Ogilvie’s English translation (1729), on which see Trevor-Roper, ‘Pietro Giannone and Great Britain’, in *History and the Enlightenment*, 34–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Middleton, ‘Apology’, BL Add. MS 32459, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Middleton to Archbishop Potter, ?7 Oct. 1740, in BL Add MS 32457, f. 157r. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Middleton, *Life of Cicero*, 2: 562 & n. X. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Middleton, *Letter to Waterland*, 174–5. Middleton turned to Cicero to critique, rather than to corroborate Clarke’s moral theology, contrary to the interpretation offered in Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 91–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Middleton, ‘Apology’, BL Add. MS 4478b, f. 36r. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Middleton, *Letter to Waterland*, 170; *Life of Cicero*, 2: 559–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Middleton, *Life of Cicero*, 2: 559–60; cf. 1: 77, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid., 2: 327 (the emphasis is Middleton’s). For Locke’s abundantly attested admiration for *De officiis* see Phillip Mitsis, ‘Locke’s offices’, in *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. J. Miller & B. Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Middleton to Hervey, 31 July 1733, in SRO 941/47/7 (n. pag.). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Middleton, ‘Apology’, BL Add. MS 4478b, f. 44r. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *EMPL*, xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Hume to Henry Home, 13 June 1742, in *LDH*, 1: 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Hume to Home, 2 Dec. 1737, in ibid, 1: 24–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Hume to Home, 13 Feb. 1739, in ibid, 1: 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. On which see Roger Emerson, ‘The “affair” at Edinburgh and the “project” at Glasgow: The politics of Hume’s attempts to become a professor’, in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions* (see note 58), 1–22; and M.A. Stewart, *The Kirk and the Infidel* (Lancaster: University of Lancaster Publications Office, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. M.A. Stewart, ‘Two species of philosophy: The historical significance of the first *Enquiry*’, in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First Enquiry*, ed.P. Millican (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 67–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Stephen, *English Thought*, 1:86–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Hume to Home, 2 Dec. 1737, in *LDH*, 1: 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Hume, ‘My Own Life’, xxxv–xxxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid, xxxvii (italics added). The pamphlet in question was, unbeknownst to Hume, co-authored by Warburton and Hurd. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Warburton to Hurd, 29 Sept. 1749, in *Letters from an Eminent Prelate to one of his Friends*, ed. R. Worcester [Hurd] (Kidderminster: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1793), 11; Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *EMPL*, xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. ‘For though “the Warburtonian School” is a phrase of common occurrence in the writings of the end of the 18th century, Hurd is really the only man to whom the designation properly applies’: Pattison, ‘Life of Bishop Warburton’ [1863], in *Essays*, 2: 147. This point is advanced more comprehensively by Mills in his contribution to this special issue: ‘David Hume and the myth of the “Warburtonian School”’, *History of European Ideas*, Online First (Sept. 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. I borrow the language of thwacking from Colin Kidd, ‘On heroes, hero-worship and demonology in Scottish historiography: A reply to Dr. Ferguson’, *Scottish Historical Review* 86, no.1: 221 (2007): 108–112 (on 108). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Wootton, ‘Hume’s “Of Miracles”’; cf. Pedro Faria, ‘David Hume, the *Académie des Inscriptions* and the nature of historical evidence in the early eighteenth century’, *Modern Intellectual History*, Online First (Jan. 2020). For an alternative interpretation which foregrounds Hume’s engagements with Locke (and, through him, the English debate) in the *Treatise*, see Stewart, ‘Hume’s historical view’. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. For the significance of the French context in which the *Treatise* was composed see Dario Perinetti, ‘Hume at La Flèche: Skepticism and the French connection’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56, no. 1 (2018): 45–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Robertson, *Case for the Enlightenment*, 302–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Pocock, *B&R*, 5: 230–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Cf. Pocock’s remark (ibid, 240) on ‘Of Miracles’: ‘It was easier [for English critics] to dismiss Hume as irrelevant to that debate than to see him as undermining its foundations; it is not certain that he intended to take part in it’. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Wootton, ‘Hume’s “Of Miracles”’, 223 and passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Hume followed Middleton in discussing the miracles performed on the tomb of the Abbé de Paris in the 1720s, although both authors could plausibly have been drawing from a shared source: compare Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T.L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93–4 & n.25, with Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, in *Miscellaneous Works*, 1: 181–3. Middleton was himself a keen follower of the French discussions, as attested by his library: *A Catalogue of the Entire Library of the Reverend Conyers Middleton, D.D.* (London: s.n., 1751). [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Gibbon, *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Lord Sheffield (London: John Murray, 1896),‘Memoir F’ [*c*.1792–3], 84–91; 130. For legitimate doubts regarding this retrospective claim on Middleton see David Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’: The Historian and his Reputation, 1776–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 309–13; cf. Pocock, *B&R*, 1: 45–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Gibbon, *Autobiographies*, 124, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Pocock, *B&R*, 1: 255; Pocock discusses Gibbon’s disappointment at the English reception of the work in ibid, 213–4. For Gibbon’s later debts to the ‘Natural History’, see too Pocock, *B&R*, 5: 243 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Gibbon, *Autobiographies*, 172–6. For the *Essai*’s French context see Robert Shackleton, ‘The impact of French literature on Gibbon’, in *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed.G.W. Bowersock, J. Clive & S.R. Graubard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 207–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid, 139. These years were also marked by a close study of Locke’s *Essay*: ibid, 142, 397; cf. Pocock, *B&R*, 1: 72–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Pocock, *B&R*, 5: 215–310. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Ibid, 89. Hume certainly foresaw the controversy which chapters 15 and 16 would generate in England: Hume to Gibbon, 18 March 1776, in *LDH*, 2: 309–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Gibbon, *A Vindication of some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1779], in *DF*, 3: 1161; cf. Pocock, *B&R*, 5: 220–21; Young, ‘“Scepticism in excess”’. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Gibbon, *Autobiographies*, 281–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. For Gibbon’s search for an authorial persona see Womersley, *Transformation*; and Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), who briefly discusses Middleton’s *Life of Cicero* on 24–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *EMPL*, xxxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. ‘We cannot help feeling at a loss to determine Hume’s real intentions and to precisely evaluate the *Natural History*’s general import’: Michel Malherbe, ‘Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*’, *Hume Studies* 21, no. 2 (1995): 255–74 (on 255). [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. See Mossner, ‘Hume’s “Four Dissertations”; and the balanced discussion of the evidence in Mills, ‘Hume and the myth of the “Warburtonian School”’. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. [Hurd and Warburton], *Remarks on Hume’s Natural History*, Remark XIII, 49–50. Warburton was primarily responsible for the ‘rude beating’ administered to Hume in this pamphlet, and Hurd for its ‘elegance of form and splendor of polish’: Warburton to Hurd, 7 Feb. 1757, in *Letters from an Eminent Prelate*, 176. For Warburton’s critique of Middleton’s interpretation of Cicero – initially in private correspondence, and subsequently in print – see [removed for blind review]. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Middleton, *Life of Cicero*, 2: 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. A point Middleton laboured to Hervey, 21 Nov. 1734, in SRO 941/47/7 [n. pag.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Hume, *Four Dissertations* (London: A. Millar, 1757), i–ii. For a very similar claim, see Hume to anon [James Balfour], 15 Mar. 1753, in *LDH*, 1: 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Hume, ‘The Natural History of Religion’ [1757], in T.L. Beauchamp (ed.), *The Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), XII: 71, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. [Hurd and Warburton], *Remarks on Hume’s Natural History*, Remark XIII, 49–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, 1: 327–31, 59–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Hume, ‘Natural History’, XII: 71–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Like ‘Of Suicide’, with which it was published posthumously in *Two Essays* (1777), this was intended for inclusion in the abortive *Five Dissertations*. Along with the ‘Natural History’, ‘Immortality’ might have been one of the ‘four short Dissertations’ which, in 1755, Hume declared he had ‘have kept some Years by me’: Hume to Millar, 12 June 1755, in *LDH*, 1: 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Hume, ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’, in *EMPL*, 592–6 (italics added). The scholarly literature on the Ciceronian framing of the *Dialogues* is vast, but for an illuminating discussion see Christine Battersby, ‘The *Dialogues* as original imitation: Cicero and the nature of Hume’s skepticism’, in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. N. Capaldi, D. F. Norton & W. L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1976), 239–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Middleton, *Life of Cicero*, 2: 559–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Harris, *Hume*, 250–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Hume to Francis Hutcheson, 17 Sept. 1739, in *LDH*, 1: 34–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. For discussion see James Moore, ‘Utility and humanity: The quest for the *honestum* in Cicero, Hutcheson, and Hume’, *Utilitas* 14, no. 3 (2002): 365–86; and [removed for blind review]. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D.F. Norton & M.J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 3.2.2.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Peter Loptson, ‘Hume and ancient philosophy’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 20:4 (2012): 741–72; Aaron Garrett, ‘Hume, Cicero, and the ancients’, in *Hume’s Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Guide*, ed. E. Kroeker & W. Lemmens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 192–218. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T.L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 106 & n.72 (italics added). It bears remarking that, in his final revisions to the *Dialogues* in 1776, Hume had Philo declare that debates over the nature and attributes of God are similarly ‘merely verbal’: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. D. Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 92–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, 2: 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Moore, ‘Utility and humanity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Hume, *EPM*, 72. For discussion of this point see Harris, *Hume*, 255–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. The ambiguous relationship between the *utile* and *honestum* in Cicero’s *De officiis* was interpreted rather differently by Machiavelli who, on Marcia L. Colish’s account, followed Cicero in reducing the latter to the former: ‘Cicero’s *De Officiis* and Machiavelli’s *Prince*’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 4 (1978): 80–93. For the eighteenth-century British discussion of this issue see Moore, ‘Utility and humanity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* [1693], ed. J.W. Yolton & J.S. Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), §185, p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. For Locke’s emphasis on esteem and reputation as a motive to adhere to the moral law see [removed for blind review]. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Hume, ‘Natural History’, XV: 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. There is an increasingly voluminous literature on this question. For two lucid discussions see Don Garrett, ‘What’s true about Hume’s “true religion”?’, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2012): 199–220; and Emilio Mazza, ‘The broken brake. Hume and the “proper office” of religion’, *Ethica & Politica/ Ethics & Politics*, 20 (2018): 261–317. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Ibid, 143–4. Hume was, of course, similarly scathing about the ‘Monkish virtues’: cf. Philip A. Reed, ‘What’s wrong with the Monkish virtues? Hume on the standard of virtue’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2012): 39–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. This passage was originally intended as a preface to Volume II, but eventually appeared in a footnote (and only in the first edition of the work): Hume, *The History of Great Britain: Vol. II: Containing the Commonwealth, and the Reigns of Charles II. and James II.* (London: A. Millar, 1757), 449n. The MS of Hume’s draft preface can be found in Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 306–307. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Hume, *Dialogues*, XII: 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Hume, *The History of Great Britain: Vol. II*, 449 n. (italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Gibbon, *DF*, I, 1.15: 460–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. This partially explains why certain of his Anglican and dissenting readers considered his attack on corrupted (‘false’) religion as a service to the cause of primitive Gospel Christianity: Isabel Rivers, ‘Responses to Hume on religion by Anglicans and dissenters’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52, no. 4 (2001): 675–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. ‘Of National Characters’ (1748), in *EMPL*, 199 n.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. This neglect is all the more curious because, as James Harris remarks, Hume’s correspondence is decidedly anaemic for the period between 1749 and 1753 (including, therefore, the Ninewells years): Harris, *Hume*, 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Montesquieu to Hume, 15 July and 3 Sept. 1749 (N.S.), National Library of Scotland [NLS] MS 23156, ff. 47–8. These letters were published in *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, ed. J.H. Burton, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1846), 1, Appendix B: 456–7. From Montesquieu’s second letter, it is clear that Hume’s missive, recommending Middleton, was dated 15 July (O.S.). Hume referred again to Middleton as an ‘eminent’ author in a letter to Millar, 20 June 1758, in *LDH*, 1: 282–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. As Middleton boasted to Warburton, he had secured ‘a splendid list of the Great, & I may add, I hope, of the Good, for I have fourteen Bishops in it already’: Middleton to Warburton, 26 June 1739, BL Add. MS 32457, 20. For the *Life* and its reception, see Robert G. Ingram, ‘Conyers Middleton’s *Cicero*: enlightenment, scholarship, and polemic’, in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Cicero*, ed. W.H.F. Altman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 95–123. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. The speculative reconstruction of Hume’s library, based on an inventory of the books of Baron Hume (the author’s nephew), offers circumstantial evidence: it contains the first edition (1729) of Middleton’s *Letter from Rome*, along with the 1755 editions of both the *Life of Cicero* and the *Miscellaneous Works*: *The David Hume Library*, ed. D.F. Norton & M.J. Norton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, 1996), 146, 82, 113.  [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Middleton, *A Vindication of the Free Inquiry* (*c*.1750), in *Miscellaneous Works*, 1: 294–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Adam Smith to Alexander Wedderburn, 14 Aug. 1776, in *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. E.C. Mossner & I.S. Ross, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 203–4; Hume to Andrew Stuart, 1 Aug. 1775, printed in an appendix to Moritz Baumstark, ‘The end of empire and the death of religion’, in *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain*, ed. R. Savage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 231–57 (on 257). [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, ed. W. B. Todd, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 3: 135–6; cf. Ryu Susato, *Hume’s Sceptical Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. As Hume himself recognised, hence why he considered the second *Enquiry* to be incomparably the best of all of his writings: Hume to David Dalrymple, 3 May 1753, and to the Abbé Le Blanc, 5 Nov. 1755, in *LDH* 1: 175, 227; ‘My Own Life’, in *EMPL*, xxxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Gibbon, *Autobiographies*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)