



WORKSHOP
SCEPTICISM AND RELIGION
IN AL-GHAZĀLĪ, MAIMONIDES, AND HUME
NOVEMBER 7–8, 2017

WORKSHOP

SCEPTICISM AND RELIGION IN AL-GHAZĀLĪ, MAIMONIDES, AND HUME

Convenors

Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg/Germany), Josef Stern (University of Chicago/USA), and Máté Veres (Université de Genève/Switzerland)

Venue

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies, Schlüterstraße 51, Room 5060, 20146 Hamburg

Abstract

In David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes challenges Demea: "Or how do you *mystics*, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from *sceptics* or *atheists*, who assert, that the first cause of All is unknown and unintelligible?" By the eighteenth century, we find questions of religion and scepticism tightly intertwined but this dialectic goes back to the ancient sceptics' critique of the gods and, when the three revealed monotheistic faiths encounter philosophy in the Middle Ages, it comes to embrace a rich variety of classical epistemological and metaphysical questions reconfigured in light of the medieval philosophical/theological context. Not only do thinkers grapple with issues of *how* knowledge can be

acquired—by direct intuition, human reasoning, and/or divine revelation—but also with the classical question of the very possibility of knowledge, at least in the realms of metaphysics and theology. And if knowledge cannot be possessed, how should one act: by denying the claims as Academic sceptics are said to have argued, by embracing them *despite*, or *because* of, their lack of rational justification as fideists recommend, or by simply suspending judgment to free oneself from the conflict between religion and philosophy as Pyrrhonists would have reacted? In this workshop, we propose to explore parallels and discrepancies between three of the greatest philosophers in the three faiths to have canvassed this rich and inadequately studied territory between religion and scepticism leading to an even wider range of questions from atomism and causation to knowledge and the self: Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111), Moses Maimonides (c. 1135–1204), and David Hume (1711–76). Although we make no claims of influence among these three thinkers, there are striking and sometimes uncanny moments of convergence and divergence in their arguments and strategies, whose mutual investigation can serve to illuminate the thought of each.

Participants

- Blake Dutton (Loyola University Chicago/USA)
- Andreas Lammer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München/Germany)
- Paul Russell (University of British Columbia/Canada, Göteborgs Universitet/Sweden)
- Mark Steiner (Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel)
- Josef Stern (University of Chicago/USA)
- Máté Veres (Université de Genève/Switzerland)
- Ramona Winter (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin/Germany)

Programme

TUESDAY	NOVEMBER 7, 2017
13:45 – 14:00	Welcome and Introductory Remarks <i>Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)</i>
14:00 – 17:00	SESSION 1 <i>Chair: Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)</i>
14:00 – 15:15	“Philosophy’s happy escape?” Ancient Scepticism and the Project of Hume’s Natural History of Religion. <i>Máté Veres (Université de Genève)</i>
15:15 – 15:45	Coffee Break
15:45 – 17:00	Al-Ġhazālī’s Critical Theology <i>Andreas Lammer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)</i>

17:00 – 17:30	Coffee Break
17:30 – 18:45	SESSION 2 <i>Chair: Daniel Davies (Universität Hamburg)</i> Al-Ghazālī and Hume on Causal Connection and Scepticism <i>Blake Dutton (Loyola University Chicago)</i>
19:30	Conference Dinner at La Monella (Hallerplatz 12) <i>For participants and invited guests only</i>
WEDNESDAY	NOVEMBER 8, 2017
09:30 – 12:30	SESSION 3 <i>Chair: Sonja Schierbaum (Universität Hamburg)</i>
09:30 – 10:45	Maimonides' Guide and Hume's Dialogues: A Tale of Two Sceptics <i>Josef Stern (University of Chicago)</i>
10:45 – 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 – 12:30	David Hume: the First and Last “Kalamist” <i>Mark Steiner (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)</i>
12:30 – 13:30	Lunch Break
13:30 – 18:00	SESSION 4 <i>Chair: Ariane Schneck (Universität Hamburg)</i>
13:30 – 14:45	Fictional Beliefs about the Self in Hume’s Treatise. In what Sense are Fictional Beliefs Defective? <i>Ramona Winter (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)</i>
14:45 – 15:15	Coffee Break
15:15 – 16:30	Hume's Scepticism and the Problem of Atheism <i>Paul Russell (University of British Columbia/Göteborgs Universitet)</i>

Abstracts

“Philosophy’s happy escape?” Ancient Scepticism and the Project of Hume’s Natural History of Religion

Máté Veres (Université de Genève)

Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (DNR) is often credited with the single-handed destruction of the ambitions of early modern rational theology. In his somewhat lesser known *Natural History of Religion* (NHR), Hume put forward a psychological theory concerning the origin of religious belief, and an account of the mechanisms that explain its transformations throughout human history. Due to some of its peculiarities, *NHR* is occasionally invoked in support of a distinction, allegedly present in *DNR*, between epistemically suspect popular religions and a rationally justified, if vague, form of philosophical theism.

Hume was familiar with the encounter between ancient scepticism and philosophical theology, including works by Cicero and Sextus Empiricus. In this paper, I shall briefly present the ancient material, and argue that Hume’s understanding of this encounter sheds light on his own sceptical agenda in *NHR*. Importantly, however, I do not argue for a direct line of influence: Hume arrived at his position previously to, and independently from, his substantial engagement with ancient scepticism. I argue instead that a careful reading of *NHR* reveals that Hume was aware of, engaged with, and crucially transformed the ancient sceptical legacy, using it for the purpose of denouncing the rational justification of all forms of religious belief. I shall also argue that, despite the usual insistence on his Ciceronian scepticism, Hume in fact understands the relation between philosophical doubt and ordinary life very much along Pyrrhonian lines.

Al-Ghazālī’s Critical Theology

Andreas Lammer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111) is one of the most famous figures, and his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is among the most famous works, within the Arabic-Islamic intellectual tradition. In it, al-Ġazālī attacks twenty philosophical positions which were developed and defended, most significantly, in the preceding century by Avicenna (d. 428/1037). These positions concern religious and theological matters, spanning from the conception of God, creation, and causality to the human soul, the afterlife, and bodily resurrection. On the main, al-Ġazālī’s aim is to reveal the weaknesses in the argumentations put forth by the philosophers, not to develop an alternative system.

Still, even by looking at his criticism, it is possible to derive and comprehend central features of his own theology. Thus, it is through an investigation of what precisely he criticised that we can see more clearly by what precisely he was exercised, and so establish a broad picture of how he himself conceptualised God and His relation to the world.

In my paper, then, I shall provide an introduction to al-Ġazālī by discussing central arguments of his *Incoherence* in an attempt to outline his critical theology, with a special focus on the notion of causality.

Al-Ghazālī and Hume on Causal Connection and Scepticism

Blake D. Dutton (Loyola University Chicago)

While David Hume is placed alongside John Locke and George Berkeley in the triumvirate of British empiricists, he is without question a stunningly original philosopher whose views on a range of issues have set the agenda for much of philosophy since his day. Perhaps most influential have been his views on causation, which are commonly taken as the starting point of all modern thinking on the subject. Despite their originality, important aspects of Hume's views on causation were formulated by a number of philosophers before him, though often as part of larger theories that Hume rejected and for ends that he did not share. A case in point is Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, the great Ashʿarite theologian of the 11th and 12th centuries. In agreement with Hume, al-Ghazālī denied both that there exists any necessary connection between causes and effects (or between what are habitually believed to be causes and what are habitually believed to be effects) and that there is any basis for thinking that causes are productive of their effects (or that what are habitually believed to be causes are productive of what are habitually believed to be effects). However, as these denials were made as part of a larger theory that Hume rejected, occasionalism, and for an end that he did not share, the certification of the possibility of miracles, the alignment of al-Ghazālī with Hume on causation, while significant and striking, is anything but simple and straightforward. This paper will not attempt a comprehensive comparison of al-Ghazālī and Hume on causation but will examine key points of agreement to determine the nature and degree of their alignment. Of particular interest will be the extent to which each thinker sees skeptical consequences to follow from his views of causation and how each attempts to block or mitigate those consequences.

Maimonides' Guide and Hume's Dialogues: A Tale of Two Sceptics

Josef Stern (University of Chicago)

Although we have no evidence of (textual) contact between Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) and David Hume (1711-1776)—let alone of influence—this paper explores (as time allows) several parallels and differences between these two intensive attempts to approach religion philosophically: (1) the philosophical forms of writing they each adopt to discuss religion and theology; (2) their conceptions of anthropomorphism and its significance; and (3) their respective conceptions of skepticism, its relation to their respective conceptions of naturalism, and its function for and in religion.

Fictional Beliefs about the Self in Hume's Treatise. In what Sense are Fictional Beliefs Defective?

Ramona Winter (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Typically, beliefs in Hume's philosophy represent some experience we have. In this paper, I discuss a special case of beliefs, namely *fictional* beliefs. Fictional beliefs differ from non-fictional beliefs in that they are not connected to experience in the same way: I have a fictional belief without having an exactly corresponding experience. Hume discusses various fictional beliefs: examples include the beliefs in distinct and continued existence, substance, faculties, and the self. Unfortunately, Hume is not very clear on this issue. There is much disagreement over what exactly fictional beliefs are and what their status is. I take up a specific question concerning fictional beliefs: In what sense are fictional beliefs defective? That is, what mistake (if any) are we making in holding such beliefs? I answer those questions by focusing on the case of the self. I argue that one commonly accepted feature about their defectiveness is wrong: Fictional beliefs are not defective *in general*; rather, their defectiveness is context-dependent. I spell out this context-dependent defectiveness in terms of an instability: Facts about certain contexts make us acquire a competing non-fictional belief, thereby making the fictional belief less stable. As I show, interpreting the defectiveness this way also gives us a better way to make sense of Hume's more general stance on the self.

Hume's Scepticism and the Problem of Atheism

Paul Russell (University of British Columbia, Göteborgs Universitet)

Although it is widely accepted that Hume was a critic of religion it remains a matter of considerable debate whether or not he was an atheist who denied the existence of God. The interpretations available range from the view that Hume was some form of theist (e.g. an "attenuated deist"), an agnostic who simply suspends any belief on this issue, to the view that he was indeed an atheist who denies the existence of God. On the face of it Hume's "mitigated" skeptical commitments seem to fit most comfortably with the (middle) agnostic position, neither affirming nor denying the existence of God, on the ground that this is a matter beyond the scope and limits of human understanding. This reading may be challenged from either side of the theist/atheist divide. In this paper I argue that Hume's theory of belief tells against any theistic interpretation – including the weaker, "attenuated" accounts. I then turn to the case for the view that Hume's criticisms of theism were not limited to the "soft" skeptical aim of discrediting theist arguments but commit him to the "harder" skeptical objective of providing grounds for denying the theist hypothesis (in all its forms). On the basis of this account I conclude by way of showing that Hume's atheistic commitments, so interpreted, are entirely consistent with his mitigated skeptical principles.

David Hume: the First and Last of the Mutakallimun

Mark Steiner (Hebrew University Jerusalem)

Maimonides devotes three chapters (1:71-4) of his *Guide* to a hostile critique of the Islamic theologians known as the "Speakers" (Mutakallimun). In chapter 73, he reduces their theology to twelve postulates, of which the most "repugnant" is what I call Axiom I: the possible and the

imaginable are one and the same. Michael Schwarz has shown that a good number of these postulates are completely undocumented in the Islamic literature that has come down to us. In particular, there is no evidence of anybody formulating Axiom I before Maimonides, let alone believing it; although Al-Ghazali and others promoted various *consequences* of Axiom I. Others of the axioms, relating to Islamic atomism, were on their way out by the time Al-ghazali wrote (says Shlomo Pines). Maimonides, therefore, made up a philosophy that was held by nobody he knew. On the other hand, it is easy to document that David Hume's Treatise is largely based on Axiom I, which is used to refute the doctrines of Locke and Berkeley, let alone the rationalists. He uses it to promote atomism and anti-Euclideanism (Book I, Part II), and argue for the non-existence of necessary connections among events (all of which are precisely the doctrines Maimonides attributes to the Mutakallimun). We conclude, then, that Maimonides made up the philosophy of David Hume, and that nobody but Maimonides had formulated this philosophy, and so we ask—did Hume read Maimonides' Guide?