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David Hume's Irony in the Natural History of Religion

David Hume'un Dinin Doğal Tarihi'ndeki İronisi

NURTEN ÖZTANRIKULU ÖZEL
Dicle University

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Abstract: David Hume, in The Natural History of Religion, investigates the origins of religious phenomena in human nature. This investigation is carried out through an ironic approach that is characteristic of Hume's thought. In a controversial subject such as religion, it is not surprising that irony is particularly favored by a skeptical philosopher; for the nature of religion is especially well-suited to be addressed from an ironic perspective by a skeptic. Although Hume's ironic approach to religion has mostly been studied by Hume scholars with a focus on the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, it is evident that irony is also prominently present in The Natural History of Religion. Nevertheless, there are very few studies in the literature that thoroughly examine irony in the context of The Natural History of Religion. This study aims to reveal how Hume addresses natural religion and religious phenomena in an ironic manner in The Natural History of Religion. By irony, what is meant here is not simply the use of sarcastic, provocative, or disparaging language; these are merely some among the many forms irony may take. The central claim of this study is that the irony in The Natural History of Religion is not merely a rhetorical device, but rather a philosophical attitude that constitutes one of the fundamental components of Hume's skepticism.

Keywords: David Hume, irony, religion, skepticism, human nature.

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✉ Nurten Öztanrıkulu Özel
Dicle Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe Bölümü
21280, Diyarbakır, Türkiye | nurtenoztanrikulu@gmail.com

Introduction

There are two primary sources for David Hume's philosophical inquiries into religion: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *The Natural History of Religion*[1]. Although reflections on religion can also be found in other parts of his works, these two works hold particular significance for Hume scholarship, as they engage directly with religious themes. While Hume's use of irony in *Dialogues* has been widely studied, his ironic approach in the *NHR* has received comparatively little scholarly attention. This article aims to demonstrate how Hume employs irony in his treatment of natural religion and religious phenomena not merely as a rhetorical device but as a form of critical inquiry that is central to his skepticism.

In the *NHR*, which was written in the 1750s, Hume approaches the question of whether religious beliefs can be rationally justified from a skeptical perspective. Peter Jones argues that what Hume meant by the 'natural history of religion' is an account of religious beliefs in terms of its sociological and psychological background (Jones, 1999, p. 270). Given the broad scope of philosophy, it is reasonable to interpret Hume's account as sociological, psychological, or even historical in nature. Nevertheless, it is evident that his primary aim is to philosophically investigate the origins of religion within human nature. The fundamental question Hume sets out to explore is: What are the natural causes in human nature that give rise to religious beliefs? In fact, the very first sentence of the *NHR* clarifies that the work is an inquiry into religion itself. Theologies, he argues, defend the idea that "there is an invisible, intelligent power in the world" (Hume, 1956, p. 32), yet Hume never attempts to endorse such ideas as a theologian; instead, he focuses on religion as a phenomenon. The two philosophical questions he poses at the beginning of the book reveal the reasons for his research on religion. These questions concern the foundation of religion in reason and its origin in human nature (Hume, 1956, p. 21). The first addresses the justification of religious belief, while the second concerns the explanation of its emergence (Hardy, 2013, p. 700). *NHR* is primarily devoted to the investigation of the second question.

[1] Henceforth, references to these works of Hume will be abbreviated as *Dialogues* and *NHR*.

1. The Subject of *The Natural History of Religion*

Hume explores the origins of religious belief in human nature in the *NHR*. This inquiry is separate from the inquiry into the foundation of religion in reason. The inquiry into the foundation of religion in reason is mostly undertaken by theologians. Hume claims that the idea they defend is "almost universal"(Hume, 1956, p. 32), which suggests that it is grounded in reason. According to Hume, anyone capable of rational thought can, after serious reflection, arrive at the theistic conclusion that nature was created by an intelligent being. Therefore, as Keith Yandell pointed out, it may be said that all people possess a minimal theism, because "the acceptance of theism is a product of man's *rational* capacities; the propensity to theism is a propensity of reason" (Yandell, 1995, pp. 40-41). This provides an answer to the question concerning the foundation of religion in reason. Regarding the question of the origin of religion in human nature, Hume identifies it as the central concern of the *NHR*. Although belief in an invisible and intelligent creator of nature has been and remains widespread, the religious beliefs derived from this foundational idea are not necessarily universal, since they are not the product of reasoning. If they were rational in origin, history would not reveal nations entirely devoid of religious sentiment (Hume, 1956, p. 21). This implies that religious belief is unnatural. Yandell is right in noting that religious belief is not "common to every member of a species" nor "definitive of belonging to the species in question" (Yandell, 1979, p. 105). Indeed, a religious belief does not stem from "an original instinct or primary impression of nature" (Hume, 1956, p. 21), such as self-love, the love of man and woman for each other, the love of parents for their children, and gratitude — sentiments found across all nations. This is because the principles of religious belief are secondary to human nature. That is to say, they do not arise from an instinct that operates consistently and may, in certain conditions, fail to develop at all: it can "easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation too, may, by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances, be altogether prevented" (Hume, 1956, p. 21). Therefore, according to Hume, religious beliefs are unnatural productions of human nature. What he seeks to investigate is precisely this non-universal, contingent aspect of human nature — the accidents and causes that influence its operation (Hume, 1956, p.

21). Hume adressess this secondary operation of human nature empirically, by considering the common features and variations in religious beliefs from the earliest human societies onward.

In his analysis of religious beliefs and practices, he draws attention to the transition from polytheism — the first and rudest form of religion — to monotheism, which emerged as human understanding advanced. In ancient times, people were barbarous and ignorant, and due to their limited understanding, they were inclined to marvel at superior powers. It was not any perceived order or uniformity in nature that gave rise to polytheism, as nature presented them with nothing more than an ordinary, unstructured image. Therefore, early humans did not infer the existence of an invisible, intelligent power from their observations of nature. What gave rise to polytheism, according to Hume, was the idea that there was a "constant combat of opposite powers" in nature — such as life and death, health and sickness, and plenty and want (Hume, 1956, p. 27). This perceived conflict created a sense of the uncanny in early humans and also led them to distrust the future, as they could not predict what lay ahead. Their ignorance regarding future events caused them deep anxiety about life. On the one hand, they hoped that good things would happen; on the other hand — and more dominantly — they feared what would happen in the future.

"We may conclude, therefore, that, in all nations, which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the Works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind." (Hume, 1956, p. 27).

Hope and fear are aroused in people when they encounter the unknown causes of various and conflicting circumstances in life. The anxiety produced by this experience leads them to believe in "invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence" (Hume, 1956, p. 30) and to deify "every part of the universe" (Hume, 1956, p. 38) — in other words, to adopt polytheism. According to Hume, the gods of polytheism are anthropomorphic beings with human-like qualities, as humans naturally tend to project anthropomorphic characteristics onto external powers unless this inclination is corrected "by experience and reflection" (Hume, 1956, p. 29). For this reason, the gods of polytheism are believed to possess human

attributes such as reason, passion, emotion, and even physical features. Although each of these gods represents a distinct invisible power, human beings — because of their tendency to associate invisible, intelligent powers in nature — are "led to unite the invisible power with some visible object" (Hume, 1956, p. 38). Consequently, various forms of polytheism, such as paganism, began to emerge.

Paganism is a form of polytheism in which people attribute invisible power to sensible and visible objects, and all organisms in nature are regarded as real gods. Sometimes, paganism manifests as belief in the sun, moon, stars, stones, or certain animals; at other times, it appears in the veneration of human-made figures, such as those created by painters or sculptors. What gives rise to this belief is a natural human propensity, which is a fundamental principle of human nature (Hume, 1956, p. 38). Through this propensity, human beings create gods that are sensible and relatable, forming analogies and associations with other perceptible entities, as well as with allegorical representations of these gods. Each god is attributed an appropriate genealogy, various qualification, historical characteristics, and mythological stories. Hume offers numerous examples drawn from different mythologies to illustrate how these analogies are rooted in the notion that gods, like humans, possess limited powers. The gods' limited capacities explain both the division of divine functions and the multiplication of gods, thereby accounting for the origin and variety of polytheistic systems in human nature. With these explanations, Hume aims to demonstrate that polytheism is a product of human passions and sentiments. The anxiety experienced by early humans — ignorant and vulnerable in the face of unknown natural causes —gave rise to polytheistic belief systems. This anxiety strongly influences the imagination, which produces deities by constructing relationships "suitable to its natural comprehension" (Hume, 1956, p. 48). Since these gods are conceived as beings that can be seen, heard, touched, and resemble human beings, polytheism, according to Hume, is the earliest and most primitive religion to emerge from the natural inclinations of human beings. Moreover, he argues that all subsequent forms of religion throughout human history are derrived from polytheism. This is most clearly illustrated in the title of the sixth chapter: "Origin of Theism from Polytheism".

Polytheism, according to Hume, is the source of theism. However, the form of theism to which he primarily refers is *vulgar theism*, which arises from "the ignorance and the stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favour of their particular superstitions" (Hume, 1956, p. 41). Hume clearly distinguishes this vulgar theism from *genuine* and *pure theism*. Genuine theism is grounded in the idea that nature was created by an intelligent being — a belief that, according to Hume humans cannot help but adopt (Hume, 1956, pp. 21,23,33). In this view, the existence of an intelligent creator is inferred from the observation of order and diversity in nature. Such empirical reasoning sets genuine theism apart from both polytheism and vulgar theism, as neither of the latter two, in Hume's analysis, arises from the rational inference that the natural world reflects the design of a creator.

"But farther, if men were at first led into the belief of one Supreme Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief, in order to embrace polytheism; but the same principles of reason, which at first produced and diffused over mankind, so magnificent an opinion, must be able, with greater facility, to preserve it." (Hume, 1956, p. 25) .

Hume argues that if belief in an intelligent creator had ever been firmly established, neither individuals nor communities would have turned away from genuine theism toward polytheism or vulgar theism. The difference between these forms of belief lies in the origin of religion—whether it arises from reason or from human nature. According to Hume, reason naturally leads to the conclusion that a single intelligent being is responsible for the organization of the universe, rather than multiple deities. As he asserts in *NHR*, "All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Everything is adjusted to every thing. One design prevails throughout the whole" (Hume, 1956, p. 26). This uniformity in nature supports the rational inference of a singular designer. In contrast, polytheism and vulgar theism are not grounded in rational inquiry but are instead products of imaginative speculation.

Vulgar theism emerges when polytheists elevate one god among many—typically one perceived as more powerful—to a position of singular devotion. While maintaining belief in other gods, they direct their

worship, prayers, and respect primarily toward this superior deity (Hume, 1956, p. 42). In moments of urgent fear or distress, people appeal to this highest god with increasingly hyperbolic expressions of reverence. These expressions intensify "till at last they arrive at infinity itself". Thus, worshippers move from the idea of a supremely powerful god to the concept of a single, infinite deity who is the creator of the world. In this way, belief shifts from a limited divine being to "the notion of a perfect being, the creator of the world" (Hume, 1956, p. 43). This is what Hume referred to as vulgar theism, which he portrayed as an ignorant form of belief fueled by "irrational and superstitious principles" (Hume, 1956, p. 42).

To put it briefly, Hume revealed that the origin of religion in human nature lies in the fears born of ignorance, and that in response to such feelings, the human mind constructs religion through imagination. On this basis, he argued that religious belief lacks a rational foundation in human nature, and that the origin of all religions—even paganism—is fundamentally psychological. Hume's aim in this work was not to launch an outright attack on religion. Indeed, as Gaskin pointed out, the eighteenth century was a time of overconfidence in religious argument—a period in which deism was regarded as the natural and rational religion of humanity (Gaskin, 1988, p. 185). Thus, Hume cannot be expected to have attacked religion directly; rather, he sought to critique and subtly undermine it.

2.Hume's Ironic Approach

Hume was an Enlightenment philosopher who challenged superstition in the Western world. He engaged with it through skepticism and an ironic stance. *The Natural History of Religion* is one of Hume's works in which both approaches are most clearly articulated, particularly because its focus is religion. With his skepticism, Hume revealed that religion arises from passion or sentiment; consequently, religions grounded in superstition lack rational justification. As for irony, it should be noted that in this context, irony functions not merely as a rhetorical device, but as a philosophical attitude toward religious belief. Although John Valdimir Price argued that irony and satire were hallmarks of the eighteenth century, and that Hume wrote in accordance with the literary norms of his time (Price, 1965, p. 29), what aligns Hume with the ironic perspective is not the form but the content—the gravity of the issues he raises. Hume's irony in the

NHR stems from the seriousness of the subject matter, namely, the question on the origins of religion in human nature.

Apart from the *NHR*, in which Hume addresses religion directly, he also adopts an ironic approach in the *Dialogues*. However, his irony in the *Dialogues* is so pronounced that it has garnered greater attention from Hume scholars. According to Timothy S. Yoder, Hume's irony in the *Dialogues* is interpreted as a cover or facade to hide his actual beliefs about religion (Yoder, 2008, p. 40). While Yoder acknowledges this perspective, I argue that such a reading fails to fully capture the nature of Hume's irony. Owing to its dialogical form, the *Dialogues* frequently employ irony, particularly in relation to the design argument—the idea that the universe was created by an intelligent designer. As J. C. A. Gaskin has noted, the *Dialogues* may be understood as an instance of "prudential irony" due to the sensitivity of its subject matter (Gaskin, 2009, p. 488).[2] In contrast, it is not appropriate to speak of an ironic treatment of the existence of an invisible power in *NHR*, as the philosophical focus there is not an ontological question concerning the existence of God, but rather a psychological and anthropological inquiry into religious belief. Therefore, Hume's irony in *NHR* is reflected not in skepticism toward God's existence per se, but in his skeptical approach to religion as an object of philosophical investigation, and in the critique of the arguments presented by those who profess particular religious beliefs.

2.1. Irony as the Characteristic Form of Philosophical Inquiry

While investigating religions in *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume frequently drew upon historical examples. He cited the Chinese, Laplanders, Egyptians, and Lacedemonians (Hume, 1956, pp. 33-34), among others, as representative of polytheistic and pagan traditions, selecting these cases carefully by appealing to what he called "the clear testimony of history" (Hume, 1956, p. 23). This historical approach was maintained in his analysis of monotheism as well. Hume explained, through historical developments, how polytheism and paganism gave rise to vulgar theism, and how the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the *Optimus Maximus* of the

[2] As Gaskin notes, the expression of religious opinions in eighteenth-century Britain was fraught with difficulties. Accordingly, Hume employs a form of prudential irony, especially in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.* See, (Gaskin, 2009, p. 488).

pagans—was eventually transformed into the Jewish *Yehowah* (Hume, 1956, p. 44). He presented Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in a comparative and sequential historical framework.

Ironically, Hume treated religions as historical phenomena despite his skepticism about the reliability of historical knowledge, which he believed was based primarily on testimony and transmission. This irony highlights a central tension in his method: he relies on historical evidence to explain the irrational origins of religion, even as he remains skeptical of the epistemic foundation of such evidence.

"There is a great difference between historical facts and speculative opinions; nor is the knowledge of the one propagated in the same manner with that of the other. An historical fact, while it passes by oral tradition from eyewitnesses and contemporaries, is disguised in every successive narration, and may at last retain but very small, if any, resemblance of the original truth, on which it was founded. The frail memories of men, their love of exaggeration, their supine carelessness; these principles, if not corrected by books and writing, soon pervert the account of historical events; where argument or reasoning has little or no place, nor can ever recall the truth, which has once escaped those narrations." (Hume, 1956, p. 25).

Poor memory, carelessness, or exaggeration on the part of a narrator or witness distorts historical events and distances them from the truth. Once an event has been separated from its factual basis, it may bear no resemblance to the original, rendering the truth irretrievable. Therefore, according to Hume, knowledge derived from historical facts cannot be reliably transmitted. Despite this skeptical stance toward historical knowledge, Hume's reliance on historical facts in the *NHR* reveals the ironic character of the work. The irony lies in this: Hume chooses to explain the emergence of religion through historical evidence, even though he acknowledges the unreliability of such evidence. One might argue that anyone investigating the natural causes of religion has no other source than the record of religions in human history. Thus, Hume's turn to history might appear inevitable. Yet, it is precisely this inevitability that underlines the irony in his method—it is an attempt to reconcile a methodological contradiction. This ironic strategy enables Hume to trace various religious practices across different cultures and epochs, while simultaneously

supporting his skeptical conclusion that none of these traditions can be deemed superior, as historical knowledge is itself prone to distortion. Just as no religious belief is inherently more valid than another, historical facts cannot serve as a standard to elevate one over others.

Hume's ironic use of historical explanation underscores that the comparative study of religion through historical data is an epistemologically groundless enterprise. In this sense, Hume's method resembles the rhetorical artifice employed by the skeptic Cotta in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, which is also written in dialogical form. Hume explains Cotta's rhetorical maneuver regarding the natural origins of the gods as follows:

"He refutes the whole system of mythology by leading the orthodox gradually, from the more momentous stories, which were believed, to the more frivolous, which every one ridiculed: From the gods to the goddesses; from the goddesses to the nymphs, from the nymphs to the fawns and satyrs." (Hume, 1956, pp. 64-65).

Cotta employed a rhetorical artifice by gradually rendering the religious narratives believed by devout individuals absurd, thereby undermining their credibility. Similarly, Hume adopts Cotta's skeptical strategy to demonstrate—through historical evidence—that while religions initially consisted of "a multitude of stories, which, however groundless, imply no express absurdity and demonstrative contradiction" (Hume, 1956, p. 65), they gradually evolved into scholastic systems rooted in superstition. The irony lies in the fact that these religious narratives, despite their questionable credibility, are accepted as historical facts and thus treated as valuable material for philosophical inquiry. In other words, the irony emerges from the paradox that historical facts are considered significant enough to inform the study of religion, while at the same time, their transmissive nature renders them inadequate for any reliable justification. Hume's ironic strategy, therefore, consists in using historical facts—despite their weak evidential status—to explore the principles underlying the origin and dissemination of religion. Thus, irony becomes a defining characteristic of the *NHR*, which upholds the skeptical claim that no historical fact can serve as conclusive evidence for any religious doctrine. In this light, the irony lies in the simultaneous deployment and subversion of historical reasoning—an

approach that aligns with a broader skeptical tradition where contradiction is used not to assert truth, but to unmask its pretenses.

2.2. Skeptical Irony

Another context in which Hume's ironic approach in *the NHR* becomes apparent is in his treatment of religious votaries—a theme that connects with the previous discussion. Although Hume occasionally employs derogatory or sarcastic language when referring to devout believers, the deeper irony does not lie in his tone but rather in the very content of his philosophical analysis. In this sense, irony in the *NHR* is not merely stylistic but strategic, as it arises from the structure of the arguments concerning religious belief itself.

Hume argues that religious theologies consist largely of superstitious narratives and unfounded doctrines. He frequently associates superstition with ignorance (Hume, 1956, p. 39), claiming that the most ignorant, weak, and timid individuals are particularly prone to such beliefs (Hume, 1956, pp. 32,41). According to Hume, religious adherents often view the doctrines of other faiths as absurd while remaining blind to the irrational and superstitious nature of their own. He writes that there is "a sufficient reason for [their] blind and bigoted attachment to the principles in which [they have] been educated" (Hume, 1956, p. 57). The irony, then, is that while these individuals can critically assess the beliefs of others, they fail to apply the same scrutiny to their own traditions. Hume notes that a nation may readily list the absurdities of ancient Greek or Egyptian religions, yet similar absurdities are found in all religious systems (Hume, 1956, p. 55). Thus, he suggests that religious devotion to the absurd—so obvious in historical examples—will likely persist in the future.

"Though, in a future age, it will probably become difficult to persuade some nations, that any human, two-legged creature could ever embrace such principles. And it is a thousand to one, but these nations themselves shall have something full as absurd in their own creed, to which they will give a most implicit and most religious assent." (Hume, 1956, p. 56).

Hume argues that it is nearly impossible to imagine a future in which religion, despite all its absurdities, ceases to influence human behavior. In his view, the proportion of religious believers in history was just as high as it is today—and will continue to be so (Hume, 1956, p. 60). What intrigues

Hume is how people, regardless of time or place, can accept as certain and ordinary the very things others see as absurd. His irony about the arguments of religious adherents is also evident here. As Hume writes:

"We may observe, that, notwithstanding the dogmatical, imperious style of all superstition, the conviction of the religionists, in all ages, is more affected than real, and scarcely ever approaches, in any degree, to that solid belief and persuasion, which governs us in the common affairs of life." (Hume, 1956, p. 60).

Religious belief is dogmatic and authoritative; hence, faith is demanded from the believer. According to Hume, faith arises not from rational satisfaction, but from "frivolous observations, by intemperate zeat, rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions"(Hume, 1956, p. 70). Rather than examining the evident works of nature and inferring a sovereign creator, uneducated and barbarous people form beliefs in gods based on absurd principles (Hume, 1956, p. 74). But what distinguishes this from the belief that nature has a divine designer? Is it akin to the difference between philosophical reasoning and ordinary thinking? Perhaps this distinction points to a deeper separation between genuine theism and religion. Nevertheless, in concluding the NHR, Hume ironically equates belief in a designer God with superstition. This may be the most overt irony in the entire work:

"What a noble privilege is it of human reason to attain the knowledge of the Supreme Being; and, from the visible works of nature, be enabled to infer so sublime a principle as its supreme Creator? But turn the reverse of the medal." (Hume, 1956, p. 75).

Though not a rationalist, Hume appears to praise human reason here in rationalist terms. Yet he simultaneously casts doubt on the very possibility of inferring a transcendent idea from experience, thereby calling this so-called "noble privilege" into question. This is where his irony lies. For Hume, the rational inference of a supreme creator from the order of nature and belief in absurd religious superstitions are simply two sides of the same coin. A survey of religious principles throughout history reveals that they are often little more than "sick men's dreams" or "the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape"(Hume, 1956, p. 75). If reason truly were the noble privilege of human beings among all living creatures, it would not

permit them to be misled by beliefs rooted in absurdity. According to Hume, such beliefs are no different from the antics of another creature—like a monkey. Thus, when it comes to knowability, the notion of a designer God and that of superstitious religion are equally indefensible. Hume's initial claim—that religious belief is not rational—his apparent openness to the idea of intelligent design, and his final skeptical conclusion all converge, reinforcing the ironic architecture of the *NHR*.

"The whole is a riddle, enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld; did we not enlarge our view, and opposing one species of superstition to another, set them a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape, into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy." (Hume, 1956, p. 76).

Religious belief, whether grounded in intelligent design or superstition, remains mysterious and unknowable. All religions, when assessed for evidence, stand on equal footing. Even when arguments are framed as opposing one faith to another, no belief emerges as the victor. Peter J. E. Kail refers to this as "suspension of religious belief" (Kail, 2007, p. 195). In such a scenario, we have no rational grounds to affirm any religious proposition, especially since—according to Hume—religions originate in human hope and, above all, fear. Attempting to justify religious sentiments only leads to further absurdity or philosophical dead-ends. Thus, since no belief or its origin can be rationally justified, Hume ironically withdraws the philosopher from religious inquiry and directs them instead to the obscure but tranquil regions of philosophy. This is where the entire effort of the *NHR* concludes—with irony. Philosophers, it turns out, cannot construct a rational, evidential account of religion. Although Hume does not explicitly define these "calm and obscure regions of philosophy" in the *NHR*, it is clear from his other works—especially the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*—that this region is not the investigation of religious belief itself. Rather, it is the philosophical realm in which "human reason can reach no fixed determination"(Hume, 1991, p. 173). What ultimately leads Hume to this

skeptical conclusion is irony. For this reason, irony is not merely rhetorical in his work—it is a central element of his skeptical philosophy.

Conclusion

In his investigation of the origins of religion in human nature in the *NHR*, Hume adopted a strategically ironic approach. While comparing genuine theism with polytheism, paganism, and vulgar theism, he seems to rely on historical facts, yet, due to the inherently narrative structure of the work, he simultaneously draws attention to the epistemic unreliability of those very facts. One of the central ironies of the *NHR* is that Hume deliberately uses fragile historical evidence in order to undermine the evidential credibility of religion itself. In doing so, he demonstrates that religious belief cannot be grounded in historical testimony.

A second use of irony emerges in Hume's analysis of the arguments advanced by religious believers who claim to have proven their faith. According to Hume, such arguments are grounded in stories and superstitions, which are themselves insufficient to establish any rational basis for belief. His irony, therefore, exposes that religious arguments are neither demonstrably true nor false; they fall outside the scope of rational justification. Without granting any belief a privileged epistemic status, Hume arrives at a skeptical conclusion: all religious beliefs are ultimately expressions of feeling, and thus equally unverifiable or unprovable.

In this way, Hume's ironic strategy in the *NHR* stands as one of the most important components of his skeptical philosophy, reinforcing and deepening its conclusions. Any reading of the *NHR* that fails to account for this irony—and the skepticism it serves—is, in that sense, necessarily incomplete.

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Öz: David Hume Dinin Doğal Tarihi'nde dini fenomenlerin insan doğasındaki kökenini soruşturur. Bu soruşturma Hume'un düşüncesine özgü ironik bir yaklaşımla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Din gibi tartışmalı bir konuda ironinin özellikle skeptik bir filozof tarafından tercih edilmesi şaşırtıcı değildir; çünkü dinin doğası skeptik biri için ironik bir yaklaşımla ele alınmaya son derece uygundur. Hume'un dine ilişkin ironik yaklaşımı Hume araştırmacıları tarafından çoğunlukla Doğal Din Üzerine Diyaloglar adlı eseri merkeze alınarak incelenmiş olsa da ironinin Dinin Doğal Tarihi'nde de belirgin bir biçimde yer aldığı görülmektedir. Bununla birlikte literatürde Dinin Doğal Tarihi bağlamında ironinin kapsamlı bir şekilde ele alındığı çalışmalar oldukça azdır. Bu çalışma Hume'un Dinin Doğal Tarihi'nde doğal dini ve dini fenomenleri nasıl ironik bir şekilde ele aldığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Burada ironi ile kast edilen alaycı, kışkırtıcı veya küçümseyici bir dilin kullanılması değildir; bunlar, ironinin birçok biçiminden yalnızca bazılarıdır. Çalışmanın temel iddiası Dinin Doğal Tarihi'ndeki ironinin sadece bir retorik araç olmadığını; daha ziyade Hume'un skeptisizminin temel bileşenlerinden biri olan felsefi bir tutum olduğunu vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: David Hume, ironi, din, skeptisizm, insan doğası.