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## David Hume, the Caliph Omar and the burning issue of metaphysics

This essay aims at solving a minor puzzle in the interpretation of David Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Its object is no more than an anecdote, but it involves a more general and ambitious suggestion about a possible way of handling meaning in past philosophical texts.

Before starting, I must introduce a bit of philosophical terminology. All human knowledge, we find in Hume's *Enquiry*, is based either on demonstration or on experience—that is, either on *a priori* “relations of ideas,” such as quantity and number, as in mathematics, which consists of abstract reasonings concerning objects independent of experience; or on *a posteriori* “matters of fact,” as in all our reasonings concerning causes and effect, which are based on experience. The main object of Hume's book is, as is well known, the treatment of the latter, the so-called “probable” knowledge.

The textual side of my puzzle is to be found in the conclusion of the *Enquiry*, and refers back to that original distinction between “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact.” If all knowledge must consist of either relations of ideas, or matters of fact, books containing neither are totally pointless—so when we get into a library “what havoc must we make?” Hume wonders with some scorn. And he goes on, in a passage that is among the most quoted, discussed and famous in western philosophy:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?*

No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.<sup>1</sup>

This passage has played a crucial role in the appropriation of Hume's philosophical legacy by the positivist philosophers of the last century, who regarded it as a strongly-worded anticipation of their own denunciation of metaphysical nonsense. For example, in *Language, Truth and Logic* Alfred Ayer writes: "What is this but a rhetorical version of our own thesis that a sentence that does not express either a formal or an empirical hypothesis is devoid of significance?"<sup>2</sup> Others have described Hume's passage as at once a "purple peroration", and as "the most positivistic passage in Hume's writings ... the ringing conclusion of the *Enquiry*", a passage which "has lent colour to innumerable positivist writings [...] a resounding conclusion."<sup>3</sup> And so on. In more recent years it has also been observed that this fierce language is out of character, and that it requires explanation.<sup>4</sup>

The use of such extraordinary language in a page of the mild "bon David," the friendly and civilised "Socrates of Edinburgh" (as Hume used

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1 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 165.

2 A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1946), 2nd ed., p. 54.

3 A. Flew, 'Infinite Divisibility in Hume's *Treatise*', in D. W. Livingston, J. T. King (eds.), *Hume: A Re-evaluation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), pp. 257–269 (1st published in *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia* 22, 1967, pp. 457–71), p. 273; R. Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 8; J. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) (3rd ed.), p. 65.

4 See W. Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 279, according to whom Hume's "mitigated skepticism" is "mitigated" with respect to our "naturally moderate reaction" to its own "undisguisably nightmarish content:" "only thus," Waxman concludes, "can we comprehend how an apostle of 'modesty and reserve' could at the same time couch his final sceptical prescription to us in the incendiary language of the zealot."

to be called in his time), does indeed demand explanation. It is clear that the general background implied by the passage of the *Enquiry* is one where burning books is a common image of fanaticism; and that some books of “divinity or school metaphysics”—the books, we are told, to be burned this time—are regarded as connected with such fanaticism. On more than one occasion Hume voices his dislike of “divinity and school metaphysics” not only as expressions of a style of philosophising he does not share, but also as liable to inspire fanaticism and as a consequence, one may suppose, such activities as burning books (and perhaps their authors or readers as well). In the *Treatise*, for example, he contrasts the “much more bold” “systems and hypotheses” of “superstition of every kind and denomination,” with their powerful grip on the mind, and the “mild and moderate sentiments” presented to us by philosophy: and his conclusion is that “generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.”<sup>5</sup> But in this way we can only make sense of Hume’s outburst of aggressive positivism *ante litteram* in the most general terms: we are in no position to explain why it is in precisely this apparently fanatical form that he here expresses his condemnation of fanaticism. My question now is: is it possible to find something more specific, and something which would have converted Hume’s customary polite disapproval of such things as “divinity and school metaphysics” into the violence of a book-bonfire?<sup>6</sup> My answer is a tentative yes—a conjecture.

Quod ad libros quorum mentionem fecisti: si in illis contineatur, quod cum Libro Dei conveniat, in libro Dei [est] quod sufficiat absque illo; quòd si in illis fuerit quod Libro Dei repug-

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5 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited with an analytical index by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., with text revised and variant readings by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 271–2. See also *Enquiry*, p. 147, where Hume writes: “There is no enthusiasm among philosophers” (and see J. Passmore, ‘Enthusiasm, Fanaticism and David Hume,’ in P. Jones (ed.), *The ‘Science of Man’ in the Scottish Enlightenment: Hume, Reid and their Contemporaries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), pp. 85–107.

6 I am here deliberately paraphrasing M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 131.

net, neutiquam est eo [nobis] opus, jube igitur e medio tolli.<sup>7</sup>

According to Gregory Bar Hebraeus Abulpharagius, these are—in Edward Pococke’s Latin version of 1663—the words with which in 642 A. D. the Caliph Omar, famously not particularly fond of books, decided the fate of the Library of Alexandria.<sup>8</sup> Abulpharagius tells the whole story: the friendship between the Emir Amrou, the intelligent and sophisticated, if unscholarly conqueror of the city, and the learned scholar John Philoponus; the petition of the latter for the books; Amrou’s letter to the Caliph, asking leave to satisfy the desire of Philoponus; the dreadful wit of the Caliph’s answer—finally, the dramatic conclusion:

jussit ergo *Amrus Ebno’lAs* dispergi eos per balnea *Alexandriae*, atque illis calefaciendis comburi: ita spatio semestri consumpti sunt. Audi quid factum fuerit et mirare.<sup>9</sup>

From the way this story is presented, in the 1780s, in chapter 51 of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it is clear that it is a very popular tale, and that the readers are supposed to be familiar with it:

I should deceive the expectation of the reader if I passed in silence the fate of the Alexandrian Library, as it is described by the learned Abulpharagius [...] since the Dynasties of Abulpharagius have been given to the world in a Latin version, the tale has been repeatedly transcribed; and every scholar, with pi-

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7 “As for the books of which you have made mention: if there were contained in them what agrees with the Book of God, there is in the Book of God that which suffices without it; but should there be in them what is contrary to the Book of God, we by no means need it, therefore order that they be disposed of.”

8 *Historia compendiosa Dynastiarum, auctore Gregorio Abul-Pharajio, Malatiensi Medico, Historiam complectens universalem, à mundo condito, usque ad Tempora Auctoris, res Orientalium accuratissimè describens. Arabice Edita, & Latine versa, ab Eduardo Pocockio...*, Oxoniae, Excudebant H. Hall Celeberrimae Academiae Typographus (Impensis Ric: Davis, 1663), p. 114.

9 “Hence Amrus Ebno’lAs ordered that they be distributed through the baths of Alexandria, and be burned to warm them: thus in the space of a semester they were consumed. Hear what was done, and wonder.”

ous indignation, has deplored the irreparable shipwreck of the learning, the arts, and the genius, of antiquity [...] it would be endless to enumerate the moderns who have wondered and believed [...].<sup>10</sup>

The point of Gibbon's discussion of the destruction of the Alexandrian library is in fact precisely to show the historical implausibility of a frequently repeated and nearly universally believed tale;<sup>11</sup> and his treatment is still recognised as on the whole sound.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, a presentation of all the historical and historiographical issues involved is beyond the scope of the present discussion.<sup>13</sup> What is

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<sup>10</sup> E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by J. B. Bury, vol. 5 (London: Methuen & Co, 1911), pp. 481 ff. and fn. 136.

<sup>11</sup> "Nearly" because, as Gibbon himself says (see his fn. 136), E. Renaudot had already expressed doubts about the story: *Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum Jacobitarum a D. Marco usque ad finem Saeculi XIII* (Paris: apud Franciscum Fournier, 1713), pp. 169–170 (here the Caliph's words are: "illis in libris ea contineri quae Alcorano contraria essent, vel quae in eodem legentur, aut essent similia: atque ita aut impios esse, aut inutiles, et idcirco abolendos", that is, "in those books are contained either things contrary to the Alcoran, or things which may be read in the same or be similar: so, they are either impious, or useless, and on that account to be abolished").

<sup>12</sup> Gibbon's reasons for disbelieving the story are as follows: "the solitary report of a stranger who wrote at the end of six hundred years on the confines of Media is overbalanced by the silence of two annalists of a more early date, both Christians, both natives of Egypt, and the most ancient of whom, the patriarch Eutychis, has amply described the conquest of Alexandria". Furthermore, "the rigid sentence of Omar is repugnant to the sound and orthodox precept of the Mahometan casuists: they expressly declare, that the religious books of the Jews and Christians which are acquired by the right of war, should never be committed to the flames." But Gibbon does not question that Philoponus was still alive at the time of the conquest of Alexandria, and also in attributing the catastrophe of the library to Caesar and to the archbishop Theophilus he seems to confuse the two great libraries in Alexandria, the palace library and the library in the Serapeum. See L. Canfora, *The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World*, translated by M. Ryle, (London: Vintage, 1991) (1st ed. Palermo: Sellerio, 1987), Part 2, ch. 1, pp. 109 ff.

<sup>13</sup> A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, edited by P. M. Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) (1st ed. 1902), ch. 25, pp. 401–426, is the classic treatment of the questions concerning the alleged destruction of the Library. See also the Preface, pp. xvi–xvii, for a discussion of the modern Western authorities, and Fraser's *Additional Bibliography*, pp. lxxiii–lxxvi. A very detailed dis-

interesting for my purposes is the popularity of the story of the Caliph; and my conjecture is that the story can be taken as an element of the background against which Hume's conclusion of the first *Enquiry* was both written and read. With this I am not suggesting that Hume was directly acquainted with any of the sources I am quoting from in this essay—I have no direct evidence of any such thing. But I think we can be positive that the Caliph's dictum must have been a matter of common knowledge among the learned, as well as, perhaps, the polite and "conversable" of the time: its very appearance in exactly the same words, no matter whether they are Greek, Latin or English words, in so many reasonably well-known history books may be taken as evidence of this. Hume, a notoriously omnivorous reader, is more than likely to have come across the Caliph, one way or another. And he could safely assume the same of his intended readers, whose reaction to Hume's book-bonfire passage must therefore have been to some extent directed by their acquaintance with the Caliph.

So the next question is: what is the effect of this conjecture on our understanding of Hume's page? Let us consider the two passages, Hume's and Abulpharagius's, together. The words of the Caliph are given, now, in the English translation from the famous *History of the Saracens* (1708) of Simon Ockley:

What is contained in those Books you mention, is either agreeable to what is written in the Book of God (meaning Alcoran) or it is not: If it be, then the Alcoran is sufficient without them: If otherwise, 'tis fit they should be destroy'd.<sup>14</sup>

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cussion of the Arabic sources of the story of the friendship and dialogue between Amrou and John Philoponus is G. Furlani, 'Giovanni il Filopono e l'incendio della Biblioteca di Alessandria' in *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Alexandrie*, N.S. 4, 1925, pp. 58–77.

<sup>14</sup> *The History of the Saracens: containing the lives of Abubeker, Omar, ... and Abdolmelick, the immediate successors of Mabomet. Giving an account of their most celebrated battles, sieges, &c. ... Illustrating the religion, rites, customs and manner of living of that warlike people. Collected... By Simon Ockley, ...* (London: printed for R. Knaplock, J. Sprint, R. Smith, B. Lintott, and J. Round, 1718 [second edition]), Vol. 1, p. 360 (volume 1 was first published in 1708 with the title *The Conquest of Syria, Persia, and Aegypt, by the Saracens*, and was issued again in 1718 with the first edition of the second volume). The passage continues: "Amrou,

And Ockley goes on with the standard complaint about “the great Havoc,” as he calls it. The essentials of the Caliph’s order are variously pointed out by historians. It is an order “inspired by the ignorance of a fanatic,” Gibbon says before showing that in fact it was unlikely to have ever been given. And it creates a no-win situation, as the notoriously heavy-going Humphrey Prideaux explains in full, after quoting it, in his *Old and New Testament Connected (or Connection)*, of 1716: “therefore he ordered that whatsoever the contents of them were, they should all be destroyed.”<sup>15</sup>

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in Obedience to the *Caliph’s* Command, distributed the Books throughout all the City, amongst those that kept warm Baths (of which there was at that time in *Alexandria* no fewer than four Thousand) to heat the Baths with. And notwithstanding the great Havoc that must needs be made of ’em at this rate; the Number of Books which the Diligence of former Princes had collected was so great, that it was six Months before they were consumed. A Loss never to be made up to the Learned World”. For contemporary assessments of Ockley’s book see the review of volume 1 in *Journal des Sçavans*, April 1710, pp. 363–69, and in *Bibliothèque angloise*, tome 111, 1718, part 1, article iv, pp. 145–214; and of volume 2 in *Bibliothèque angloise*, tome 111, 1718, part 2, article ii, pp. 347–89 (which mentions the story of the Alexandrian library, but refers the reader to the review of Prideaux’s *Connection* for details, see below, fn. 15). Ockley’s *History of the Saracens* was the main source for the story of the library in the entry “Omar Ebn al Khattab”, fn. S, in vol. 8 (1739) of the English edition of Bayle’s *Dictionary* published in London 1734–1741 (the Caliph’s sentence does not appear). This entry is an addition of the English editors; in vol. 1 one finds the entry “Abul Faragius” as given in Bayle, taken mainly from Pococke, and a second entry on the same subject where George Sale, the well-known scholar responsible for the articles on oriental history, adds new sources and corrects some inaccuracies.

15 H. Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations, from the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ* (London: printed for R. Knaplock, and J. Tonson, 1716–1718), Vol. 2, Part 1, pp. 16–17 (the words of the Caliph: “his answer hereto was, that if those books contained what was agreeing with the *Alcoran*, there was no need of them, for the *Alcoran* alone was sufficient of itself for all truth; but if they contained what was disagreeing with the *Alcoran*, they were not to be endured, and therefore...[etc.]”). On the heaviness of Prideaux’s writing see the Rev. Alexander Gordon’s entry in the *DNB*: “Prideaux’s literary reputation rests on his ‘Life of Mahomet’ (1697) and his ‘Connection’ (1716–18). Of each of these the story has been told that the bookseller to whom he offered the manuscript said he ‘could wish there were a little more humour in it’. No sign of humour was ever shown by Prideaux”. Even so, Prideaux’s works were very popular at the time: see for example the review of the *Connection* in the *Bibliothèque angloise* (tome 111, 1718, part 2, article vi, pp. 484–541) (this article contains a full account of the story of the Alexandrian library, pp. 502 ff.); and the review in the *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne... par Jean Le Clerc* (tome xvi, 1721, part 2,

Now let us read Hume again:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

It is easy to hear an echo of the Caliph's prescription in Hume's words. But something else is also clear, that is, that the structure of the argument is different: this time, it is not a no-win situation—there is the threat of havoc, and yet following Hume's criterion not all books are to be burned. We have on the one hand the fanaticism of the book-burners turned against the fanatics themselves, and, on the other hand, the hidden and hence all the more powerful emphasis on the books that, this time, are to be saved from the flames: philosophy replaces zeal, and the risk of being ridiculous—as Hume would put it—replaces other, worse dangers. And given philosophy's inability to inspire fanaticism, it seems likely that in fact no books at all, not even those of divinity or school metaphysics, are meant to be seriously at risk. So, Hume's anti-metaphysical stance is expressed through an echo of the words of the Caliph, and a full ironic reversal of their content.

I would like to conclude with a final appearance of the Caliph's dictum in a context which is, on the contrary, most unlikely to have been familiar to either David Hume, or any of his readers, but where the argument is close to his own in one important respect:

I am He who is, said the God of the Jews. I am the way, the

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pp. 365–418) of the French translation (Amsterdam 1722) and of the Flemish translation of volume 1 (Leiden 1722) of the *Connection* (in p. 366 the readers are told of the great success of this book, which, Le Clerc says, is also being translated into German, having already been reprinted eight times in English).

truth, and the life, said our Lord. There you have it: knowledge is nothing but the awed comment on these two truths. [...] beyond that there is nothing further to say. There is only to continue meditation, to gloss, preserve [...] It is said that an Oriental caliph one day set fire to the library of a famous and glorious and proud city, and that, as those thousands of volumes were burning, he said that they could and should disappear: either they were repeating what the Koran already said, and therefore they were useless, or else they contradicted that book sacred to the infidels, and therefore they were harmful. The doctors of the church, and we along with them, did not reason in this way. Everything that involves commentary and clarification of the Scripture must be preserved, because it enhances the glory of the divine writings; what contradicts must not be destroyed, because only if we preserve it can it be contradicted in its turn by those who can do so and are so charged, in the ways and times the Lord chooses. Thus the responsibility of our order through the centuries [...] proud of the truth we proclaim, humble and prudent in preserving those words hostile to the truth, without allowing ourselves to be soiled by them.

Thus Umberto Eco, in *The Name of the Rose*: and it is old Jorge de Burgos talking.<sup>16</sup> It is his final sermon, revealing the coming of the Antichrist in the abbey and in the world at the fall of the Middle Ages. One might draw all sorts of contrasts between the world of the Caliph and of Eco's Jorge de Burgos, and the world of David Hume—between superstition, to use the eighteenth-century term, and the enlightenment: one might contrast divine with secular authority, absolute intolerance with relative tolerance, the uniqueness of a truth which is only to be either repeated or contradicted, with the multifarious truths based on relations of ideas and matters of fact. Superstition and enlightenment are, so it seems, worlds apart.

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16 U. Eco, *Il nome della rosa*, English translation by W. Weaver as *The Name of the Rose* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), p. 399–400.

The immediate similarity of the Benedictine's sermon with Hume's passage consists, of course, in the fact that in this case as well, it appears, not all books should be "committed to the flames"—indeed, in this case all of them should be preserved in the "fearless defence" of truth.<sup>17</sup> And yet, one can also find a more sinister continuity between Eco's Jorge and "le bon David" and his readers. In *The Name of the Rose* it is the final irony of the situation that it is Jorge and no other talking about the work of the Benedictine order for the conservation of knowledge and books: Jorge is himself a Benedictine and we know that in his youth, before becoming blind, he was a book-lover; but he is also, it turns out, the religious fanatic responsible for the violent deaths of so many of his fellow monks, and a few chapters on is to light the fire which burns the monastery library to ashes. David Hume is a moderate, enlightened man of letters, and his distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact is, I think, meant to encourage a wider and more humane notion of knowledge, to foster new inquiry. Yet, in due course Hume's own readers were to turn it into the positivist intolerance that was to stifle inquiry in so many fields; and book-burning was to acquire connotations more horrific than Hume could ever have envisaged. Fanaticism won with a vengeance, after all.

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, this similarity between the modern inquirer and the medieval commentator has to be qualified. The Benedictine talks about the "fearless defence" of truth in the very same breath as he condemns the anxious distortions of those attempting any "foolish increment" of truth.

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