

## Religion and the ‘sensitive branch’ of human nature

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**Abstract:** While the theses that (1) human beings are primarily passionate creatures and that (2) religion is fundamentally a product of our sensible nature are both closely linked to David Hume, Hume’s contemporary Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696–1782), also defended them and explored their implications. Importantly, Kames does not draw the same sceptical conclusions as does Hume. Employing a sophisticated account of the rationality of what he calls the ‘sensitive branch’ of human nature, Kames argues that religion plays a central role in the development and perfection of human life.

The two theses that (1) human beings are fundamentally creatures of passion and sentiment rather than of reason, and that (2) religion is, therefore, primarily a product of this emotive side of human nature, are both indelibly linked with the name of David Hume. Both are shared by Hume’s contemporary, occasional correspondent, and distant cousin Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696–1782), who, like Hume, fell foul of the Kirk for his religious views.<sup>1</sup> However, the lesson that Kames draws from these claims, and the use he makes of them in constructing his own elaborate philosophical anthropology, are strikingly different from Hume’s conclusions. For Hume, the upshot of these two claims is famously captured in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757):

Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing but sick men’s dreams. Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical assertions of a being who dignifies himself with the name of rational.<sup>2</sup>

Lord Kames, on the other hand, in his *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751) [hereafter *EPM*], defends religion from sceptical attack. In his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774) [hereafter *SHM*], a voluminous

tour-de-force of eighteenth-century anthropology, he follows Hume in exploring the development of religious ideas over the course of human history, likewise according passion and sensibility primary explanatory roles, yet still maintaining the positive view expressed in *EPM*.<sup>3</sup> Like Hume, Kames seeks to challenge the pretensions of rationalists. Unlike Hume, he is not committed to the idea that doing so relegates religion to the domain of irrational instinct.<sup>4</sup>

While Kames was widely respected during his lifetime and for decades afterwards, in his native Scotland, in North America, and in Germany, his work is all but ignored today outside specialist circles. My principal aim in this essay is to argue that Kames deserves more serious attention as an innovator in the development of a naturalistic understanding of religion. Recent years have seen a revival of scholarly interest in the history of the modern study of religion, and in its origins in the eighteenth-century 'science of man'.<sup>5</sup> Ian Ross has sketched Kames's place within this tradition, the origins of which, like many scholars, he locates in the work of Lord Herbert of Cherbury.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, philosophers have begun to reconsider the positive role played by what Kames calls the 'sensitive branch' of human nature, including, in particular, emotion.<sup>7</sup> Kames's account of religion, embedded within a larger account of the central role played by the 'sensitive branch' in social life and cognition, constitutes an interesting, yet neglected, point of historical reference for contemporary scholars pursuing these lines of enquiry.

My argument for the importance of Kames's work takes the form of a reconstruction of his position that pays special attention to his multi-dimensional account of the *rationality* of the 'sensitive branch'. I begin, first of all, by showing Kames's commitment to the Humean thesis that human beings are primarily creatures of passion and sentiment. I then go on to describe his account (in both *EPM*, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, *SHM*) of how religion is best understood as a product of the 'sensitive branch'. Having established this common ground between Kames and Hume, I go on to show why Kames drew different conclusions from these claims. Beginning with *EPM*, I show how Kames develops a functional-teleological account of the 'sensitive branch' and its products, according to which the emotions 'fit' us into our environments and help us to realize the characteristic ends of our nature. Next, I turn to Kames's more detailed discussion in the *Elements of Criticism* (1762) [hereafter *EC*], perhaps his most influential work, which went through five editions during his own lifetime, as well as five German editions between 1763 and 1791, and which impacted discussions in aesthetics well into the nineteenth century. In *EC*, Kames reiterates his functional-teleological account, while adding some important new considerations. First, Kames argues that (1) passions and emotions make rational agency possible, that (2) they are cognitive responses to features of the world, that (3) they are indispensable to rational cognition in general, and that (4) they are capable of both culture and rational assessment.

### The primacy of the 'sensitive branch'

Ian Ross, in his classic intellectual biography of Kames, provides an elegant statement of the foundation of his philosophical outlook: 'Home may be said to participate in that silent eighteenth-century revolution which rejected man's concept of himself as essentially rational and substituted that of the creature driven by appetites whose behaviour was affected by the environment to which he was exposed.'<sup>8</sup> Kames belongs firmly in the sentimentalist tradition derived from Shaftesbury, alongside George Turnbull (1698–1748), Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), Adam Smith (1723–1790), and, of course, Hume. He also represents a pivot between this tradition and its successor in the Common Sense school of Reid, who was quite explicitly indebted to Kames. Ross's characterization is, therefore, quite accurate. At the same time, however, this characterization seems to accept a dualism between rationality and the 'sensitive branch' that, as will be shown below, Kames is keen to undercut.

Kames's commitment to the explanatory primacy of the 'sensitive branch' is advertised at the very beginning of *EPM*, 'where', he observes, 'it is occasionally shown, that our reasonings on some of the most important subjects, rest ultimately upon sense and feeling' (*EPM*, 3).<sup>9</sup> It is important that Kames phrases the claim in the way he does. That it is our 'reasonings' that are grounded in 'sense and feeling' suggests, among other things, that the latter play a central role in cognition. His commitment to the primacy of the 'sensitive branch' leads him, for example, to follow Hutcheson in rejecting Clarke's rationalist moral philosophy. On Clarke's view, reason discerns the essential relations comprising the physical and spiritual worlds. Our duty, then, is to co-ordinate our actions or to make them 'fit' with these essential relations. Kames expresses his reservations about Clarke's position as follows:

The Doctor's error is a common one, that he endeavours to substitute reason in place of sentiment. The fitness of worshipping our Creator was obvious to him, as it is to every person, because it is founded on our very nature. . . . His only mistake is, that, overlooking the *law written in his own heart*, he vainly imagines that his metaphysical argument is just, because the consequences he draws from it happens to be true. (*EPM*, 69)

One of the more telling statements of Kames's commitment to the primacy of the 'sensitive branch' comes, not surprisingly, from a work dedicated to analysing this crucial part of human nature, *EC*. Kames writes:

Man is superior to the brute, not more by his rational faculties, than by his senses. With respect to external senses, brutes probably yield not to men; and they may also have some obscure perception of beauty: but the more delicate senses of regularity, order, uniformity, and congruity, being connected with morality and religion, are reserved to dignify the chief of the terrestrial creation. Upon that account, no discipline is more suitable to man, nor more *congruous* to the dignity of his nature, than that which refines his taste, and leads him to distinguish in every

subject, what is regular, what is orderly, what is suitable, and what is fit and proper. (*EC*, 233)<sup>10</sup>

Here, Kames turns his back on the ancient tradition of defining human beings as rational animals and of grounding the dignity of human nature on its intellectual element. For Kames, all of the distinctive achievements of humanity, the arts, sciences, morality, and, importantly, religion, rest upon our more ‘delicate senses’. His goal in works like *EPM* and *SHM* is to develop the ramifications of this perspective in domains as diverse as logic, epistemology, morality, political theory, and philosophy of religion.

What, more precisely, does Kames mean by what he calls the ‘sensitive branch’ of our natures?<sup>11</sup> Like Locke and Hutcheson, Kames accepts the empiricist thesis that all of our ideas are derived from the senses, and that a distinction can be drawn between our ‘external’ and ‘internal’ senses (*EPM*, 149). Like Hutcheson, Kames does not draw any rigid line between the more purely cognitive function of these senses and their role in producing affective responses.<sup>12</sup> As he makes clear in *EC*, the senses include capacities for emotion and passion (*EC*, 32). Already in *EPM*, Kames envisions the senses as cognitive-cum-affective organs: ‘As we are placed in a great world, surrounded with beings and things, some beneficial, some hurtful; we are so constituted, that scarce any object is indifferent to us: it either gives pleasure or pain’ (*EPM*, 26). The ‘sensitive branch’ of human nature, therefore, is the totality of our fundamental cognitive and affective faculties. It comprises the most basic level at which we respond to the world. But the ‘sensitive branch’ is also the locus of more distinctively *human* responses to the world: the perception of regularity and order, of aesthetic and moral value, and of the existence and nature of God.

### **Religion and the ‘sensitive branch’ of human nature**

Like most of his contemporaries (with the possible exception of Hume), Kames takes religion to be a more or less universal feature of all human societies (*EPM*, 205–206). His task in *EPM* is twofold: first, to show that belief in God (natural religion) is rationally justified, and second, to explain how it is that this more or less universal conviction comes to be. Kames holds that, while arguments (specifically, a posteriori arguments) establish the existence of God beyond reasonable doubt, such arguments do not *explain* human religiosity. The approximate universality of religion forces the conclusion that ‘the Deity hath manifested himself to us by principles wrought into our nature’ (*EPM*, 206). Which principles are these? Kames writes:

At the same time, to found our knowledge of the Deity upon reasoning solely, is not agreeable to the analogy of nature. We depend not on abstract reasoning, nor indeed on any reasoning, for unfolding our duty to our fellow creatures: it is engraved upon the table of our hearts. We adapt our actions to the course of nature,

by mere instinct, without reasoning, or even experience. Therefore, if analogy can be relied on, it ought to be thought that God will discover himself to us, in some such manner as may take in all mankind, the vulgar and illiterate as well as the deep-thinking philosopher. (*EPM*, 201)

The same suspicion of rationalism evidenced in Kames's criticisms of Clarke's moral theory is clearly present in this passage. Reason, Kames holds, is just not the sort of thing that *could be counted on* either to disclose to us our duties or to produce the idea of God and the conviction of God's existence. A proper account of human religion must therefore seek its foundations in the 'sensitive branch' of human nature. Kames is therefore committed to a broadly 'sentimentalist' account of religion.<sup>13</sup> The crucial step in such an account is suggested in the following remarks: 'Every thing must appear gloomy, dismal, and disjointed without a Deity to unite this world of beings into one beautiful and harmonious system' (*EPM*, 204). In other words, some fact about our emotional constitution accounts for the universality of religion. Kames elaborates:

Man, at the same time, by his taste for beauty, regularity, and order, is fitted for contemplating the wisdom and goodness displayed in the frame and government of the world. These are proper objects of admiration and joy. It is not agreeable to the ordinary course of nature, that man should be endued with an affection, without having a proper object to bestow it upon. And as the providence of the Deity is the highest object of this affection, it would be unnatural, that man should be kept in ignorance of it. (*EPM*, 205)

We are so constituted, says Kames, that we take delight in order, regularity, and harmony. The 'sensitive branch' of our nature 'fits' us for appreciating these features of the universe, both locally (in particular animals, for example) and globally (in the laws of nature). If these features were absent, or too much diminished, our natural propensity to respond to them would find itself without any object. Such a situation would be analogous to one in which an animal possessed a complex organ, such as an eye, yet lived in an environment that lacked visual properties. The best candidate for a proper object of our 'taste for beauty, regularity, and order' is the providential order of things. Therefore, Kames concludes, it would be 'unnatural' for there not to be such an order and for us to be unapprised of it.

But how is it that we come to recognize the providential order of the universe? Here, the 'sensitive branch' once more plays the key explanatory role in Kames's account. We discover the existence of God 'not by any process of reasoning, but by the light of nature. The Deity hath not left his existence to be gathered from slippery and far-fetched arguments. We need but open our eyes, to receive impressions of him almost from every thing we perceive' (*EPM*, 207). That is, the very same part of our nature that 'fits' us to *appreciate* order and regularity in the universe also makes possible cognitive access to the same global features of the world. Just as we have cognitive access to moral properties

of actions and characters through a 'moral sense', so too our 'sensitive' natures make it possible for us to perceive properties of the world that are fitting objects of our admiration.

This account remains in place throughout Kames's career, reappearing over two decades later in *SHM*. Unperturbed by Hume's doubts, Kames still acknowledges the virtual universality of religion in human culture (*SHM*, 791).<sup>14</sup> 'A conviction so universal and so permanent', he avers, 'cannot proceed from chance; but must have a cause operating constantly and invariably upon all men in all ages' (*SHM*, 791). After considering, and ultimately rejecting, both a Humean fear-based explanation and a rationalist explanation that appeals solely to conviction on the basis of argument, Kames concludes that the only remaining option is that 'the image of the Deity must be stamp'd upon the mind of every human being, the ignorant equally with the knowing' (*SHM*, 794–795).

This way of putting the matter is, however, potentially misleading. The Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century, who in many ways anticipate the sentimentalist tradition, largely held that the idea of God is innate. Lord Herbert of Cherbury, another crucial figure in the formation a modern understanding of religious phenomena, held the same sort of position. Kames, however, follows Locke and Hutcheson in their resolute empiricism.<sup>15</sup> Thus, what is innate is not so much the *idea* of God, but rather the capacity, rooted in the 'sensitive branch' of our nature, to form this idea by responding to various features of our environment. Kames holds, therefore, that 'the original perception we have of Deity, must proceed from an internal sense, which may be termed the *sense of Deity*' (*SHM*, 795). Indeed, in *SHM*, Kames insists that this 'sense of Deity' is 'quiescent' until appropriate features of the world trigger a cognitive-cum-affective response (*SHM*, 797).

This position makes it possible for Kames to go on to present a developmental, historicist account of religion that, in this respect, parallels his work in the philosophy of law. This approach forms the guiding idea behind *SHM*. Beginning with a basic conception of the instinctual capacities of human nature, Kames examines the development of commerce, the arts, the material condition of society, political constitutions, logic, morality, and, of course, religion. With respect to religion, Kames is willing to grant that there is some element of truth to Hume's Lucretian observations about the influence of fear on the opinions of 'savages'. Yet, by Kames's lights, the idea that fear *alone* suffices to explain religion is contravened by the evident progress of religious ideas, which has often occurred alongside and in interaction with improvements in the sciences (*SHM*, 793).

'Savages', however, do provide an important case study for understanding the origins of religion in human nature. Relating the travel report of a Danish missionary in Greenland, Kames observes that, while the indigenous people possessed a number of articulate and sophisticated religious ideas, they nowhere

appealed to a posteriori philosophical arguments (*SHM*, 793–794). The important lesson that Kames draws from this is the following: 'It may be added with great certainty, that could they be made in any degree to conceive such reasoning, yet so weak and obscure would their conviction be, as to rest there without moving them to any sort of worship' (*SHM*, 794). What this implies is that, even in 'civilized' states of society, religion, which clearly involves worship, is neither fundamentally nor exclusively a product of reason.

### **The rationality of the 'sensitive branch'**

So far I have argued that Kames shares with Hume the ideas that human beings are primarily creatures of affect and sensibility and that these features of our nature best explain religion. But Kames also differs from Hume in that he wants to *defend* religion precisely because it issues from the 'sensitive branch' of our nature. Unlike, say, the emotivists of the twentieth century (many of whom enthusiastically appropriated Hume's ideas), Kames does not share the assumption that if a phenomenon is primarily an emotional response, it is therefore irrational and unworthy of serious consideration as an instance of genuine cognition. Kames is, however, sensitive to the near-ubiquity of this assumption, and of the difficulties it might pose for the sort of account of religion that he provides. In *EPM*, he notes that one might express the concern that 'To substitute sense in place of reason and demonstration, may seem to put the evidence of the Deity upon too low a footing' (*EPM*, 212). This reservation is, however, based simply on the fact that 'Human reason is commonly overvalued by philosophers' (*EPM*, 212). This is a sentiment that Hume would no doubt have shared. Nevertheless, in seeking to curb what he views as the pretensions of reason, particularly with respect to religion, Kames is not committed to relegating religion to the domain of irrationality. To understand why this is so requires a reconstruction of his overall account of the 'sensitive branch' of human nature. Kames's account of the *rationality* of the 'sensitive branch' begins to take shape, not surprisingly, in *EPM*. The core features of this account survive this early period, reappearing in the *EC* a decade later. In *EC*, however, significant new elements are added to the account. Both will be considered in what follows.

The heart of Kames's account is a functional-teleological explanation of the 'sensitive branch' that shares some features with both the classical tradition and with some of his immediate predecessors in the sentimentalist tradition. Consider, for example, what Francis Hutcheson has to say about the moral sense in his *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions*:

Our *moral Sense* shews this to be the highest Perfection of our Nature; what we may see to be the *End* or *Design* of such a Structure, and consequently what is requir'd of us by the Author of our Nature: and therefore if any one like these Descriptions better, he may call Virtue, with many of the Antients, '*Vita secundum naturam*;' or 'acting

according to what we may see from the Constitution of our Nature, we were intended for by our Creator'.<sup>16</sup>

The moral sense apprises us of our place in the providential order of the universe, as well as of the characteristic ends of our nature. In doing so, it evidently assists us in realizing these ends and thereby 'fitting' into the providential order. This position clearly travels together with a kind of moral naturalism reminiscent of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. As Kames makes clear in *EPM*, he shares this outlook. Moral precepts are, he maintains, 'to be derived from the common nature of man, of which every person partakes who is not a monster' (*EPM*, 25). Or, as he puts it a bit further on: 'In a word, it is according to order, that the different sorts of living creatures should be governed by laws adapted to their peculiar nature. We consider it as fit and proper that it should be so; and it is beautiful to find creatures acting according to their nature' (*EPM*, 25).

This naturalistic perspective also appears in *EC*, suggesting that it is a stable feature of Kames's philosophical view:

We have a sense of a common nature in every species of animals, particularly in our own; and we have a conviction that this common nature is *right*, or *perfect*, and that individuals *ought* to be made conformable to it. To every faculty, to every passion, and to every bodily member, is assigned a proper office and a due proportion ... : if a passion deviate from the common nature, by being too strong or too weak, it is also wrong and disagreeable: but as far as conformable to common nature, every emotion and every passion is perceived by us to be right, and as it ought to be; and upon that account it must appear agreeable. (*EC*, 79)

Crucially, it is a 'sense' that apprises us of the natures of things and of their place in the providential order. In *EPM*, Kames follows Hutcheson in ascribing this office to the 'moral sense' in particular (*EPM*, 41). The 'moral sense' is just our capacity for a cognitive-cum-affective response to actions that accord with 'laws which are fitted to the nature of man, and to his external circumstances' (*EPM*, 30). This is the source of Kames's objection to Clarke; reason may indeed help us to grasp essential relations, but it cannot account for our *approval* of actions that correspond with these relations (*EPM*, 69).

The 'moral sense', however, is merely a specification of a much broader capacity to discern what befits our nature and our 'situation on this earth': 'That man is finely adjusted internally as well as externally to his situation on this earth, is made evidence from a thousand instances' (*EPM*, 128). It is, first and foremost, the 'sensitive branch' of our nature that accounts for this fineness of fit. In essence, then, our sensibility is that part of our nature that allows us to pursue our characteristic ends, and so to play our allotted role in the providential scheme of the universe. What applies in this instance to the moral sense applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to our capacity for religious responses to the world. As Kames puts it elsewhere, 'Every thing must appear gloomy, dismal, and disjointed without a

Deity to unite this world of beings into one beautiful and harmonious system' (*EPM*, 204). In this sense, the 'sensitive branch' is *rational* in that it serves a crucial role in the rational order of nature designed and executed by God. If one were to occupy, *per impossibile*, the standpoint of God prior to the act of creation, one would see the prudence of including a 'sensitive branch' in human nature.

Kames's *EC* continues the functional-teleological account developed in *EPM*. However, Kames also includes new arguments meant to vindicate the rationality of the 'sensitive branch'. *EC* is obviously primarily concerned with aesthetics and rhetoric. However, in a move that later drew appreciative acknowledgment from J. G. Herder, Kames also maintains that aesthetics (or 'criticism', as he and his contemporaries called it) serves as a kind of entrée into the development of a complete philosophical account of the 'sensitive branch' of human nature.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the ultimate goal of Kames's lengthy examination is to arrive at a 'standard of taste', i.e. a normative criterion for aesthetic judgements. In the final chapter of *EC*, he firmly rejects relativism or subjectivism about aesthetic judgements (*EC*, 720–722). This obviously commits him to the claim that our affective responses can be rationally assessed.

In introducing his topic, Kames argues that aesthetic responses play a crucial role in helping human beings to achieve the characteristic ends of human nature:

Thus the author of nature, by qualifying the human mind for a succession of enjoyments from low to high, leads it by gentle steps from the most groveling corporeal pleasures, for which only it is fitted in the beginning of life, to those refined and sublime pleasures that are suited to its maturity ... . (*EC*, 13)

These 'refined and sublime pleasures' are none other than those of morality and religion, the capacity for which Kames has elsewhere identified as the distinguishing mark of human nature. In helping us to thus achieve our natural ends, taste, or the capacity for aesthetic responses, is allied to the 'moral sense', the functional role of which Kames left in no doubt in the earlier *EPM* (*EC*, 13). Kames states his general perspective quite clearly later in the text:

The beauty of contrivance, so conspicuous in the human frame, is not confined to the rational parts of our nature, but is visible over the whole. Concerning the passions in particular, however irregular, headstrong, and perverse in a slight view, they may appear, I hope to demonstrate, that they are by nature modeled and tempered with perfect wisdom, for the good of society as well as for private good. (*EC*, 131)

The 'sensitive branch' serves to 'fit' us into our environments in a variety of important ways. For example, our complex array of both 'selfish' and 'social' passions makes it possible for us to participate in society (*EC*, 41). Even more violent passions, such as fear and anger, 'answer the purposes of nature' (*EC*, 62).

As in *EPM*, Kames here delegates a crucial role to the 'sensitive branch' in attuning us to the requirements of our own natures. The 'sense of propriety', which Kames regards as a species of 'congruity', is what leads us to regard

‘temperance, modesty, firmness of mind’ and other such traits as duties that ‘respect ourselves’ (*EC*, 241–242). He explains this point as follows:

It is undoubtedly the interest of every man, to suit his behaviour to the dignity of his nature, and to the station allotted him by Providence; for such rational conduct contributes in every respect to happiness, by preserving health, by procuring plenty, by gaining the esteem of others; and, which of all is the greatest blessing, by gaining a justly-founded self-esteem. (*EC*, 242)

At the same time, as he had argued forcefully in *EPM*, Kames once again argues that reason alone cannot be relied upon to achieve these ends. Hence, God ‘hath fortified us with natural laws and principles’ (*EC*, 242).

This functional-teleological account of the ‘sensitive branch’ is also what grounds Kames’s contention that emotions and passions can be rationally assessed. I have already quoted above Kames’s comments on our ‘sense of a common nature’ as the root of this important contention (*EC*, 79). Kames’s point here is that our judgement of the ‘fitness’ or ‘propriety’ of various affective responses is based upon a prior appreciation of the function that the relevant faculties are intended to play. Importantly, this prior appreciation is attributed not (or at least not solely) to *reason*, but to a ‘sense’. Even when it is some aspect of the ‘sensitive branch’ that is being evaluated, it is also the ‘sensitive branch’ itself that cues us to the relevant criterion.

In *EC*, however, Kames supplements this basic functional-teleological account with one that both highlights the role of emotions and passions in initiating and framing cognition, and interprets these responses as themselves fundamentally cognitive in nature. Emotions such as surprise and wonder direct our attention to novelty, pique our curiosity, and thus *initiate* cognitive processes. The pleasure we take in simplicity and congruity also accounts for the central role of theorems, generalizations, and heuristics in both daily experience and in science. Finally, the emotions themselves give us access to properties of states of affairs of which we would otherwise be unapprised.

To begin with this last point, Kames notes that all emotions and passions have causes in ‘circumstances’, i.e. in objective states of affairs (*EC*, 33). But, for this to be possible, these states of affairs cannot be ‘indifferent’, rather they must ‘antecedently’ have the sorts of features that render them agreeable or disagreeable (*EC*, 33–34). Thus, objects or states of affairs *immediately* arouse our emotions ‘by means of their properties and qualities’ (*EC*, 34). In other words, emotions cue us to relevant features of the world that are in some sense *really* part of the world, independently of our responses to them.

In addition to being properly cognitive in themselves, emotions also serve to initiate other sorts of cognition. Kames makes this point in a discussion of curiosity:

The connection that man hath with the beings around him, requires some acquaintance with their nature, their powers, and their qualities, for regulating his

conduct. For acquiring a branch of knowledge so essential to our well-being, motives alone of reason and interest are not sufficient: nature hath providently superadded curiosity, a vigorous propensity, which never is at rest. This propensity attaches us to every new object; and incites us to compare objects, in order to discover their differences and resemblances. (EC, 197)

Here, Kames is arguing a point familiar from *EPM*, viz. that without the operation of the 'sensitive branch' (in this case, emotions), our cognitive life would be significantly impoverished. The 'sensitive branch' initiates other cognitive activities, and Kames expresses doubts as to whether these would ever get off the ground without this impetus.

Moreover, Kames elsewhere maintains that the sorts of features of the environment to which the 'sensitive branch' gives us access facilitate our cognitive activities. For example, 'regularity, uniformity, order, and simplicity contribute each of them to readiness of apprehension; enabling us to form more distinct images of objects, than can be done with the utmost attention where these particulars are not found' (EC, 144–145). In a similar manner, the pleasure we receive from considering these sorts of regularity contributes to the higher reaches of cognition, i.e. the sciences. 'General theorems', notes Kames, 'are delightful by their simplicity, and by the easiness of their application to variety of cases. We take equal delight in the laws of motion, which, with the greatest simplicity, are boundless in their operations' (EC, 147).

In addition to playing a key role in cognition, which, for Kames, is evidence of the solicitude of the 'Author of nature', the 'sensitive branch' is also central to action. He observes that 'with respect to the endless variety of objects that owe their beauty to art and culture, the perception of beauty greatly promotes industry; being to us a strong additional incitement to enrich our fields and improve our manufactures' (EC, 149). Like Hume, Kames regards the passions as conditions for the possibility of rational action. He defines passions as emotions that are 'accompanied with desire' (EC, 36). An emotion, on the other hand, 'passeth away without desire', and so plays a more indirect role in motivation (EC, 37).

Kames brings out this distinction further on in the discussion, where he maintains that while both emotions and passions have causes, only the latter have objects (EC, 38). Objects can either be 'general', such as 'fame, esteem, opulence', or particular, such as 'a man, a house, a garden' (EC, 38). Having put this machinery in place, Kames goes on to distinguish an action from an instinctual response by noting that the former possesses a teleological structure, i.e. is characterized by an intentional object. Thus,

A passion when it flames so high as to impel us to act blindly without any view to consequences, good or ill, may in that state be termed *instinctive*; and when it is so moderate as to admit reason, and to prompt actions with a view to an end, it may in that state be termed *deliberative*. (EC, 39)

In other words, rational agency (i.e. acting for a *reason*) is only possible for creatures with deliberative passions.

### Conclusion

I have shown above how Kames is committed to two related theses: (1) that human beings are fundamentally creatures of passion and sensibility, and that (2) this ‘sensitive branch’ of our nature explains religion. Decades before Schleiermacher famously defined religion as the ‘sense and taste for the infinite’, and long before his disciple Rudolf Otto identified the features of the ‘numinous’ that call forth religious responses, Kames outlined a theory of religion that roots it firmly in our sensibility. His *EPM* anticipates Hume’s well-known *Natural History of Religion* by half a decade.

More importantly, Kames does not accept the assumption that this sort of account of religion commits him to the idea that religion is fundamentally irrational. On the contrary, he develops a sophisticated account of the *rationality* of the ‘sensitive branch’ of human nature. The fundamental framework of this account is a functional-teleological picture on which the ‘sensitive branch’ plays the key role in ‘fitting’ us to nature, to society, and to the characteristic ends of our own nature. Moreover, the ‘sensitive branch’, which includes emotion, passion, appetite, affection, and desire, both initiates and frames cognition and enables us to act in identifiably rational ways. Religion, for Kames, is at bottom a cognitive-cum-affective response to the world, a recognition of the order of nature that arouses admiration, wonder, and gratitude. To locate the roots of religion in this part of human nature is afford it an important functional role in the development, maintenance, and perfection of human life.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

1. For a clear account of the religious controversy surrounding Kames’s views on free will and providence, see Ian S. Ross ‘The natural theology of Lord Kames’, in Paul Wood (ed.) *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2000), 335–350. A more lengthy account of the affair can be found in Ross’s excellent intellectual biography of Lord Kames, *Lord Kames and the Scotland of His Day* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 152–165.
2. David Hume *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, J. A. C. Gaskin (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 184.
3. On the relationship between Kames’s account of the history of religion and Hume’s *Natural History*, see Christopher J. Berry ‘Rude religion: the psychology of polytheism in the Scottish Enlightenment’, in Wood *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 315–334. Berry points out that, unlike Hume, Kames is committed to the idea that religion is, in some sense, an instinctual response that is universal among human beings (318).
4. William C. Lehmann captures this part of Kames’s distinctiveness when he observes that, for Kames, natural religion is ‘a product of intuition and experience, and while not itself a product of reason, yet as rationally arrived at and as always in harmony with the demands of man’s God-given reason’. See his *Henry Home, Lord Kames, and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Study in National Character and in the*

*History of Ideas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 274. The present essay can be viewed, in part, as an attempt to fill in Lehmann's suggestive comments.

5. For some of the more important studies of this topic, see: Eric J. Sharpe *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1986); J. Samuel Preus *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Peter Byrne *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989); and Peter Harrison *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
6. Ross 'The natural theology of Lord Kames', 336.
7. See especially Robert C. Roberts *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), and Mark R. Wynn *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception, and Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
8. Ross *Lord Kames and the Scotland of His Day*, 101.
9. Henry Home, Lord Kames *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*, Mary Catherine Moran (ed.) (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 2005).
10. Henry Home, Lord Kames *Elements of Criticism*, 2 vols, Peter Jones (ed.) (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 2005).
11. For this useful phrase, see *EC*, 14.
12. See, for example, Hutcheson's account of the 'internal sense' of beauty: 'This superior Power of Perception is justly called a sense, because of its Affinity to the other senses in this, that the Pleasure does not arise from any knowledge of Principles, Proportions, Causes, or of the Usefulness of the object; but strikes us at first with the Idea of Beauty: nor does the most accurate Knowledge increase this Pleasure from prospects of Advantage, or from the Increase of Knowledge.' See Francis Hutcheson *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Wolfgang Leidhold (ed.) (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 2004), 25.
13. For a helpful discussion of this 'sentimentalist' approach to religion, derived in part from Shaftesbury, see Isabel Rivers's magisterial *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, II: *Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Rivers briefly discusses Kames's place in this tradition on 257–260.
14. Henry Home, Lord Kames *Sketches of the History of Man, Book III*, James A. Harris (ed.) (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 2007).
15. For a fascinating account of the debate over innateness, see Daniel Carey *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
16. Francis Hutcheson *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, Aaron Garrett (ed.) (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 2002), 8.
17. 'The principles of the fine arts appear in this view to open a direct avenue to the heart of man. The inquisitive mind beginning with criticism, the most agreeable of all amusements, and finding no obstruction in its progress, advances far into the sensitive part of our nature; and gains imperceptibly a thorough knowledge of the human heart, of its desires, and of every motive to action; a science, which of all that can be reached by man, is to him of the greatest importance'; *EC*, 32. For Herder's reference to Kames, see J. G. Herder, 'Critical forests: fourth grove', in Gregory Moore (ed.) *Selected Writings on Aesthetics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 276–278.
18. Thanks to Lex Newman for a helpful discussion of the concept of an 'internal sense' in the Lockean tradition, as well as to an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies* for a number of useful comments.