

Chapter 1

Who was David Hume?

Introduction

If one were to poll academic philosophers today and ask which philosopher from the past they would most like to share a meal with, my guess is that the winner would be David Hume (1711–1776). Perhaps more than any other great philosopher in history, Hume had a combination of brilliance and ebullience, of wit and wisdom and of affability and conviviality, that would make him a most excellent conversational companion. There might be other figures who exceeded him in brilliance—though not many—and there are certainly others who have exceeded him in influence; but perhaps more than any others Hume seemed to be the kind of person who would have been both an intellectual and a social joy to be with. Yet, Hume’s life, in many of its particulars and in many ways overall, was tragic: he met with disappointment after disappointment; though loved by many he was (or at least his ideas were) reviled by even more; and though he had some stalwart friends, perhaps his single best friend, Adam Smith (1723–1790), often disappointed him as well. Yet in all this Hume apparently maintained his cheerfulness, somehow managing to remain a person of good will, charity, and generosity despite the many reasons he had to sour on his life, on his times, and even on his friends.

Hume thus lived a life that was at once inspiring and heartbreaking. He was the preeminent philosopher in what is now called the Scottish Enlightenment, a time that was “crowded with genius”² and in a place regarded as the rebirth of the golden era of Athens. His writing displayed an astonishing range, addressing everything from metaphysics to politics, and in subject after subject he produced fresh, novel, and brilliant insights.

2 See Buchan, 2003.

Though in his own words it “fell *dead-born from the press*,”³ Hume wrote, in his late twenties, what is now considered one of the great texts in Western philosophy, his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), which offered an account of human psychology, of causation and the limits of human knowledge, and of the origins and nature of moral judgments. He went on to write shorter essays on, and produce penetrating insights about, topics from political economy like debt, interest, trade, and the origins and limits of political obedience; to fine arts and “the standard of taste”; to divorce, the immortality of the soul, and suicide; and much else besides. He also wrote *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), offering a genealogical account of religious belief that seemed to sever it from connections to transcendence or the divine, and he wrote a magisterial, multivolume *History of England* (1754–62). Hume managed to see well beyond his age and, time again, as we shall see, he got things right.

Hume is thus a towering and intriguing figure in the history of philosophy, which justifies placing him in the pantheon of great philosophers. Indeed, he should be on any list of the ten greatest philosophers of all time, and arguably the single greatest English-speaking philosopher. He was also one of the greatest English prose writers of all time, despite the fact that, as he himself confessed, his Scots dialect and accent were sources of embarrassment for him.⁴ But it was his groundbreaking insights and advances in political economy that warrant his place in the Fraser Institute’s *Essential Scholars* series.

It would be impossible in one volume to give due expression to, or even address, all of Hume’s thought. For that reason, *The Essential David Hume* will focus on a handful of his central contributions with an emphasis on political economy, in particular his conception and defense of commercial society and of the role government should play in protecting it. Hume had a peculiar ability to write with clarity and style, and to present sophisticated and subtle arguments with ease, precision, and even humor. To understand his arguments and to appreciate the force and vitality of his writing, there is no substitute for reading his work itself. Any attempt at recreating or reconstructing his work will pale by comparison. Nonetheless, I will do my best to summarize and represent his work and contributions accurately, giving an account of their substance and

3 Here and throughout, direct quotations are reprinted exactly as they appear in the original.

4 Hume wrote to the English politician John Wilkes in 1754 that he regarded his own Scottish accent to be “totally desparate and irreclaimable” (HL1: 205).

import as clearly and faithfully as I can. My goal will be to recount Hume’s life and work in a way that conveys their depth and importance, and that pays due respect to one of philosophy’s profoundest geniuses and one of humanity’s greatest souls.

The great David Hume

David Hume was born in 1711 in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was the third and final child of Joseph and Katherine Home. (Hume changed the spelling of his last name from “Home” to “Hume” in 1734 so that its spelling matched its pronunciation.) His father died when Hume was only two years old, and Hume was raised by his mother, Katherine, who never remarried. Katherine was the daughter of Sir David Falconer, a prominent judge in Scotland, and was herself an advocate (or lawyer). It was perhaps understandable, then, that Hume’s mother expected him to follow a similar path and also become an advocate.

Hume matriculated at the University of Edinburgh at the tender age of 10, pursuing the then-standard course of study of Greek, Latin, metaphysics, and “natural philosophy” or natural science. He spent four years at the University of Edinburgh, though he never received a degree (a practice not uncommon at the time). He then spent the next eight years, or until he was 22, engaged in independent study. He read widely in history, literature, philosophy, law, and theology, a course of study that would have prepared him well for law or ministry—though neither would turn out to interest him. Hume’s family was Presbyterian, and Hume himself seems to have been raised as a pious Christian. During Hume’s teenage years, however, he grew increasingly skeptical about the religious beliefs his family and most of those around him held. In any case, as Hume himself reported, he “found an insurmountable aversion to every thing but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning” (EMPL: xxxiii).

Although he read the leading religious and theological thinkers of his day, Hume was apparently far more impressed by Isaac Newton (1643–1727), and the feat Newton had accomplished by accounting for disparate observations—the motion of things on earth and in the heavens—with a few relatively simple principles that were arrived at empirically and inductively and that did not rely on theological, metaphysical, or other *a priori* principles (that is, principles based on pure reason, not on experience or observation). This led Hume to

wonder whether a similar procedure could be applied to human nature and the human condition: could we do for the study of human behaviour what Newton did for the behaviour of inanimate objects?

Hume wanted to devote himself to reading and writing literature and philosophy. His resources were “very slender” (EMPL: xxxiii), however, and so he was forced by his circumstances to seek other means to support himself. In 1734, at the age of 23, he traveled to Bristol to try his hand at being a merchant. When he discovered “that scene totally unsuitable” to him (EMPL: xxxiii), he traveled to France and resolved to live as frugally as possible so that he could maintain his independence and dedicate his life to “the improvement of my talents in literature” (EMPL: xxxiv). It was during his time in France that he began work on what would become his first major project, *The Treatise of Human Nature*, which was published in two parts in 1739 and in 1740.

The public reception of Hume’s *Treatise* was disheartening. Its sales were meager, and its few reviewers complained that it was too long and difficult to understand. This was one of the first great disappointments in Hume’s life. As he himself would write later, “Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell *dead-born from the press*, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots” (EMPL: xxxiv). It would have been one thing for the book’s arguments to be sharply criticized, something that would have been unsurprising since the book’s arguments led in new and even radical directions; but to be largely ignored and greeted with little more than a shrug of the shoulders was a great blow to the young Hume. Despite the fact that no less a figure than Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) would later report that it was Hume who woke Kant from his “dogmatic slumber” and launched him on the trajectory to publish his groundbreaking three *Critiques*,⁵ it was not until the twentieth century that Hume’s *Treatise* began to rise in the esteem of philosophers. It is now widely regarded as one of the great works in the history of philosophy, despite having been written by a man only in his twenties and with no college degree.

The tepid response to Hume’s *Treatise* led him to try his hand at writing shorter works. He revised and shortened the three major parts of his *Treatise*

5 These would be Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 1781 [1965], 1788 [1956], and 1790 [1787], respectively).

into *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1748 and corresponding to book I of the *Treatise*; *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, first published in 1751 and corresponding to book III of the *Treatise*; and *Dissertation on the Passions*, first published in 1757 and corresponding to book II of the *Treatise*. In the meantime, he began publishing short essays on a wide range of subjects. The first volume of his essays he published under the title of *Essays Moral and Political* in 1741. He went on to publish several subsequent editions of his *Essays*, each time adding more essays.⁶

His essays enjoyed much wider readership than did his *Treatise*, and his notoriety and reputation were now growing. When the position of Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh became available in 1744–45, the 33-year-old Hume sought it out. He was denied the position, however, on the grounds that he was a “sceptic.” Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), who was Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow and had been Adam Smith’s teacher, intervened against Hume because he considered skepticism to be tantamount to atheism, which, Hutcheson believed, rendered one unfit for a professorship in moral philosophy. Later, when Adam Smith left his position as Chair of Logic at the University of Glasgow in 1751 to take up the position of Chair of Moral Philosophy at the same institution, this left the former position open, and Hume was again interested. Unfortunately, the “violent and solemn remonstrances of the clergy” prevented Hume from receiving the position (see HL1: 164), and so he was for a second (and final) time disappointed not to receive a professorship for which he was, by any objective standard, arguably the most qualified person in Scotland.

In 1752, the position of librarian at the Faculty of Advocates (or library for lawyers) became vacant, and, despite “the violent cry of Deism, atheism, and scepticism” (HL1: 165) raised against him, Hume was elected to the position. This position afforded Hume a small income, but, more importantly, it gave him access to a large library of books and the time to read and write. Hume went on to write several notable works, including *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) and his multivolume *History of England* (1754–62). The latter sold well enough

6 See the editor’s Foreword to EMPL for specifics on publication dates and the essays contained in each edition.

to finally put him at financial ease and gained him both supporters and critics on both sides of the Channel.

Hume never married or had children, both of which were further causes of disappointment in his life. He apparently fell in love with a Parisienne named Comtesse de Boufflers during the time he spent in France in the mid-1760s, but she was already married (and, apparently, the mistress of yet another man) (see Rasmussen, 2017: chap. 6). Although they had a close friendship that lasted many years, including after Hume left France and returned to Scotland, they thus could never marry. Hume spent his final years in Edinburgh writing, meeting with friends, and increasingly suffering from dysentery. Hume died on August 25, 1776 in his house on St. David Street, Edinburgh, at the age of 65. He lived long enough to have read Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, which had been published in March of that year, and to send Smith remarkable praise for the work; and he lived long enough to have suffered yet one more grave disappointment, this time at the hands of perhaps his best friend, none other than Adam Smith himself (see chapter 8).

After Hume's death, Smith was moved to write: "Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit" (Smith, 1987: 221). Given Hume's by-then confirmed status as a skeptic and possibly an atheist, such a claim was bound to cause a stir—and Smith did indeed face criticism for having written it. Yet Smith called Hume a "never to be forgotten friend"; Smith continued that regarding Hume's "philosophical opinions men will, no doubt, judge variously, every one approving or condemning them, according as they happen to coincide or disagree with his own," yet "concerning whose character and conduct there can scarce be a difference of opinion" (Smith, 1987: 220–1).

Philosophy would never again be the same. Hume's contributions to "natural philosophy," or what we would now call the natural sciences, as well as to "moral philosophy," or what concern all the subsequently subdivided disciplines relating to human nature, history, and conduct, were original, provocative, and brilliant. I contend that Hume should be considered among the most important philosophers in the entire Western tradition. Let us see why.