

David Hume

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Western Philosophy 18th-century philosophy



David Hume

Name: David Hume

Birth: April 26, 1711 (Edinburgh, Scotland)

Death: August 25, 1776 (Edinburgh, Scotland)

School/tradition: Naturalism, Scepticism, Empiricism,
Scottish Enlightenment

Main interests: Epistemology, Metaphysics, Philosophy
Mind, Ethics, Political Philosophy,

Aesthetics, Philosophy of Religion

Notable ideas: Problem of causation, Induction, Is-ought problem

Influences: Locke, Berkeley, Hutcheson, Newton
Cicero, Malebranche

Influenced: Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Bentham
James Madison, Alexander Hamilton,
William James, Darwin, Russell, Karl Popper, Thomas Huxley, John Stuart Mill
William James, Einstein, Ayer, Simon Blackburn, Iain King, J. L. Mackie,
Auguste Comte

David Hume (April 26, 1711 – August 25, 1776)

[1] was a Scottish philosopher, economist, and historian. He is considered one of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy and the Scottish Enlightenment. Although in recent years interest in Hume's work has centred on his philosophical writing, it was as a historian that he first gained recognition and respect. His *The History of England* [2] was the standard work on English history for sixty or seventy years until Macaulay's. [3]

Hume was the first great philosopher of the modern era to carve out a thoroughly naturalistic philosophy. This philosophy partly consisted in the

rejection of the historically prevalent conception of human minds as being miniature versions of the Divine mind; a notion Edward Craig has entitled the ‘Image of God’ doctrine.^[4] This doctrine was associated with a trust in the powers of human reason and insight into reality, which powers possessed God’s certification. Hume’s scepticism came in his rejection of this ‘insight ideal’,^[5] and the (usually rationalistic) confidence derived from it that the world is as we represent it. Instead, the best we can do is to apply the best explanatory and empirical principles available to the investigation of human mental phenomena, issuing in a quasi-Newtonian project, Hume’s ‘Science of Man’.

Hume was heavily influenced by empiricists John Locke and George Berkeley, along with various Francophone writers such as Pierre Bayle, and various figures on the Anglophone intellectual landscape such as Isaac Newton, Samuel Clarke, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Joseph Butler.^[6]

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Life

David Home (later Hume), the son of Joseph Home of Ninewells, advocate, and Katherine, Lady Falconer, was born on 26 April 1711 (Old style) in

a tenement on the North side of the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh. Throughout his life Hume, who never married, was to spend time occasionally at his family home at Ninewells by Chirnside, Berwickshire. (He changed his name to Hume in 1734 because the English had difficulty in pronouncing Home in the Scottish manner.) He was sent by his family to the University of Edinburgh at the unusually early age of twelve (fourteen would have been more normal). At first he considered a career in law, but came to have, in his words, "an insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of Philosophy and general Learning; and while [my family] fancied I was poring over Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Vergil were the Authors which I was secretly devouring." He had little respect for professors, telling a friend in 1735 "there is nothing to be learned from a Professor, which is not to be met with in Books."^[7]

At the age of eighteen Hume made a philosophical discovery that opened up to him "a new Scene of Thought" which inspired him "to throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it".^[8] He did not recount what this was, but it seems likely to have been his theory of causality - that our beliefs about cause and effect depend on sentiment,

custom and habit, and **not** upon reason, **nor** upon abstract, timeless, general Laws of Nature.

The careers open to a poor Scottish gentleman in those days were very few. As Hume's options lay between a travelling tutorship and a stool in a merchant's office, he chose the latter. In 1734, after a few months in commerce in Bristol, he went to La Flèche in Anjou, France. He had frequent discourses with the Jesuits of the famous college in which Descartes was educated. During his four years there, he laid out his life plan, resolving "to make a very rigid frugality supply my deficiency of fortune, to maintain unimpaired my independency, and to regard every object as contemptible except the improvements of my talents in literature."^[9] While there, he completed *A Treatise of Human Nature* at the age of twenty-six. Although many scholars today consider the *Treatise* to be Hume's most important work and one of the most important books in the history of philosophy, the public in Great Britain did not agree at first. Hume himself described the (lack of) public reaction to the publication of the *Treatise* in 1739–40 by writing that it "fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots. But being naturally of a cheerful and sanguine temper, I soon

recovered from the blow and prosecuted with great ardour my studies in the country". There he wrote the *Abstract*.^[10] Without revealing his authorship, he aimed to make his larger work more intelligible by shortening it. Even this advertisement failed to enliven interest in the *Treatise*.^[11]

The effort of writing the *Treatise* drove the youthful Hume to near insanity. To restore his perspective he escaped to the common life.^[12]

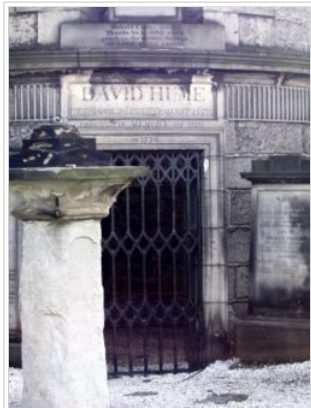
After the publication of *Essays Moral and Political* in 1744, he applied for the Chair of *Ethics and pneumatic philosophy* at the University of Edinburgh but was rejected. During the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 he tutored the Marquise of Annandale (1720-92) officially described as a "lunatic".^[13] This engagement ended in disarray after about a year. But, it was then that he started his great historical work *The History of Great Britain*^[14] which would take fifteen years and run to over a million words, to be published in six volumes in the period 1754 to 1762. During this period he was involved with the Canongate Theatre and in this context associated with Lord Monboddo and other Scottish Enlightenment luminaries in Edinburgh. In 1748 he served for three years as Secretary to General St Clair writing

his *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* later published as *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. The *Enquiry* proved little more successful than the *Treatise*.

Hume was charged with heresy, but he was defended by his young clerical friends who argued that as an atheist he lay outside the jurisdiction of the Church. Despite his acquittal—and, possibly, due to the opposition of Thomas Reid of Aberdeen, who that year launched a Christian critique of his metaphysics—Hume failed to gain the Chair of Philosophy at Glasgow. It was after returning to Edinburgh in 1752, as he wrote in *My Own Life*, that "the Faculty of Advocates chose me their Librarian, an office from which I received little or no emolument, but which gave me the command of a large library." It was this resource that enabled him to continue his historical research for his *History*.

Hume achieved great literary fame as an essayist and historian. His enormous *History of Great Britain* from the Saxon kingdoms to the Glorious Revolution was a best-seller in its day. In it, Hume presented political man as a creature of habit, with a disposition to submit quietly to established government unless confronted by uncertain

circumstances. In his view, only religious difference could deflect men from their everyday lives to think about political matters.



Tomb of David Hume in Edinburgh

Hume's early essay *Of Superstition and Religion* laid the foundations for nearly all subsequent secular thinking about the history of religion.

Critics of religion during Hume's time were required to express themselves cautiously. Less than 15 years before Hume was born, 18-year-old college student Thomas Aikenhead was put on trial for saying openly that he thought Christianity was nonsense; he was later convicted and hanged for blasphemy. Hume followed the common practice of expressing his views obliquely, through characters in dialogues. Hume did not acknowledge authorship of *Treatise* until the year of his death, in 1776. His essays *On Suicide*, and *On the Immortality of the Soul* and his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* were held from publication until after his death (published 1778 and 1779, respectively), and they still bore neither author's nor publisher's name. So masterly was Hume in disguising his own views that debate continues to this day over whether Hume was actually a deist or an atheist. Regardless, in his own time Hume's alleged atheism caused him to be passed over for many positions.

Hume told his friend Mure of Caldwell of an incident which occasioned his "conversion" to Christianity. Passing across the recently drained Nor' Loch to the New Town of Edinburgh to supervise the masons building his new house, soon to become No 1 St David Street, he slipped and fell

into the mire. Hume, being then of great bulk, could not regain his feet. Some passing Newhaven fishwives seeing his plight, but recognising him as the well-known atheist, refused to rescue him until he became a Christian and had recited The Lord's Prayer and the Creed. This he did and was rewarded by being set again on his feet by these brawny women. Hume asserted thereafter that Edinburgh fishwives were the "most acute theologians he had ever met".^[15]

From 1763 to 1765 Hume was Secretary to Lord Hertford in Paris, where he was admired by Voltaire and lionised by the ladies in society. He made friends with and, later, fell out with Rousseau. He wrote of his Paris life "I really wish often for the plain roughness of the The Poker Club of Edinburgh . . . to correct and qualify so much luciousness." For a year from 1767, Hume held the appointment of Under Secretary of State for the Northern Department. In 1768 he settled in Edinburgh. Attention to Hume's philosophical works grew after the German philosopher Immanuel Kant credited Hume with awakening him from "dogmatic slumbers" (*circa* 1770) and from then onwards he gained the recognition that he had craved all his life.

James Boswell visited Hume a few weeks before his death. Hume told him that he sincerely believed it a "most unreasonable fancy" that there might be life after death.^[16] This meeting was also dramatized in semi-fictional form for the BBC by Michael Ignatieff as *Dialogue in the Dark*. Hume wrote his own epitaph: "Born 1711, Died [----]. Leaving it to posterity to add the rest." It is engraved with the year of his death 1776 on the "simple Roman tomb" which he prescribed, and which stands, as he wished it, on the Eastern slope of the Calton Hill overlooking his home in the New Town of Edinburgh at No. 1 St David Street.

Legacy

Hume's Science of Man

There are, of course, various ways of interpreting Hume's philosophical project regarding the understanding. Hume certainly adopts the idiom of previous empiricist philosophers such as John Locke in talking of the ideas of the mind, and



Statue of David Hume in
Edinburgh, Scotland

indeed at least formally accepts the theory that our concepts or ideas are derived from or copied off of our sensory impressions.

Some positivist philosophers have thus assumed that his project could be interpreted as a detailed analysis of our concepts in terms of actual or potential experiences. Such interpreters have sought to disentangle the

analytical Hume from Hume the psychologist, who saw mental states as linked to one another by laws of association. However, such an interpretation seems doomed to failure, as it has radically anti-sceptical, and thus un-Humean, conclusions. For if our ideas are analysable into experience, then

anything we can grasp in the understanding would have first to be *knowable* by, or directly accessible in, experience. Hume would not have thought of our ideas as thus *given* in experience; for him, the natural, and importantly non-rational, mechanisms of the mind must go to work on the sensory data or input to produce our concepts.

However, another strain of interpretation that has become prominent in the last couple of decades is that, rather than *analysing* our ideas into copies of experiences, Hume was instead looking at the way our mind *synthesises*, or actively generates, our complex notions of and beliefs in, e.g., the external world, causal connection, the self, and so on. For Hume, our forming and using such concepts was the result of an in-built, natural disposition to deploy faculties of the mind such as custom, habit, and the imagination. Another way of expressing this is to say that he was not concerned with advancing a theory of semantics - i.e. what we mean when we talk about, say, physical objects or causal relations - but rather was carrying out an epistemological enquiry, asking in effect how the stimuli of the senses and our conceptual apparatus work together to compel us to form various sorts of judgements and to make claims to knowledge.

The Idea of Necessary Causal Connection

Hume begins Chapter VII of the first *Enquiry* with a hunt for the impression behind our idea of causal power. This has been interpreted as an attempt to specify the parameters of the concept of causation — i.e. what we *mean* when we deploy causal terms — and the traditional analytical take on Hume's answer is that it is to be found in the regular succession of certain of our impressions; their 'constant conjunction'. On this interpretation, Hume is basically saying that when we make statements of the form "X caused Y", or "Y happened because of X", we just mean that X happened, then Y did, and that X-like events always precede Y-like ones.

However, this take is almost certainly flawed, for at least two reasons. Firstly, Hume offers *two* 'definitions' of causation, the first of which is in terms of pure regularity, but the second of which introduces the notion of the natural passage of the mind from the appearance of the cause to the idea of the effect (e.g. someone knocks a coffee mug off the table and, having always experienced unsuspended objects to fall, you anticipate its falling to the floor). This feeling stems from a

natural association of the two events after persistent observation of them as constantly conjoined. And it is this feeling, or 'determination of the mind', which is the basis of our idea of necessity, i.e. that the cause necessitates its effect.

Secondly, this is the basis for our idea not in the sense that our concept of necessary connection can be analysed into such feelings of anticipation, expectation, etc., but that we then come to see the world as structured by a certain predictability of order, and we attribute this predictability to the external objects themselves, i.e. we attribute them a causal power which makes things fall out, or occur in, the way they do; a property of necessary connection. So Hume's argument is that the mind synthesises and then projects a concept of causal power when it observes similar events to occur together repeatedly. This is an example of what the philosopher Simon Blackburn has entitled 'projectivism'; Hume argues that we project our feeling of predictability onto the objects, much as he argues that we project our moral attitudes onto situations or objects, as "nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation which they occasion."^[17]

The Problem of Induction

In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §4.1.20-27, §4.2.28-33,^[18] Hume articulated his view that all human reasoning is of two kinds, to wit *Relation of Ideas* and *Matters of Fact*. While the former involves the abstract concepts of logic and mathematics where intuitive and deductive certitude presides, the latter concerns what exists in the world. In order to avail ourselves of any matter of fact or existence beyond what we are aware of in our present sensory experience and our memory, we must employ inductive reasoning.

Inductive inference operates on the principle that the past acts as a reliable guide to the future (sometimes called the principle of the uniformity of nature). For example, if in the past the sun has risen in the east and set in the west, then, inductive inference suggests that it will probably rise in the east and set in the west in the future. But how are we to explain our ability to make such an inference? Hume argued that we *cannot* explain our capacity as a product of our faculty of reason. For reason could only come in two flavours, and neither of these can be used to *ground* our inferences.

1. **Demonstrative or Intuitive.** This sort of reasoning is basically a priori. We cannot determine a priori that the future will be conformable to the past, because it is both (logically) consistent and conceivable that the world stop being uniform. Hume here does not distinguish adequately between the uniformity of nature in general and the persistence of *particular* regularities. For it is open to a philosopher (perhaps of a Kantian bent) to argue that it *is* in fact inconceivable that the world not be regular in *some* ways. However, what is important, and what vindicates Hume, is that for any *particular* regularity in the operations of nature, it is consistent and conceivable that it might cease. Thus we cannot ground our inductions in a priori reasoning.
2. **Inductive.** We cannot appeal, either, to our past successes in using inductive inference, to the fact that it has worked in the past, for this would be circular reasoning.

Hume thus concludes that our inductive practices have no rational foundation, for no form of reason will certify it. However, there are many points to note about what Hume is definitely not saying. He is not saying that induction is not deduction, and *thus* not rational (i.e. he is not a "deductivist"). For

in the Treatise, in a section entitled *Of Scepticism with regard to Reason*, he argues that if unaided reason determined our beliefs, if belief-formation were rational *all the way down*, then we would never believe *anything*, including intuitive or deductive truths. Furthermore, Hume is not saying that induction doesn't work, or doesn't reliably lead to true conclusions, or anything of that sort; rather, he argues just that it isn't spurred on by reason. The important thing to remember with Hume is that although pessimistic about the likelihood of showing that induction was a rational procedure, he thought it was a remarkable—indeed, quasi-magical—ability to predict the future. The fuel for the inductive fire for Hume, and his solution to the problem of explaining our inductions, is Nature. Nature has determined us to expect more of the same, for: "this operation of the mind, by which we infer like effects from like causes, and *vice versa*, is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures, it is not probable, that it could be trusted to the fallacious deductions of our reason, which is slow in its operations; appears not, in any degree, during the first years of infancy; and at best is, in every age and period of human life, extremely liable to error and mistake." (ECHU, 5.2.22) This is the closest thing possible during his (pre-

Darwinian) time to an evolutionary account of our inductive tendencies, and Hume here has lit on a central feature in any properly atheistic Science of Man, placing him firmly in the naturalist tradition of great thinkers.

The Self: Bundles and Beliefs

Although Hume almost certainly meant it figuratively, his statement that man is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions"^[19] has been taken by many quite literally. This interpretation stems from a desire to see Hume as answering the same sort of question about the self that Locke addressed himself to; viz., what counts as an individual person? Locke's answer was that a person is a thinking thing, and that the boundaries of a person stretch as far back as they can remember (though "thinking thing" is not to be taken in the Cartesian sense of being an intellectual *substance*; Locke thought that we have, and can have, no knowledge of the substantial nature of the self). If this was Hume's question, it might seem reasonable to take his answer to be that the self is just a bundle of perceptions. However, if we interpret him this way, we do him a great disservice, for the view that the self is a bundle of

perceptions is deeply flawed. It can be shown to be incorrect with a simple argument: it is logically impossible for two different people to be the same person; it is logically possible for two different people to have the same collections of perceptions; therefore people are not collections of perceptions.

Charity demands, then, that we find a different way of looking at Hume's problem. If we see him as answering an epistemological question - namely, what causes us to form judgements, or *beliefs*, about the existence of the self? - then we will have more success. Luckily, Hume is quite explicit that this *is* his question: "What then gives us so great a propensity to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives?"^[20] The problem, then, is that experience is interrupted and ever-changing, but somehow causes us to form a concept of a constant self which is the subject of these experiences. Given that this is Hume's real question, we must also re-interpret his answer. Hume's discussion of personal identity is strongly interlocked with a discussion of the attribution of identity to objects. Roughly, Hume's argument concerning our belief in external objects is that we attribute a continued identity to unperceived

objects because resemblances and relations of contiguity and causation in our perceptions force us to form an imaginative picture to the effect that their identity remains intact even when we are not looking. And, he argues, we cannot make sense of the notion of objects existing independently of ourselves unless we have an idea of 'ourself' as something that occasionally becomes aware of these objects. The human mind is thus conceived of as a field of experience into which various different objects appear and then disappear: "the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other."^[21] So *we* are not collections of perceptions (except perhaps metaphorically); we are the *subjects* of experience, who come to see ourselves as perceivers of a world of continuous objects.

So instead of the thesis that we are bundles of perceptions, we may attribute Hume with the much more plausible view that our concept of the self is formed alongside our conception of an external world of independently existing objects.

Practical Reason in Hume

Hume's most famous sentence occurs at *Treatise*, II, III, iii, *Of the influencing motives of the will*: "Reason is, and ought only to be, slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." Hume here extends his anti-rationalism from the epistemological sphere into that of the theory of action, and demonstrates that the faculty of reason cannot, of itself, move the will. He starts the section by going over the by now familiar distinction between demonstrative and probable reasoning (roughly, deductive and inductive reasoning). He then argues that neither can influence the will, as both simply provide *information* - deductive reasoning about correct mathematical or logical inference and inductive reasoning about causal connections - and it is always open to us as to how to *act* on this information. Hume then argues that in order to be moved to act on the information provided us by reason, my passions, desires and inclinations must play a role. To take a simple example: using causal reasoning I can discern that if I drink a lot of wine, I will get drunk, but the truth of this conditional will not motivate me to do anything unless I have

some desire, in this case the desire to be drunk. As such, Hume forwards the basic folk psychological action-theory that a motive to action requires both a belief (ascertained by the understanding) and a desire (provided by the passions). This theory is still hotly contested, with Humean philosophers such as Simon Blackburn and Michael Smith on one side, and moral cognitivists, like John McDowell, and Kantians, like Christine Korsgaard, on the other.

Sentiment-based ethical theory

Hume first discusses ethics in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. He later extracts and expounds upon the ideas he proposed there in a shorter essay entitled *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hume's approach in the Enquiry is fundamentally an empirical one. Instead of telling us how morality ought to operate, he purports to tell us how we actually do make moral judgments. After providing us with various examples, he comes to the conclusion that most, though not all, of the behaviors we approve of increase public utility. Does this then mean that we make moral judgments on self-interest alone? Unlike his fellow empiricist Thomas Hobbes, Hume argues that this

is not in fact the case, abandoning Hobbes's attachment to psychological egoism. In addition to considerations of self-interest, Hume maintains that we can be moved by our sympathy for others, which can provide a person with thoroughly non-selfish concerns and motivations, indeed, what contemporary theorists would call, altruistic concern. Hume defends his sympathy-based, moral sentimentalism by claiming that we could never make moral judgments based on reason alone. Our reason deals with facts and draws conclusions from them, but, all else being equal, it could not lead us to choose one option over the other; only our sentiments can do this. And our sympathy-based sentiments can motivate us towards the pursuit of non-selfish ends, like the utility of others. For Hume, and for fellow sympathy-theorist Adam Smith, the term "sympathy" is meant to capture much more than concern for the suffering of others. Sympathy, for Hume, is a principle for the communication and sharing of sentiments, both positive and negative. In this sense, it is akin to what contemporary psychologists and philosophers call empathy. In developing this sympathy-based moral sentimentalism, Hume surpasses the divinely implanted moral sense theory of his predecessor, Francis Hutcheson, by elaborating a naturalistic,

moral psychological basis for the moral sense, in terms of the operation of sympathy. Hume's arguments against founding morality on reason are often now included in the arsenal of moral anti-realist arguments. As Humean-inspired philosopher John Mackie suggests, for there to exist moral facts about the world, recognizable by reason and intrinsically motivating, they would have to be very queer facts. Still, there is considerable debate among scholars as to Hume's status as a realist versus anti-realist.

Free will versus determinism

Just about everyone has noticed the apparent conflict between free will and determinism – if your actions were determined to happen billions of years ago, then how can they be up to you? But Hume noted another conflict, one that turned the problem of free will into a full-fledged dilemma: free will is incompatible with indeterminism. Imagine that your actions are not determined by what events came before. Then your actions are, it seems, completely random. Moreover, and most importantly for Hume, they are not determined by your character – your desires, your preferences, your values, etc. How can we hold someone

responsible for an action that did not result from his character? How can we hold someone responsible for an action that randomly occurred? Free will seems to require determinism, because otherwise, the agent and the action wouldn't be connected in the way required of freely chosen actions. So now, nearly everyone believes in free will, free will seems inconsistent with indeterminism, and free will seems to require determinism. Hume's view is that human behavior, like everything else, is caused, and therefore holding people responsible for their actions should focus on rewarding them or punishing them in such a way that they will try to do what is morally desirable and will try to avoid doing what is morally reprehensible. (See also Compatibilism.)

The is-ought problem

Hume noted that many writers talk about *what ought to be* on the basis of statements about *what is* (is-ought problem). But there seems to be a big difference between descriptive statements (what is) and prescriptive statements (what ought to be). Hume calls for writers to be on their guard against changing the subject in this way without giving an explanation of how the ought-statements are

supposed to follow from the is-statements. But how exactly can you derive an "ought" from an "is"? That question, prompted by Hume's small paragraph, has become one of the central questions of ethical theory, and Hume is usually assigned the position that such a derivation is impossible. (Others interpret Hume as saying not that one cannot go from a factual statement to an ethical statement, but that one cannot do so without going through human nature, that is, without paying attention to human sentiments.) Hume is probably one of the first writers to make the distinction between normative (what ought to be) and positive (what is) statements, which is so prevalent in social science and moral philosophy. G. E. Moore defended a similar position with his "open question argument", intending to refute any identification of moral properties with natural properties ("naturalistic fallacy").

Utilitarianism

It was probably Hume who, along with his fellow members of the Scottish Enlightenment, first advanced the idea that the explanation of moral principles is to be sought in the utility they tend to promote. Hume's role is not to be overstated, of

course; it was the Irish-born Francis Hutcheson who coined the utilitarian slogan "greatest happiness for the greatest number". But it was from reading Hume's *Treatise* that Jeremy Bentham first felt the force of a utilitarian system: he "felt as if scales had fallen from [his] eyes". Nevertheless, Hume's proto-utilitarianism is a peculiar one from our perspective. He doesn't think that the aggregation of cardinal units of utility provides a formula for arriving at moral truth. On the contrary, Hume was a moral sentimentalist and, as such, thought that moral principles could not be intellectually justified. Some principles simply appeal to us and others don't; and the reason utilitarian moral principles do appeal to us is that they promote our interests and those of our fellows, with whom we sympathize. Humans are hard-wired to approve of things that help society – public utility. Hume used this insight to explain how we evaluate a wide array of phenomena, ranging from social institutions and government policies to character traits and talents.

The problem of miracles

For Hume, the only way to support theistic religion beyond strict fideism is by an appeal to miracles

saying, in *On Miracles* "...we may conclude, that the Christian religion not only was first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."

Hume argued that, at minimum, miracles could never give religion much support. There are several arguments suggested by Hume's essay, all of which turn on his conception of a miracle: namely, a violation of the laws of nature. His very definition of miracles from his *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* states that miracles are violations of the laws of nature and consequently have a very low probability of occurring. In a slogan, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. But far from that, Hume observes, "The gazing populace receive greedily, without examination, whatever soothes superstition and promotes wonder."

Critics have argued that Hume's position assumes

the character of miracles and natural laws prior to any specific examination of miracle claims, and thus it amounts to a subtle form of begging the question. They have also noted that it requires an appeal to inductive inference, as none have observed every part of nature or examined every possible miracle claim (e.g., those yet future to the observer), which in Hume's philosophy was especially problematic (see above). Another claim is his argument that human testimony could never be reliable enough to countermand the evidence we have for the laws of nature. This point on miracles has mostly been applied to the question of the resurrection of Jesus, where Hume would no doubt ask, "Which is more likely – that a man rose from the dead or that this testimony is mistaken in some way?"

The design argument

One of the oldest and most popular arguments for the existence of God is the design argument – that all the order and 'purpose' in the world bespeaks a divine origin. A modern manifestation of this belief is creationism. Hume gave the classic criticism of the design argument in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and *An Enquiry*

concerning Human Understanding. Here are some of his points:

1. For the design argument to be feasible, it must be true that order and purpose are observed only when they result from design. But order is observed regularly, resulting from presumably mindless processes like snowflake or crystal generation. Design accounts for only a tiny part of our experience with order and "purpose".
2. Furthermore, the design argument is based on an incomplete analogy: because of our experience with objects, we can recognise human-designed ones, comparing for example a pile of stones and a brick wall. But in order to point to a designed Universe, we would need to have an experience of a range of different universes. As we only experience one, the analogy cannot be applied. We must ask therefore if it is right to why we ought to compare the world to a machine - as in Paley's watchmaker argument - when perhaps it would be better described as a giant inert animal.
3. Even if the design argument is completely successful, it could not (in and of itself) establish a robust theism; one could easily reach the conclusion that the universe's

configuration is the result of some morally ambiguous, possibly unintelligent agent or agents whose method bears only a remote similarity to human design. In this way it could be asked if the designer was God, or further still, who designed the designer?

4. If a well-ordered natural world requires a special designer, then God's mind (being so well-ordered) *also* requires a special designer. And then this designer would likewise need a designer, and so on *ad infinitum*. We could respond by resting content with an inexplicably self-ordered divine mind but then why not rest content with an inexplicably self-ordered natural world?
5. Often, what appears to be purpose, where it looks like object X has feature F in order to secure some outcome O, is better explained by a filtering process: that is, object X wouldn't be around did it not possess feature F, and outcome O is only interesting to us as a human projection of goals onto nature. This mechanical explanation of teleology anticipated natural selection. (see also Anthropic principle)
6. The design argument does not explain pain, suffering, and natural disasters.

Political theory

Many regard David Hume as a political conservative, sometimes calling him the first conservative philosopher. This is not strictly speaking accurate, if the term conservative is understood in any modern sense. His thought contains elements that are, in modern terms, both conservative and liberal, as well as ones that are both contractarian and utilitarian, though these terms are all anachronistic. His central concern is to show the importance of the rule of law, and stresses throughout his political *Essays* the importance of moderation in politics. He thinks that society is best governed by a general and impartial system of laws, based principally on the "artifice" of contract; he is less concerned about the form of government that administers these laws, so long as it does so fairly (though he thought that republics were more likely to do so than monarchies).

Hume expressed suspicion of attempts to reform society in ways that departed from long-established custom, and he counselled people not to resist their governments except in cases of the most egregious tyranny. However, he resisted aligning himself

with either of Britain's two political parties, the Whigs and the Tories, and he believed that we should try to balance our demands for liberty with the need for strong authority, without sacrificing either. He supported liberty of the press, and was sympathetic to democracy, when suitably constrained. It has been argued that he was a major inspiration for James Madison's writings, and the *Federalist No. 10* in particular. He was also, in general, an optimist about social progress, believing that, thanks to the economic development that comes with the expansion of trade, societies progress from a state of "barbarism" to one of "civilisation". Civilised societies are open, peaceful and sociable, and their citizens are as a result much happier. It is therefore not fair to characterise him, as Leslie Stephen did, as favouring "that stagnation which is the natural ideal of a skeptic". (Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1876), vol. 2, 185.)

Though it has been suggested Hume had no positive vision of the best society, he in fact produced an essay titled *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*, which lays out what he thought was the best form of government. His pragmatism shone through, however, in his caveat that we

should only seek to implement such a system should an opportunity present itself which would not upset established structures. He defended a strict separation of powers, decentralisation, extending the franchise to anyone who held property of value and limiting the power of the clergy. The Swiss militia system was proposed as the best form of protection. Elections were to take place on an annual basis and representatives were to be unpaid.

Contributions to economic thought

Through his discussions on politics, Hume developed many ideas that are prevalent in the field of economics. This includes ideas on private property, inflation, and foreign trade.

Hume does not believe, as Locke does, that private property is a natural right, but he argues that it is justified since resources are limited. If all goods were unlimited and available freely, then private property would not be justified, but instead becomes an "idle ceremonial". Hume also believed in unequal distribution of property, since perfect equality would destroy the ideas of thrift and industry, which leads to impoverishment.

Hume did not believe that foreign trade produced specie, but considered trade a stimulus for a country's economic growth. He did not consider the volume of world trade as fixed because countries can feed off their neighbors' wealth, being part of a "prosperous community". The fall in foreign demand is not that fatal, because in the long run, a country cannot preserve a leading trading position.

Hume was among the first to develop automatic price-specie flow, an idea that contrasts with the mercantile system. Simply put, when a country increases its in-flow of gold, this in-flow of gold will result in price inflation, and then price inflation will force out countries from trading that would have traded before the inflation. This results in a decrease of the in-flow of gold in the long run.

Hume also proposed a theory of beneficial inflation. He believed that increasing the money supply would raise production in the short run. This phenomenon was caused by a gap between the increase in the money supply and that of the price level. The result is that prices will not rise at first and may not rise at all. This theory was later developed by John Maynard Keynes.

Human species

A footnote appears in the original version of Hume's essay "Of National Characters":

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in

every profession. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

Unlike many others of his day and much in advance of his time, in 1758, Hume condemned slavery at great length.^[22]

Perspectives on Hume

Because he had real doubts about whether Hume was expressing only his "surface opinions" and not making a genuine expression of his whole personality, A. E. Taylor doubted whether Hume was really a great philosopher but concluded that "perhaps he was only a very clever man".^[23]

A.J. Ayer (1936) introducing his classic exposition of logical positivism, claimed: "the views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and Hume".^[24]

Both Bertrand Russell (1946) and Leszek Kołakowski (1968) saw Hume as a positivist holding the view that true knowledge derives only

from the experience of events, from "impressions on the senses" or (later) from "sense data", and that knowledge otherwise obtained was "meaningless". Albert Einstein (1915) wrote that he was inspired by Hume's positivism when formulating his Special Theory of Relativity.

In discussing Hume's First Principles—that all governments are founded on, and all authority of the few over the many is derived from, the public interest, the right to power, and the right to property—R.F. Anderson concluded that Hume was a materialist.^[25]

Karl Popper (1970) pointed out that although Hume's idealism appeared to him to be a strict refutation of commonsense realism, and although he felt rationally obliged to regard commonsense realism as a mistake, he admitted that he was, in practice, quite unable to disbelieve in it for more than an hour: that, at heart, Hume was a *commonsense realist*.

Edmund Husserl (1970), saw the phenomenologist in Hume when he showed that some perceptions are interrelated or associated to form other perceptions which are then projected onto a world putatively outside the mind.

Barry Stroud (1977) claimed for Hume the title of "naturalist", saying that he saw every aspect of human life as naturalistically explicable. He placed man squarely in the scientifically intelligible world of nature, in conflict with the traditional conception of man as a detached rational subject.

Antony Flew (1986) draws attention to Hume's moral and logical scepticism about the senses, and calls him a Pyrrhonian sceptic.

Hume was called "the prophet of the Wittgensteinian revolution" by N. Phillipson, referring to his view that mathematics and logic are closed systems, disguised tautologies, and have no relation to the world of experience.^[26]

In dubbing Hume "neo-Hellenist", Terence Penelhum (1993) saw him as following the Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics in maintaining that we should avoid anxiety by following nature. Before embarking on any philosophical venture, Hume, as those before him, contended that we must first come to understand our own nature.

Norton (1993) asserted that Hume was "the first post-sceptical philosopher of the early modern

period".^[27] Hume challenged the certainty of the Cartesians and other rationalists who attempted to refute philosophical scepticism, and yet himself undertook the project of articulating a new science of human nature that would provide a defensible foundation for all other sciences, including the moral and political.

Robert J. Fogelin (1993) concluded that Hume was a "radical perspectivalist",^[28] perhaps as in Protagoras and certainly in Sextus Empiricus. He referred to Hume's own words that his writings exhibit: "a propensity, which inclines us to be positive and certain in particular points, according to the light in which we survey them at any particular instant". (*Treatise* 1.4.7, 273)

Hume called himself a "mitigated" sceptic (*Enquiry into Human Understanding* 162).

Works

- *A Kind of History of My Life* (1734) Mss 23159 National Library of Scotland.

A letter to an unnamed physician, asking for advice about "the Disease of the Learned" that then afflicted him. Here he reports that

at the age of eighteen "there seem'd to be open'd up to me a new Scene of Thought... " which made him "throw up every other Pleasure or Business" and turned him to scholarship.

- *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects.* (1739–40)

Hume intended to see whether the *Treatise* met with success, and if so to complete it with books devoted to Politics and Criticism. However, it did not meet with success (as Hume himself said, "It fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots"), and so was not completed.

- *An Abstract of a Book lately Published: Entitled A Treatise of Human Nature etc.* (1740)

until recently attributed to Adam Smith but now generally believed to be an attempt by Hume to popularise his *Treatise*.

- *Essays Moral and Political* (first ed. 1741–

2)

A collection of pieces written over many years and published in a series of volumes before being gathered together into one near the end of Hume's life. The essays are dizzying and even bewildering in the breadth of topics they address. They range freely over questions of aesthetic judgement, the nature of the British government, love, marriage and polygamy, and the demographics of ancient Greece and Rome, to name just a few of the topics considered. However, certain important topics and themes recur, especially the question of what constitutes "refinement" in matters of taste, manners, and morals. The Essays are written in clear imitation of Addison's *Tatler* and *The Spectator*, which Hume read avidly in his youth.

- *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh: Containing Some Observations on a Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality, said to be maintain'd in a Book lately publish'd, intituled A Treatise of Human Nature etc.* Edinburgh (1745).

- *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

Contains reworking of the main points of the *Treatise*, Book 1, with the addition of material on free will, miracles, and the argument from design.

- *Of Miracles*
section X of the *Enquiry*, often published separately

- *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)

Another reworking of material from the *Treatise* for more popular appeal. Hume regarded this as the best of all his philosophical works, both in its philosophical ideas and in its literary style.

- *Political Discourses* Edinburgh (1752).

Included in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1753-6) reprinted 1758 - 77.

- *Four Dissertations* London (1757).

Included in reprints of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (above).

- *The History of England* (Originally titled *The History of Great Britain*) (1754–62)
Freely available in six vols. from the On Line Library of Liberty.[7]

More a category of books than a single work, Hume's history spanned "from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688" and went through over 100 editions. Many considered it *the* standard history of England until Thomas Macaulay's *History of England*.

- *The Natural History of Religion* (1757)
ISBN 0-8047-0333-7
- "My Own Life" (1776)

Penned in April, shortly before his death, this autobiography was intended for inclusion in a new edition of "Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects". It was first published by Adam Smith who claimed that by doing so he had incurred "ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain". (Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*)

- *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*

(1779)

Published posthumously by his nephew, David Hume the Younger. Being a discussion among three fictional characters concerning arguments for the existence of God, most importantly the argument from design. Despite some controversy, most scholars agree that the view of Philo, the most skeptical of the three, comes closest to Hume's own.

L A Selby-Bigge provides, by means of an introduction to Hume's *Enquiries*, a fascinating (and sometimes quite scathing) discussion of the various differences in the content and tone of Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiries*.

See also

- Hume's principle
- Hume's Law
- Liberalism
- Contributions to liberal theory
- Hume's fork
- Scientific skepticism
- Age of reason
- Human science

Further reading

- Ernest Campbell Mossner. *The Life of David Hume*. Oxford University Press, 1980. (The standard biography.)
- Peter Millican. *Critical Survey of the Literature on Hume and his First Enquiry*. (Surveys around 250 books and articles on Hume and related topics.) [8]
- David Fate Norton. *David Hume: Commonsense Moralist, Skeptical Metaphysician*. Princeton University Press, 1978.
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London & New York. (Complete study of Hume's work parting from the interpretation of Hume's naturalistic philosophical programme).

- Ampleforth College's 'an introduction to religion and science' by Mr. Fogg

Footnotes and references

Footnotes

1. ^ April 26 is Hume's birthdate in the Old Style Julian calendar, it is May 7 in New Style (Gregorian).
2. ^ 6 vols., (London: Andrew Millar, 1754-1762).
3. ^ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, 5 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1849-1861) [1], [2], [3], [4], [5] ; David F. Norton, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: 1993), p. 211.
4. ^ See Edward Craig's *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*, (Oxford, 1987).
5. ^ Term borrowed from Craig's book cited in previous fn.
6. ^ In the Introduction to his "A Treatise of Human Nature", Hume mentions "Mr Locke, Lord Shaftesbury, Dr Mandeville, Mr Hutcheson, Dr Butler, etc." as philosophers "who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing, and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of

the public".

7. ^ Hume, D. *My Own Life* Nat. Lib. Scot., mss 23159, p23.
8. ^ Hume, D. (1774) *A Kind of History of My Life*
9. ^ Hume, D. 1777 *My Own Life: The Life of David Hume, Esq, Written by Himself, London ,1777*
10. ^ Hume, D., (1740) *An Abstract Of A book lately published; Entitled, A Treatise Of human nature, &c. Wherein The chief argument of that Book is farther illustrated and Explained, London*
11. ^ *My Own Life*
12. ^ "Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther." [6]
13. ^ Grant (1883) *Old and New Edinburgh in the 18th Century* p.7 Glasgow
14. ^ Hume, D. (1754 -56) London. *The History of Great Britain*
15. ^ Maitland Club, *Caldwell Papers* II, p.177n.
16. ^ Boswell, J. *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778*
17. ^ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T. Beauchamp, (Oxford, 1999), p.147, fn.17.

18. ^ Online edition
19. ^ Treatise, I, IV, vi
20. ^ Treatise, *ibid.*
21. ^ Treatise, *ibid.*
22. ^ Hume, D. (1758) *Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations*
23. ^ Taylor, A. E. (1927). David Hume and the Miraculous, Leslie Stephen Lecture. Cambridge, pp. 53-4.
24. ^ Ayer, A. J. (1936). *Language, Truth and Logic*. London.
25. ^ Anderson, R. F. (1966). *Hume's First Principles*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
26. ^ Phillipson, N. (1989). *Hume*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.
27. ^ Norton, D. F. (ed.) (1993). *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 90-116.
28. ^ Fogelin, R. J. (1993). Hume's scepticism. In Norton, D. F. (ed.) (1993). *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 90-116.

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External links

- Online editions of Hume's work:
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 - Works by David Hume at Project Gutenberg
 - *A Treatise of Human Nature*, available at Project Gutenberg.
 - *The History of England, Volume I*, available at Project Gutenberg.
 - *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, available at Project Gutenberg.
 - *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, available at Project Gutenberg.
 - *Dialogues Concerning Natural*

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- e-texts of some of David Hume's works
- Essays by David Hume at Quotidiana.org
- *English Men of Letters: Hume*, available at Project Gutenberg., biography and discussion of Hume by T.H. Huxley
- David Hume: Resources on Hume, including books, articles, and encyclopedia entries.
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- David Hume Bibliography
- A Bibliography of Hume's Early Writings and Early Responses
- Hume's Problem of Induction
- "A play reading at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe regarding Humes life and legacy"

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