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978-0-521-54158-9 - Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction

John P. Wright

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CHAPTER I

*The author and the book*I. REFLECTIONS ON THE ROAD FROM
LONDON TO BRISTOL

The state of mind of the twenty-two-year-old David Hume as he was jostled up and down in the stagecoach traveling the rough road from London to Bristol in March of 1734 is not difficult to imagine. He had plenty of time on the fifteen-hour-long journey to reflect back on his young life and think about what the future might bring. He must have felt some sadness, having left his family and friends back in Scotland a few weeks earlier. At the same time, Hume was on his way to take up a position with a sugar merchant in Bristol and would have felt the excitement of a young man on a new adventure, traveling alone far from home for the first time in his life. Nevertheless, this was not the life that he had set out for himself five years earlier, and it was with some regrets that he had made this decision. The truth of the matter was that he had made himself ill by the studious way of life that he had adopted, and he had decided to set aside his books and writing for a time until he recovered his health. He believed that this would be best accomplished through an “active” life in business. Thus he was heading toward the major port city of western England to take up a position with a “considerable Trader” to whom he had been recommended.¹

David Hume was not from a very wealthy family and, being a second son, was expected to earn his own living. His father had died in 1713 when he was two years old, and the family estate at Ninewells, in the Scottish borders overlooking England, had been

¹ To [Dr. George Cheyne], March or April 1734, HL I, 12–18, esp. p. 18. Hereafter referred to as ‘Letter to a Physician.’

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inherited by his elder brother John. His mother was (to use his own words) “a woman of singular Merit, who ... devoted herself entirely to the rearing and educating of her Children”;² yet her patience must have been tried when her brilliant and industrious second son, who had been studying to become a lawyer like her late husband, gave up that practical pursuit at the age of eighteen to become “a Scholar & Philosopher” (HL I, 13). More frustrating still, both for himself and for those who cared for him, must have been his illness, which began shortly after he committed himself to the life of scholarship. Was it a relief or simply a worry when he finally decided shortly before his twenty-third birthday, to seek a career in business?

No doubt, Hume himself had strongly felt the need to leave home and seek his fortune abroad. Even after he had published *A Treatise of Human Nature* he hesitated to return home because he could not “over-come a certain Shamefacedness” at appearing among his friends and family without yet having “a Settlement.”³ In his *Treatise* he wrote about “men of good families, but narrow circumstances” who “leave their friends and country, and rather seek their livelihood by mean and mechanical employments among strangers, than among those, who are acquainted with their birth and education” (T2.I.II.14–15: 322).⁴ He wrote about the shame we feel when we adopt menial employment among those “who are both related to us by blood, and contiguous in place.” We feel the contempt of our family when they are close by, and we are motivated to relieve our discomfort by moving away. When we are among strangers “no body will suspect from what family we are sprung,” and our own inadequate situation “will by that means sit more easy upon us.”

But Hume would have had other reasons to leave home than his shame at not having gainful employment equal to his station and education. He lived in a complex social network in which certain religious beliefs and attitudes were expected, especially of educated people. Hume would have been under special scrutiny having declared his intention to become a philosopher, particularly a moral

² “My Own Life,” HL I, 1–7, esp. p. 1.

³ Hume to Henry Home, December 2, 1737, in *New Letters of David Hume*, eds. R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 2. Henceforth referred to as NHL.

⁴ Of course, Hume was not seeking “mechanical employments” in Bristol; nevertheless his general psychological point about shame and friends and family clearly applied to his own situation.

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philosopher. His uncle was the minister of the local Presbyterian church in the village of Chirnside and was probably involved in the prosecution of a local farmer named William Dudgeon, who had published a controversial book entitled *The State of the Moral World Consider'd* in 1732, two years before Hume left Scotland.⁵ The charges laid against Dudgeon in the local Presbytery were taken all the way to the Commission of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland before being dropped. Dudgeon was accused of denying human freedom and making God the author of all evil in the world. While ultimately no action was taken, the charge was still being considered at the time when Hume left Scotland. Hume may have known Dudgeon, and certainly would have known the controversy about his writings.

Hume's own views on religion were not orthodox, even at this early period of his life. He struggled with the question of the truth of religion after he left the College of Edinburgh at the age of fourteen or fifteen. In his logic and metaphysics class at college he had been taught that the study of both the powers of the human mind and the works of the natural world would make him appreciate the gifts of divine providence, and thereby teach him his duties "towards God, self, and other humans."⁶ He learned that the study of philosophy supplemented scriptural revelation. But a few years later, after giving up his law studies and devoting his life to scholarship, he began a notebook in which he anxiously considered various arguments for the existence of God.⁷ He studied the arguments of the greatest English philosophers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, John Locke and Samuel Clarke.⁸ In his *Essay Concerning*

⁵ Paul Russell, "Dudgeon, William," in *The Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century British Philosophers*, eds. J. W. Yolton, J. V. Price, and J. Stephens (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999). Also, James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy* (New York, 1885), pp. 111–13. McCosh mistakenly calls Dudgeon "David Dudgeon."

⁶ M. A. Stewart, "Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711–1752," in *Impressions of Hume*, eds. M. Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 11–58, esp. p. 11. These words are translated by Stewart from a transcription of the logic lectures of Colin Drummond, the year before Hume took the course. He took it in 1723, when he was 12.

⁷ Hume to Gilbert Elliot, March 1751, HL I, 154.

⁸ James Boswell, "An Account of my last Interview with David Hume, Esq.," in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. K. Smith, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1947), pp. 76–9: "He said he never entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke."

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Human Understanding Locke had claimed to demonstrate the existence of God, beginning with our self-evident knowledge of our own existence.⁹ He also appealed to a causal principle which he considered to be self-evident, namely that “*nothing can no more produce any real Being, than it can be equal to two right Angles.*” From these premises Locke inferred that “from Eternity there has been something,” and that this eternal Being must contain more power and knowledge than any other being. This argument was discussed at length in Samuel Clarke’s *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*.¹⁰ In addition, Clarke argued that one can infer the wisdom of such a being by observing the order and harmony of the natural world. Hume found that the more he worked on these arguments the more his own “doubts stole in, dissipated, return’d, were again dissipated, return’d again.”¹¹ He may have already begun to realize the devastating effect on these arguments of his discovery that knowledge of any cause and effect can only be derived from experience. In any case, the upshot of his reflections was that he had lost his faith by the time he completed his notebook on religion at the age of twenty.

The discussion of such metaphysical issues probably began among a group of friends with whom Hume met during the winters he spent in Edinburgh after he left college. Most important among these friends was Henry Home, a lawyer, about fifteen years older than Hume. Home was already a published author in 1728, and he was probably a mentor to Hume in his adolescence. Hume was later to tell Home that he was “the best Friend, in every respect, I ever possess.”¹² In 1723, Henry Home had carried on a correspondence with Samuel Clarke about his philosophical writings on religion. He had a lifelong interest in the concept of power or force, both in the natural and moral worlds, and he is reported to have said that his reading Locke’s chapter on “power” in the *Essay* “crucified” him.¹³ Home also had a correspondence at this time with Andrew Baxter, a local Scottish defender of Clarke’s philosophy. Baxter later published

⁹ ECHU 4.10.2–6.

¹⁰ Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*, ed. E. Vailati (Cambridge University Press, 1998). These were Clarke’s Boyle Lectures, first published in 1705.

¹¹ Hume to Gilbert Elliot, March 1751, HL I, 154.

¹² Hume to Henry Home, 13–15 June 1745, NHL, 17.

¹³ Ian Ross, *Lord Kames and the Scotland of his Day* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 60.

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a book in which he denied that matter has any power or force of its own, and he argued that the only power in the universe belongs to immaterial beings.¹⁴ Home, on the other hand, contended that matter was “active,” a view which, according to Baxter, undermined the foundations of the Newtonian philosophy, and its fundamental concept of “inertia.” These philosophical disputes would no doubt have been discussed by Henry Home and the young men surrounding him, including David Hume. It is striking that Home, Baxter and Dudgeon, who were thinking and writing about these metaphysical issues while Hume was growing up, all lived within a few miles of his family home at Ninewells.

2. STOIC REFLECTIONS, A “NEW SCENE OF THOUGHT”
AND THE “DISEASE OF THE LEARNED”

Is it possible that Hume's religious doubts put a strain on him which caused his illness? That was not the way he himself saw his difficulties. Rather he came to conclude that the nervous disorder which began to trouble him when he was eighteen was brought on by an excessive use of reason, an attempt to use it to suppress his passions, and his inactive, isolated, studious way of life. According to his own account, when he was sixteen years old he had found his spiritual centre through “Philosophy and general Learning,”¹⁵ rather than religion. He immersed himself in classical writers of philosophy and poetry, perhaps following the advice he had read in Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, a book which he acquired at fifteen.¹⁶ He became especially preoccupied with books on morality written by Seneca, Cicero, and Plutarch¹⁷ and from them he learned Stoic techniques for becoming indifferent to one's passions and living one's life totally in accord

¹⁴ Andrew Baxter, *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (London, 1733).

¹⁵ “My Own Life,” HL I, I.

¹⁶ D. F. Norton and M. Norton, *The David Hume Library* (Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, 1996), p. 16. Hume's copy of this multi-volume work was published in 1723.

¹⁷ Letter to a Physician, HL I, 14. On Hume and Stoicism in Scotland, see M. A. Stewart, “The Stoic Legacy in the Early Scottish Enlightenment,” in *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquility: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought*, ed. M. J. Osler (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 273–96.

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with reason. One book he studied with particular care was Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*,¹⁸ where it was argued that the soul is never cured of its unhappiness "without philosophy."¹⁹ Hume concluded that the "Greatness & Elevation of the Soul is to be found in Study and contemplation, [and] that this can alone teach us to look down upon humane Accidents." Following the advice of the Stoics he constructed a set of principles in order to strengthen his character. These included "Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life."²⁰ He probably wrote down rules like the following: "*You should always have before your eyes death, disease, poverty, blindness, exile, calumny, and infamy, as ills which are incident to human nature. If any one of these ills falls to your lot, you will bear it the better when you have reckoned upon it.*"²¹ Or, reflecting on the vicious things people often say or do to one another, he might have copied the following maxim from Plutarch's essay "On the Control of Anger": "*Let not the injuries or violence of men . . . ever discompose you by anger or hatred. Would you be angry at the ape for its malice, or the tyger for its ferocity?*" Such Stoic reflections were of some use to him for a couple of years, but in 1729, after he had made his decision to devote himself entirely to philosophy and had begun to write his book in earnest, he realized that they had backfired. He discovered "by Experience" that these attempts to eliminate his feelings had ruined his health.²² He concluded that while such principles may indeed have some use for a person leading "an active Life," they were worse than useless for someone like himself who was leading an isolated and sedentary existence.

Hume came to conclude not only that the Stoics' cure was worse than the disease, but that they had misidentified the source of the disease itself. In the remarkable Letter to a Physician, which he composed just before he set off from London to Bristol in 1734, he

¹⁸ Hume to Michael Ramsay, 4 July 1727, HL I, 9–11, esp. p. 10.

¹⁹ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, III, VI, trans. J. E. King (London: Heinemann, 1966), pp. 240–1. Compare Hume's Letter to Michael Ramsay, 2 July 1727, HL I, 9–11, esp. p. 10 where he says that he is reading both philosophy and poetry, "for what will more surely engrave upon my mind a Tusculan Dispute of Cicero's de aegritudine lenienda [on the relief of distress] than an Eclogue or Georgick of Virgils."

²⁰ Letter to a Physician, HL I, 13–14.

²¹ This and the following rule are taken from Hume's essay "The Sceptic," which was first published in 1742 (*Essays*, pp. 159–80, esp. pp. 172–6).

²² Letter to a Physician, HL I, 14–15.

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attributed his nervous disorder to his total unwavering devotion to philosophy and the life of reason. He remembered how in 1729, at the age of eighteen, after he had decided to set aside his law books and devote himself totally to his philosophical studies, “there seemed to be open’d up to [him] a new Scene of Thought, which transported [him] beyond Measure, & made [him] with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it.”²³ Unfortunately after a few months of intense philosophical studies he started to develop physical symptoms such as “Scurvy Spots on his fingers,” and was warned by the local doctor that he consulted that he was in danger of developing “Vapors” – what today would be called depression. Hume’s energy dissipated and he found it difficult to concentrate or continue with the kind of enthusiasm required by his studies. When he went back to the doctor the next year, he was told that he had “fairly got the Disease of the Learned,” a kind of depression caused by intense study. Finally, after admitting to himself that he had “a Disease, to which any one may be subject” he was relieved. He started taking the “Anti-hysterick Pills” prescribed by his doctor, developed a regular exercise routine, and left off his studies before he completely fatigued himself. While he was not cured, at least his condition grew no worse. Indeed, in the summer of 1731, he suddenly gained an enormous amount of weight so that from a tall skinny young man, who people thought subject to tuberculosis, he suddenly grew into a “sturdy robust healthful-like fellow.” His family thought he had made a complete recovery – though he continued to suffer from symptoms such as a palpitation of the heart, perhaps caused by anxiety, and excessive wind in his stomach (HL I, 14–16).

The conclusions Hume drew from his Stoic attempts to control his passions through reason and his subsequent illness were important for the philosophy he was developing. A stress on the limits of reason forms a basic part of the skepticism that pervades his whole

²³ *Ibid.*, HL I, 13–14. The speculation that this seeming “new Scene of Thought” prefigured the main themes of Book 1 of the *Treatise* was made by Norman Kemp Smith in his well-known 1941 book, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941), p. 17. But this speculation is unsupported by any surviving documents, and does not take into account indications of major changes in the direction of Hume’s thought in the next decade before the *Treatise* was published; see my “Kemp Smith and the Two Kinds of Naturalism in Hume’s Philosophy,” in *New Essays on David Hume*, eds. E. Ronchetti and E. Mazza (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2007), pp. 17–36.

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philosophy. When he began writing in earnest at the age of eighteen, he set out to pursue the scientific study of “human Nature” which, he concluded, had not been successfully carried out by the ancient moralists he had been reading (HL I, 16). He wrote that their moral philosophy, like their natural philosophy, depended “more upon Invention than Experience.” They relied upon “Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness” rather than investigating the actual nature of human beings through observation and experience, and thus drew incorrect conclusions about the road to human happiness and the true source of morality.

Moreover, Hume's own experience of living too much in his head had convinced him of the close relation of the mind and the body, and particularly of the effect of the former on the latter. He believed that the intense thinking he was doing and his passionate devotion to the philosophic life had served to “discompose the Fabric of the Nerves and Brain” (HL I, 17). He compared his own condition to that which is described in “the Writings of the French Mysticks & ... [religious] Fanatics” who complain of “a Coldness and Desertion of the Spirit.” He was no doubt thinking about what the mystics call the “dark night of the soul.”²⁴ Their “kind of Devotion” requires “the Force of Passion” which, in turn, is dependent on its physical correlate “the Animal Spirits” (HL I, 17). Hume thought that the enthusiasm of both mystical exercises and his own intense philosophical reflections affected these nervous fluids, and caused a loss of mental energy from which it was very difficult to recover. “More than any thing” it was his reading of Stoic books on morality which caused him “to waste [his] Spirits & bring on ... this Distemper” (HL I, 14–15).

The analysis of his nervous disorder which Hume adopts in his Letter to a Physician seems to be based on a book by philosopher/physician Bernard Mandeville which was revised and republished in 1730. In his *Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases. In Three Dialogues*, the physician who represents Mandeville's views identifies the cause of these diseases as “the Waste” or “Deficiency” of animal spirits, or nervous fluids.²⁵ One main cause of this loss

²⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, 3rd edn. (London: Methuen, 1912), esp. p. 455.

²⁵ Bernard Mandeville, *Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases. In Three Dialogues*, 3rd edn. (London, 1730), pp. 212, 215. In the course of this dialogue between a physician

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of animal spirits, according to Mandeville, is excessive thinking (pp. 216ff.). This loss of nervous energy results in digestive disorders as well as other physical and psychological symptoms. Mandeville argues that there is a limited quantity of neural energy available to carry out the various functions attributed to the animal spirits, and that their overuse in the performance of one function will result in dysfunction of another. He wrote that persons who suffer from the symptoms he describes are “oftner Men of Learning, than not; insomuch, that the *Passio Hypochondriaca* in High-Dutch is call'd *Der Gelahrten Krankheydt*, the Disease of the Learned” (p. 106).

A central aim of Mandeville's book is to argue for the importance of the union of mind and body in explaining the chronic diseases he is writing about. In the first edition of the book (1711), he seems to have felt compelled to adopt Cartesian dualism: “We all agree,” he wrote, “some few Atheists excepted, that matter it self can never think.”²⁶ But in the 1730 edition which Hume probably read, Mandeville dropped this claim. Here he writes of “how absolutely necessary the Brain is, in the Act of Thinking” and that it is “contradictory to human Reason, that any Part of Man should continue to think, when his body is dead and motionless.” The mind cannot act independently of the body, and “Thinking only consists in a various Disposition of Images received before”; these images arise through the operation of the animal spirits on the brain.²⁷

As we shall see, this claim about thinking depending on images in the brain would not have been lost on Hume as he developed his science of human nature in the *Treatise*.²⁸ Nor would Mandeville's claim that there is a limited quantity of mental energy or animal spirits which, when overused in one operation of the mind/body complex, results in a loss of function in other operations.²⁹

and his patient, Mandeville identifies himself as the physician. This third edition of 1730 and the second edition of the same year are heavily revised from the first edition which was published in 1711 under the title given in the next footnote.

²⁶ Bernard Mandeville, *A Treatise of the Hypochondriak and Hysterick Passions, Vulgarly call'd the HYPO in MEN and VAPOURS in WOMEN* (London, 1711), p. 124.

²⁷ See pages 159–60 of the 1730 third edition. ²⁸ Chapter 2, pp. 52–3 and 70.

²⁹ Chapter 4, pp. 135–6.

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3. FORMAL EDUCATION AND SELF-EDUCATION

Certainly, Hume was still concerned about his precarious health as he rode the stagecoach to Bristol in 1734. He was thinking that he had “not come out of the Cloud so well as [the mystics whom he had been reading] commonly tell us they have done” and he still despaired “of ever recovering” (HL I, 17). But, in spite of his worries, Hume was also tremendously proud of the achievements of his young life and would have reflected on them with some satisfaction. He had been sent to the College of Edinburgh in 1721 at the age of ten along with his brother Joseph, who was a couple of years older, and did well. He remembered his formal studies there as “extending little further than the Languages” (HL I, 13). He signed the matriculation book for the class in Greek in 1722 and certainly also took courses in Latin. He also studied some philosophy in school: he probably took the Logic and Metaphysics course when he was twelve, and we know he took Robert Stuart’s course in natural philosophy (what we would now call physics) when he was thirteen and an extramural mathematics class when he was fifteen.³⁰ As we shall see in Chapter 2, Stuart’s course in natural philosophy was particularly relevant to Hume’s claim in the *Treatise* to found his science of human nature on the same methods which had previously been applied in the natural sciences.³¹

But Hume’s serious education probably began after he left school at age fourteen. He was basically self-educated. He later remarked to a friend that “there is nothing to be learnt from a Professor, which is not to be met with in Books, & there is nothing requir’d in order to reap all possible Advantages from them, but an Order & Choice in reading them.”³² He seems to have begun such a program of systematic reading in philosophy and poetry at the age of fifteen, while his family thought he was preparing himself for a career in law. While they thought he was reading “Voet and Vinnius [Roman writers on jurisprudence], Cicero and Virgil were the Authors [he] was secretly

³⁰ See Stewart, “Hume’s Intellectual Development,” pp. 11–25.

³¹ See Chapter 2, pp. 44–7. On Hume’s course in natural philosophy and its relevance to his claims about experimental method see Michael Barfoot, “Hume and the Culture of Science in the Early Eighteenth Century,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 151–90.

³² Hume to James Birch, May 18, 1735, in E. C. Mossner, “Hume at La Flèche, 1735: an unpublished Letter,” *The University of Texas, Studies in English*, 37, 1958, pp. 30–3.