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Edited by Donald C. Ainslie and Annemarie Butler

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ANNEMARIE BUTLER

## 1 Hume's Early Biography and *A Treatise of Human Nature*

David Hume was born David Home<sup>1</sup> in Edinburgh on April 26, 1711 (o.s.) to Joseph Home (1681–1713) and Katherine Home (née Falconer) (1683–1745). He had an older brother, John, and a sister, Katherine. In “My Own Life,” Hume describes his family as “not rich” (HL 1:1). However, it is clear that they were not poor either. Joseph Home was an admitted advocate in Edinburgh,<sup>2</sup> and he was a laird at Ninewells,<sup>3</sup> along the southern border of Scotland. He employed shearers who, along with farmers and a weaver, rented houses from him (Mossner 1980: 23–24). This provided stable income for the family. Joseph Home died suddenly in 1713 from unknown causes, leaving a widow with three young children.

The details of Home's early education are scant. J. Y. T. Greig (1931: 33–35) speculates that John and David attended school in neighboring Chirnside. E. C. Mossner speculates that the boys had tutors, who would likely have been young clergymen recently out of school (1980: 31; see also Stewart 2005: 17–18). Either way, boys were expected to develop reading and writing skill in Latin, typically reading Aesop, Ovid, Corderius, and Horace (Emerson 2009: 59–60).<sup>4</sup> The boys were raised Presbyterian, and the Homes were Whigs. James Boswell reports that later in life Hume admitted that he took religion seriously when he was young, having read carefully *The Whole Duty of Man*<sup>5</sup> (a very popular book of English Protestant devotional exercises) and examined his character against the vices cataloged therein (Mossner 1980: 34; see also 34n2).

Both John and David Home were sufficiently prepared for Edinburgh University, whose goal was “to train students for virtuous living in a society regulated by religious observance” (Stewart 2005: 12). It was typical for boys to enter university in their early teenage years. David Home, aged 11, signed the matriculation book in February 1723 on a page for William Scot, the professor of Greek (Mossner 1980: 39). The numeral 2 next to David's name is taken to indicate that this was his second year, meaning that he had followed the usual course of a year of Humanity first (Stewart 2005: 17–19).<sup>6</sup> Prior to 1708, the university operated with

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rotating regents. A student would study under the same regent throughout his time at the university, and the regent would be compensated with fees from each graduate. Regents were incentivized to retain and graduate as large a student class as possible. In 1708, the university adopted a professorial system in which professors taught subjects in their own fields (Mossner 1980: 38–39; Sher 1990: 89–90). The typical coursework was four years: Humanity (Latin language and culture), Greek language and culture, Metaphysics and Logic, and Natural Philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Since only the professor of natural philosophy received graduation fees, professors no longer had an incentive to see students through to graduation. Accordingly, graduation rates dropped (Mossner 1980: 38–39). In this light, it is not remarkable that neither David nor John graduated from Edinburgh University.

Upon leaving Edinburgh University, it was clear that John would become laird at Ninewells. David's patrimony was approximately £50 (sterling), forcing him to pursue a career. David's father and maternal grandfather had been advocates, and this may have influenced David's decision to study law (Mossner 1980: 53). There is no evidence that he attended Edinburgh University for the study of law, although Roger Emerson claims that this is likely (2009: 82).<sup>8</sup> In "My Own Life," Hume reports, "I found an unsurmountable Aversion to every thing but the pursuits of Philosophy and general Learning; and while they [sc. family] fancied I was poring over Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the Authors which I was secretly devouring" (HL 1:1).

Home was splitting time between Edinburgh and Ninewells. In 1727, David wrote to his friend, Michael Ramsay, claiming to be "entirely confin'd to my self & Library for Diversion," reading "sometimes a Philosopher, sometimes a Poet" (HL 1:9–10). In a 1734 letter to a physician,<sup>9</sup> he wrote,

I found a certain Boldness of Temper, growing in me, which was not inclin'd to submit to any Authority in these Subjects, but led me to seek out some new Medium, by which Truth might be establish'd. After much Study, & Reflection on this, at last, when I was about 18 Years of Age, there seem'd to be open'd up to me a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond Measure, & made me, with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it. (HL 1:13)

By the end of the law session of 1728–29, he had quit studying law (Stewart 2005: 29). He intensely pursued reading and studying, which made him "infinitely happy" until September 1729, when he began to have difficulty concentrating. Compounding his difficulty, he was reading "Books of Morality, such as Cicero, Seneca & Plutarch, & being smit with their beautiful Representations of Virtue & Philosophy, I

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undertook the Improvement of my Temper & Will, along with my Reason & Understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life" (HL 1:14). The effect was "to waste the Spirits" (ibid.). He discovered symptoms of scurvy, and in April 1730 he was diagnosed with the "Disease of the Learned" (ibid.), the remedy for which was bitters, anti-hysterical pills, daily exercise, and wine.

Around this time, David had a religious crisis. In 1751, Hume described to Gilbert Elliot:

tis not long ago that I burn'd an old Manuscript Book, wrote before I was twenty, which contain'd, Page after Page, the gradual Progress of my Thoughts on that head. It begun with an anxious Search after Arguments, to confirm the common Opinion: Doubts stole in, dissipated, return'd, were again dissipated, return'd again; and it was a perpetual Struggle of a restless Imagination against Inclination, perhaps against Reason. (HL 1:154)

It is likely that this religious crisis contributed to David's "Disease of the Learned" (Stewart 2005: 30–31; Baier 2011: 11–13).

From 1731 to 1734, David managed to read and write, despite continued difficulty concentrating:

Having now Time & Leisure to cool my inflam'd Imaginations, I began to consider seriously, how I shou'd proceed in my Philosophical Enquiries. I found that the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity, labor'd under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend. This therefore I resolv'd to make my principal Study, & the Source from which I wou'd derive every Truth in Criticism as well as Morality. (HL 1:16)

He was now disenchanted with the ancient moral philosophy and was working to develop a new theory of morality and criticism,<sup>10</sup> based on human nature.<sup>11</sup> "[W]ithin these three Years," he had "scribbled many a Quire of Paper, in which there is nothing contain'd but my own Inventions" (ibid.). Home still struggled to think clearly and worried that this would frustrate clear exposition of his new views (HL 1:16–17). Despairing that he would never recover, Home wrote to a physician, seeking advice about whether and how his concentration could be restored (HL 1:18). Home then resolved to take up a different occupation.

Around this time, the intellectual climate in Scotland was hostile to atheism and freethinking. In Duns, a town near Chirnside, lived Andrew Baxter, a strident defender of Samuel Clarke's philosophy: matter is inert, God's existence can be demonstrated a priori, and God creates and sustains the material world (Russell 2008: 40). In 1732, William

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Dudgeon (also from southern Scotland) published *The State of the Moral World Considered*, in which he argued that the natural and moral world are governed by necessity and denied the existence of moral or natural evil (Russell 2008: 43). Baxter sharply criticized Dudgeon's work in *Reflections on a Late Pamphlet*. Soon afterwards, Dudgeon was charged with "lybel," a charge that occupied the local presbytery (which included David's uncle, George Home) and synod for several years (Russell 2008: 43–44). Paul Russell speculates that this climate contributed to David's decision to leave Scotland (2008: 45).

In March 1734, David left Ninewells for Bristol, "having got Recommendation to a considerable Trader" (HL 1:18). The trader was Michael Miller, a sugar merchant. David served as a clerk – Mossner speculates because sailing caused seasickness (1980: 89). While in Bristol, Home changed the spelling of his name to "Hume," to reflect the correct pronunciation (Mossner 1980: 90). Greig speculates that it may have been to signal independence from his disappointed family (1931: 26), but Annette Baier doubts that David would have been so affectionate toward his family later in life had this been the case (2011: 14). Hume did not last long as a clerk. He repeatedly made critical remarks about Miller's writing, to which Miller was not receptive.

Hume left England for France, arriving in Paris in midsummer 1734. Why he left England is not known. Mossner thinks that it is because of the quarrels with Miller (1980: 90). John P. Wright speculates that Hume delivered his "letter to a physician" to Dr. George Cheyne in Bath, who then recommended a sojourn in France (2003: 131–33). David Fate Norton suggests that Hume was motivated to distance himself from his family, "who may have wondered about his lack of visible progress or success" (2007: 441). In Paris, he stayed with Chevalier Ramsay, cousin of Michael Ramsay. This proved expensive, and Chevalier Ramsay and Hume did not get along well. The former provided Hume with introductions to "two of the best Families" in Rheims (HL 1:22). While in Rheims, Hume enjoyed access to the library of Abbé Noel-Antoine Pluche. There he read and re-read various classics and contemporary works in French and English, including Locke's *Essay* and Berkeley's *Principles* (Mossner 1980: 626). Although he enjoyed the parties and libraries in Rheims, it too was expensive.

In 1735, Hume moved to La Flèche, where René Descartes had been a student at the Jesuit College. Hume was able to live cheaply, enjoy access to the library, and engage in philosophical conversations with Jesuit priests. One such conversation Hume later related to George Campbell:

[I] engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent,

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when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;—which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer. (HL 1:361)

Hume's argument likely was included in an essay he composed, then entitled "Reasonings concerning Miracles."

In September 1737, Hume returned to London, seriously looking for publishers. In advance of his arrival, Hume wrote to Michael Ramsay that he would supply him with a draft of the book to read. Hume recommended that, in preparation, Ramsay read Malebranche's *Recherche de la Verité*, Berkeley's *Principles*, Bayle's *Dictionary* (particularly the articles on Zeno and Spinoza), and Descartes's *Meditations*. "These Books will make you easily comprehend the metaphysical Parts of my Reasoning and as to the rest, they have so little Dependence on all former systems of Philosophy, that your natural Good Sense will afford you Light enough to judge of their Force & Solidity" (Mossner 1980: 626–27).

In a letter to his cousin, Henry Home (later Lord Kames), in December 1737, Hume expressed excitement about his new opinions, which he had been negotiating unsuccessfully to have printed.<sup>12</sup> He said that he would likely not include the section on miracles, "afraid [that it] will give too much offence, even as the world is disposed at present" (HL 1:24). He asked his cousin to read it, perhaps show it to William Hamilton, and then burn it. (Home advised suppressing the section [Mossner 1980: 112].) Hume also asked for an introduction to Dr. Joseph Butler, reporting, "I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible, before which, I could not pretend to put it into the Doctor's hands" (HL 1:24).<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, Hume was anxiously editing his *Treatise*, beginning "to feel some Passages weaker for the Style & Diction than I cou'd have wisht. The Nearness & Greatness of the Event [sc. publishing] rouz'd up my Attention, & made me more difficult to please than when I was alone in perfect Tranquillity in France" (NHL 1–2).

Part of the difficulty in finding a publisher was that Hume had three terms that he insisted on. First, he would not solicit subscriptions or dedicate the work to a patron. Second, he insisted on anonymity.<sup>14</sup> Third, Hume would sell rights to the first edition only, and he refused to sign a contract for any future volumes (Mossner 1980: 113–14). In September 1738, John Noon agreed to publish Books 1 and 2 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* under these terms, adding further

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stipulations. Hume would receive £50 and twelve bound copies in six months, and one thousand copies would be printed. Second, Hume agreed not to publish a second edition of the *Treatise* without first buying all the unsold copies of the first edition at the standard rate (Norton 2007: 452–53), which would have been approximately 10 s. per volume (Norton 2007: 584).

In early 1739, Books 1 and 2 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* were published (HL 1:26). Hume expressed worries to his cousin about its reception: “Those who are accustomed to reflect on such abstract subjects, are commonly full of prejudices; and those who are unprejudiced are unacquainted with metaphysical reasonings. My principles are also so remote from all the vulgar sentiments on the subject, that were they to take place, they would produce almost a total alteration in philosophy: and you know, revolutions of this kind are not easily brought about” (HL 1:26). Back in Ninewells, Hume anxiously awaited reviews of his work. He sent a copy to Bishop Butler (HL 1:27), and he also wrote to Pierre Desmaizeaux, needling him to read the work (HL 1:29). Later, in “My Own Life,” Hume wrote, “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” (HL 1:2). Although the sales were poor, some copies were sold and read. Nor was it ignored: Mossner cites a comment in the *Weekly Magazine, or Edinburgh Amusement*, in 1771 that stated, “I was in Edinburgh soon after the original publication, and well remember how much and how frequently it was mentioned, in every literary conversation” (Mossner 1980: 133; Norton 2007: 520). It seems, then, that Hume was expressing disappointment with how widely it was misunderstood.

A short announcement of its publication appeared in the “Literary News from London” section of *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savans de l’Europe*: “A Gentleman, named Mr. Hume, has published *A Treatise of Human Nature*” (Mossner 1980: 120). Hume’s goal of anonymity had been frustrated. Mossner speculates that Desmaizeaux wrote the “puff piece” (*ibid.*).

The earliest brief critical comments on Books 1 and 2 were not favorable. In May 1739, *Neuen Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* published a brief description, including: “The author’s evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the sub-title of the work, taken from Tacitus” (Mossner 1980: 120). A more neutral comment was published in October in The Hague, noting the similarity between the views of Hume and Hutcheson. Another: “This is a system of logic, or rather of metaphysics, as original as can be, in which the author claims to rectify the most ingenious philosophers, particularly the famous Mr. Locke, and

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in which he advances the most unheard-of paradoxes, even to maintaining that the operations of the mind are not free" (Mossner 1980: 121).

Meanwhile, Hume worked on Book 3, "Of Morals." He corresponded with Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, to whom he provided a draft of Book 3. Hutcheson complained that "there wants a certain Warmth in the Cause of Virtue" (HL 1:32). Hume defended his presentation, using an analogy in which he likened his approach to the human mind and body to an anatomist's and Hutcheson's approach to a painter's (*ibid.*). Furthermore, he defended his claim that justice is an "artificial" virtue and contested whether benevolence is the only virtue (HL 1:33–34). Hutcheson clearly advised Hume to be careful about tone and some of the more controversial claims. Hume replied, "I must own, I think you a little too delicate. Except a Man be in Orders, or be immediately concern'd in the Instruction of Youth, I do not think his Character depends upon his philosophical Speculations, as the World is now model'd; & a little Liberty seems requisite to bring into the public Notice a Book that is calculated for so few Readers" (HL 1:34).

Toward the end of 1739, Hume continued to be frustrated that no full review of his work had appeared. Hoping to pave the way for a more favorable reception, he composed a summary of the core argument.<sup>15</sup> But before Hume could have it published as an anonymous letter to the editor of the *History of the Works of the Learned*, a review appeared in the November issue. Indeed, the review was so long that its second half was printed in the December issue (Mossner 1980: 121). The review, a collection of quotations from the text interspersed with commentary, was not kind. The reviewer complained about excessive use of the first person and Hume's lack of modesty. The reviewer misrepresented Hume as holding that in fact anything may cause anything. The reviewer scoffed: "A most charming System indeed! one can hardly conceive the Uses it may be put to, and the different Purposes it will serve: It is to be hoped, the inimitable Inventor will one Day give us a large and ample Account of them" (Mossner 1980: 123). The author of the review was likely William Warburton, close friend of Andrew Baxter, who – surprisingly – was unaware of the authorship of the *Treatise* (Mossner 1980: 124). Other reviews followed in other publications, similarly panning the work; objecting to his accounts of the will, necessity, and belief; and accusing him of paradoxes, Pyrrhonism, and posing a danger to religion (Norton 2007: 494–519).

Following Warburton's "abusive review," Hume wrote again to Hutcheson, noting "that the Alterations I have made [to Book 3] have improv'd it very much both in point of Prudence & Philosophy" (HL 1:36). He also enclosed "the *Conclusion*, as I have alter'd it, that you

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may see I desire to keep on good Terms even with the strictest & most rigid" (HL 1:37). The alteration Hume made was to strike out "both our Selfishness and Pride" in the first sentence of T 3.3.6.6 (SBN 620). R. W. Connon speculates that Hume was selective in what he allowed Hutcheson to see: "several passages seem calculated to give Hutcheson the impression that Hume was also revising his work in a more generally *Hutchesonian* direction" (1977: 195). On this hypothesis, Connon explains Hume's single mention of a "moral sense" in the title of T 3.1.2 and "its extraordinary concession to revealed religion . . . as well as its rather uncharacteristic panegyric on the beauty of noble and generous actions" (1977: 197–98).

Hume abandoned the plan of having his abstract published in *History of the Works of the Learned*; instead, he had it published anonymously<sup>16</sup> as a pamphlet in March 1740, initially to be entitled *An Abstract of a late Philosophical Performance, entitled A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the chief Argument and Design of that Book, which has met with such Opposition, and been represented in so terrifying a Light, is further illustrated and explain'd*. The published title was *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* (Mossner 1980: 124–25). With this pamphlet, Hume aimed to correct the misreading of the *Treatise*.

Hume informed Hutcheson that he would travel to London to have Book 3 published, asking Hutcheson to send a letter of recommendation for a publisher so that Hume could negotiate with multiple publishers. Hutcheson recommended Thomas Longman (HL 1:38). Hume had been revising Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*, but because of poor sales and the terms of his contract with John Noon, he was unable to publish a second edition; indeed, no second edition was published in his lifetime.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Hume included with Book 3 an Appendix "Wherein some Passages of the foregoing Volumes are illustrated and explain'd." These were published in November 1740 at a cost of 4 s. (Mossner 1980: 138).

In 1741, *Bibliothèque raisonnée* published a review that complained of paradoxes and "passages calculated to excite the curiosity of people who do not like the beaten path" (Mossner 1980: 138–39). The reviewer characterized Hume's view as a mixture of the sentiment theory of Hutcheson and the egoism of Hobbes.

Hume continued to pursue his ambition of literary fame. In 1741 and 1742, he published two volumes of moral and political *Essays*. In a letter to Henry Home in June 1742, he reported, "The *Essays* are all sold in London, as I am informed by two letters from English gentlemen of my acquaintance. There is a demand for them . . ." He added, "I am also told that Dr Butler has every where recommended them; so that I hope they



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will have some success. They may prove like dung with marl, and bring forward the rest of my Philosophy, which is of a more durable, though of a harder and more stubborn nature" (HL 1:42–43).

Meanwhile at Edinburgh University, the professor of pneumatics, Dr. John Pringle, was frequently absent, because he was personal physician to the commander of the British forces in Flanders (HL 1:55–56n7). Pringle retained his chair, paying substitutes (including William Cleghorn) to hold his place (Sher 1990: 102). In 1744, the town council sought to replace Pringle, and Hume expressed interest in filling the vacancy (HL 1:56). By all indications, Hume had reason to expect a groundswell of support for his nomination. Pringle managed to finagle another year of leave, and Cleghorn served as substitute once more (Mossner 1980: 155).

At this point, things took a turn for the worse.<sup>18</sup> Hutcheson failed to include Hume's name among candidates he recommended for the position. The principal of the university, William Wishart, collected quotations from the *Treatise* and charged Hume with scepticism, atheism, undermining morality, and other grave errors (Wright 2006: 10–11).<sup>19</sup> In May 1745, in advance of the town council's vote, the ministers of Edinburgh voted 12 to 3 against recommending Hume. In response, Hume hastily composed a letter to a friend on the town council defending himself against Wishart's charges. Henry Home received a copy and had it printed as *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, &c.* It was anonymous and advertised in the *Caledonian Mercury* and *Edinburgh Evening Courant* on May 21, 1745 (Mossner 1980: 160).

Sensing that his campaign would not be successful, Hume wrote a letter on June 1 to the town council to withdraw his candidacy (Mossner 1980: 161). The letter did not arrive in time, but it did not matter (*ibid.*). On June 5, the town council met and named Cleghorn to the professorship of pneumatics.

Hume's *Essays* were extremely popular, and he published several more. With *Philosophical Essays on Human Understanding* in 1748, he tried again to publish for a more philosophical audience, this time including controversial parts on natural and revealed religion. In 1751, he published *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. He had another unsuccessful bid to become a professor, this time of logic at Glasgow University in 1752. He became librarian of the Advocates Library in Edinburgh. In 1757, he recast Book 2 and published it as one of the *Four Dissertations*. Over his lifetime, he held a variety of positions, including secretary to Lord Hertford and undersecretary in Edinburgh. He researched and published six volumes of *The History of*

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*England* (first published between 1754 and 1762), which were extremely popular after an initially bumpy reception. He died in August 1776. In accordance with his wishes, his nephew had *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* published posthumously.

Throughout his life, Hume criticized the *Treatise* for its manner and inelegant wording. Some scholars have maintained that Hume disavowed the *Treatise*. In support of this view, they point to an Advertisement Hume composed in 1775 to serve as “a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie” (HL 2:301), who profitably published works in which they criticized Hume’s views in the *Treatise* instead of those of his later publications. In January 1776, the Advertisement was affixed to the *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (a four-volume set that contained his moral and political essays, *Philosophical Essays*, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, and *Political Discourses*):

MOST of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature*: A work which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers, who have honoured the Author’s Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work, which the Author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigotted Zeal thinks itself authorized to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles. (EHU Adv. 1; SBN 2)

Nevertheless, it is not clear that this should be understood as complete repudiation of the *Treatise*. In publishing it, Hume had exerted effort to protect his anonymity. David Fate Norton observes that Hume’s 1776 essay, “My Own Life,” and the Advertisement “constitute printed, public acknowledgement that the *Treatise* is his work” (2007: 588). To this day, scholars dispute whether we should accept Hume’s assessments of the *Treatise* at face value.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

I am deeply grateful to Donald Ainslie, Travis Butler, and Paul Russell for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. David Hume’s change of surname is discussed in this chapter.
2. There is dispute about how much he practiced law. Compare Greig 1931: 27 to Mossner 1980: 19.