

Introduction

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711, and, after a life lived in England and France as well as Scotland, died there in 1776, a wealthy and famous man. He had become Great Britain's pre-eminent man of letters, notorious for his philosophical works – especially for his critical writings on religion – and (ultimately) applauded for his historical study of England and its institutions. After having established himself as a writer, he enjoyed a successful diplomatic career in Paris and London during the 1760s, before retiring to spend his last years in the town of his birth. There he practised his culinary skills on his friends, in between receiving famous visitors from home and abroad. After his death the great political economist, Adam Smith, published a letter describing his last days, and portraying him as a second Socrates. The greatest architect of the day was commissioned to design a tomb to house his remains. Today, well over two hundred years later, the visitor to Edinburgh is greeted by historical society plaques showing the great man's various places of residence, not to mention a brand-new monumental traffic-hazard in the main street of the Old Town. A better example of a successful life is difficult to imagine.

However, in the middle years of that life, to the man actually living it, such a successful outcome must have been scarcely imaginable. In 1745, Hume's life must have seemed, to his own view, only the most qualified of successes. He was thirty-four years of age, and employed as a tutor to a mentally unstable aristocrat. He had devoted his twenties to writing a philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), which had received little praise and rather more censure. That work had argued for

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some decidedly Sceptical¹ views. To focus just on those most relevant for our purposes: it had argued that our beliefs do not arise through distinctively rational processes, but only by our transferring past experience to further, unobserved, cases; in short, that we function not according to reason but by habit. It had further argued that our experience does not give us any idea of the causes by which the world works, and indeed that our very idea of a cause is based on nothing more than observed regularities in our experience; and that even our beliefs in the external world and in our own existence as a coherent self are the result not of reason but of processes in our imagination. In a striking (and subsequently famous) passage, it concluded that Scepticism (of some form) is the only credible philosophical outlook.

These striking and unsettling views were not, however, answered with philosophical replies; instead, they were attacked for their (real or imagined) dangerous consequences for religion. The only notable review had been simply dismissive, devoting more space to the author's errors of literary style than to the content. Admittedly, the young author could take comfort in one undoubtedly positive outcome, the recent success of his *Essays Moral and Political* (1741–2). Even that, however, must have paled in the face of the discovery that the *Treatise* threatened to *prevent* an academic career – when his application for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University was blocked because of the work's supposed moral and religious implications.

It was in these discouraging circumstances that Hume worked on the *Philosophical Essays on Human Understanding*, now known as *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. The first *Enquiry* (as it is now commonly called) removed some of the more complicated and less persuasive arguments, such as those concerning the origins of the everyday ideas of the external world and the self, and shortened the arguments concerning the origins of our ideas in perceptions and of our knowledge of causes. It also

¹ When speaking of Scepticism, I have employed the capital letter throughout, except when referring to modern epistemological or metaphysical views. The reason is that Hume's use of the term retains an awareness of the views of the ancient schools of Sceptics. This awareness has been lost in the ordinary modern philosophical use of the term, which owes most to the hyperbolic doubt entertained by Descartes in the first of the *Meditations*. In brief, ancient Scepticism was a more purely epistemological doubt which denied *knowledge* of a thing's *nature*, but sought to keep ordinary *beliefs* in place; whereas the Cartesian doubt raised questions also about the very *existence* of the thing. Hume's resistance to *excessive* Scepticism is, in part, a resistance to sliding from the first sense to the second.

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carried over arguments for the compatibility of human freedom and determinism and for the similarity between animal and human ways of learning from experience. Most strikingly, it included two new sections critical of religion, and a completely rewritten account of the Scepticism implied by the author's philosophy, and concluded with a somewhat ambiguous, but plainly hostile, attack on religion.

This makes it plain that, in contrast to the *Treatise* (at least, as it was published), the *Enquiry* aims to show that Hume's empiricist and Sceptical philosophy is bad news for religion. (The ambiguity is over whether this should mean all religion or only some forms.) Nevertheless, despite this more polemical edge to the *Enquiry*, it is not uncommonly treated as a popular, even a watered-down, rewriting of some of the themes from the *Treatise*. This mistake stems from failing to understand both Hume's conclusions and his purposes. To begin with the latter: if we are to understand those purposes, it is necessary to free ourselves from the tendency to project the views of posterity onto Hume's own circumstances and motivations. To this end, it will be helpful to review Hume's life up to the point of writing the *Enquiry*, and to identify the main intellectual and political currents to which he was responding.

Hume's early career

Hume was the second son of a landed family from Ninewells, near Berwick in the Scottish borders. His father died when he was young, and so, probably because of a lack of family resources, at the unusually early age of ten he accompanied his brother to Edinburgh University. There he studied the standard four-year curriculum of the day: Latin and Greek, Logic and Metaphysics (meaning a systematic approach to the nature of the human being, of God, and of moral and religious duties), and Natural Philosophy (mathematics and natural science). After returning home (without completing the degree, as was common), it came to be expected of him that he would follow in his father's footsteps and enter the law. However, left to find his path through his own reading, he developed a passion for philosophy and literature. He fell under the spell of the ancient moral authors, especially Cicero, Seneca and Plutarch, and also of the modern Stoic philosophy of disciplined self-cultivation advocated by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, which had been published in the year of Hume's birth.

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At the age of eighteen he suffered a breakdown, apparently from his attempt at rigorous adherence to Shaftesbury's regimen. After his recovery, he developed the idea for a philosophical and literary project, and wrote 'many a quire of paper' over the next few years. In 1734, aged twenty-three, he left Scotland for employment in Bristol, but this lasted only a few months. It may, in any case, have never been intended as more than a stepping-stone in the pursuit of his project, for later that same year he departed for France in order to fulfil his ambitions. After staying for about eight months in Rheims, he settled in the town of La Flèche, in Anjou, at whose Jesuit college René Descartes (1596–1650) had studied a hundred and twenty years earlier. He remained there for just over two years, returning to London in 1737 with the unrevised manuscript of what would become *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

Revisions and the task of finding a publisher finally saw Books I and II of the *Treatise* appear in early 1739. Those volumes, and indeed the whole *Treatise*, can be summarized as an attack on the traditional idea – reinvigorated in the modern rationalist philosophy deriving from Descartes – that the human being is the rational animal. On that view, the human being is a hybrid creature half divine (the immortal, rational part, which resembles the mind of God) and half animal (the material, sensory part).² Against that view, Book I denies that humans possess a distinct rational faculty, and that those functions traditionally attributed to reason can be understood to be the result of association and habit. (The late revisions to the work saw the removal of some anti-religious passages, most notably an earlier version of the essay on miracles.³) Book II is similarly anti-rationalist: it explains human action in terms of passions, themselves understood in very mechanical terms, and explicitly subordinates reason to the passions. The human being is thus recast as a creature of passion, imagination and habit rather than of reason. This demotion of reason amounts to a denial of the only pathway to certain knowledge, so Scepticism of some form is the unavoidable result.⁴

² The significance of the idea, in the philosophy of the time, that the human mind resembles the mind of God, and Hume's rejection of it, are brought out in Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), Chs. 1–2.

³ Letter to Henry Home, 2 December 1737 (included in this volume).

⁴ Hume's essay 'The Sceptic' (included in this volume) illustrates that, for Hume, the demotion of reason is the distinguishing mark of the Sceptical outlook.

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On a more positive note, since both passion and imagination are utterly dependent for their functioning on the input provided by the senses, Hume's theory moves the sensory side of human nature to centre-stage. The *Treatise* could therefore be expected to appeal to other philosophies in which the rehabilitation of the senses loomed large. It was, presumably, partly for this reason that Hume's older relative and friend, Henry Home, sent a copy to the most eminent of the Scottish philosophers, the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow, and advocate of Shaftesburian views, Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson's response was encouraging, so Hume sent him the manuscript for Book III, 'Of Morals' – but with somewhat unhappy results. Hutcheson did not approve of Hume's occasional swipes at religion; nor, given his Christian Stoic outlook, could he approve of Hume's Epicurean and Sceptical tendencies. To see what was at stake, it is necessary to explain the meaning and contemporary significance of these ancient philosophical viewpoints.

Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism were the major schools of thought of the Hellenistic (later ancient) world. One main source for these philosophies is the philosophical works of Cicero, where the different views are described and assessed in dialogues modelled loosely on Plato's example. The study of Cicero's works was a standard part of the eighteenth-century university curriculum, so these competing views were not only well understood but also employed as standards for categorizing different kinds of contemporary philosophical position. Like all such standards of public debate – consider 'capitalist' and 'communist', or 'liberal' and 'fundamentalist' – the terms were employed crudely, to lump together many different sorts of views. The key differences, however, can be set out as follows. The Stoics believed that the gods exercise a providential concern for the world, and therefore that the surface chaos of life obscures the operation of underlying laws that work for the general good of the creation; that human beings possess reason, a 'divine spark' that distinguishes them from animals and underpins their affinity with the gods; and that through the free exercise of reason human beings can discern the good, constrain their unruly desires, and so attain to happiness through living a virtuous life. Epicureans believed, in contrast, that the gods exercise no concern for the world; that the world is entirely material, all things being made out of atoms; that humans and animals are therefore similar in nature, both driven by their desires for pleasure and the avoidance of pain; and that pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and nothing more, constitute

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happiness.⁵ The Sceptics held that both these schools of thought are ‘dogmatic’ because they make claims to certain knowledge; that those claims are not justified; and, indeed, that *no* claims to certain knowledge can be justified.

These differences were then translated into the early modern world. The ancient Stoics claimed to know that the world possesses an underlying purpose which justifies it, and which makes religious and moral duty necessary parts of the good life; their early modern Christian descendants can thus be thought of as *philosophical* Christians who held that the central doctrines of Christianity could be established on rational grounds. In contrast, the ancient Epicureans were atomistic materialists, hedonists about motivation, and ‘practical atheists’; their early modern descendants revived atomic theory and hedonism about motivation, but (typically) sought to reconcile these themes with Christianity. The ancient Sceptics denied all metaphysical claims, including those in religion and ethics; their early modern descendants did likewise; but both sought to preserve religious faith and an ethics based in custom. To their early modern critics, both Epicureanism and Scepticism were judged to be unreliable foundations for Christian belief, and their defenders were often supposed to be closet atheists. So Christian Stoicism represented, on questions of religion and morals, the ‘philosophical high ground’.

To return, then, to Hutcheson. His distaste for Hume’s views would have reflected the Stoic’s dislike of Scepticism, and, moreover, a Scepticism with evident Epicurean sympathies. So it should come as no surprise that he also complained that Hume’s moral philosophy lacked ‘a certain warmth in the cause of virtue’: this was a recognizably Stoic, and indeed Shaftesburian, complaint, meaning that the writer on morals should *show* the attractiveness of good actions and characters. Hume responded to the charge by letter, and in the course of his defence appealed to the different but complementary roles of anatomist and painter: the anatomist, by pulling the skin off a creature to see what lies within, does not bring about a beautiful result; but, through such studies, the painter is benefited, because enabled to represent the body more accurately, and so the more convincingly to create beauty. ‘And in like manner’, Hume concluded, ‘a metaphysician may be very helpful to a moralist’, without engaging in any

⁵ The differences between Stoic and Epicurean here show the modern dispute between Kantians and utilitarians in ethics to be a modern variation on an old theme.

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‘warm’ moralizing.⁶ When Book III of the *Treatise* appeared, at the end of 1740 (almost two years after the first two books), it had been trimmed of passages Hutcheson found offensive; but, in the final paragraph, stubbornly insisted upon, is the contrast between the anatomist and the painter, and the distinct roles of ‘abstract speculation’ and ‘practical morality’. In short, despite concessions, Hume stood his ground against Hutcheson and, by extension, the Shaftesbury-inspired Christian Stoics of whom Hutcheson was the leading figure.⁷

In his short autobiography, *My Own Life*, written in the last year of his life, Hume claimed that the *Treatise* ‘fell dead-born from the press’. He meant, among other things, that it did not attract readers. (He may also have meant that it contained errors, since the remark is an allusion to a line from Alexander Pope’s ‘Epilogue to the Satires’: ‘All, all but truth, drops dead-born from the press’.) If he expected the work to make a major ‘splash’, then he did indeed have cause to be disappointed, since it attracted reviews only slowly, and sales also were slow. The claim is, nonetheless, exaggerated, since, at least in learned circles, there seems to have been a steady growth in recognition of the author and his talents. But, then as now, the wheels of academe grind slowly, and the book’s first serious response, the *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751) by Henry Home (by that stage Lord Kames), still lay well in the future. Hume’s response to this slow reception was to write his own review of the book, in order to promote awareness of it. *An Abstract of a Book lately Published, entitled A Treatise of Human Nature* appeared in early 1740, six months before the appearance of Book III. The subsequent success of the *Essays Moral and Political*, however, made Hume feel like a proper man of letters; he responded to this happy turn of events by returning home to brush up on his Greek. This brings us to the fateful year 1745.

Hume’s ’45

In mid-1744 Hume had been advised that the Chair in Ethics at the University of Edinburgh would soon become vacant. He was encouraged to apply, and duly expressed his interest. But delays ensued, and opposition to Hume’s candidature grew. In the meantime, Hume left Edinburgh for

⁶ Letter to Hutcheson, 17 September 1739 (included in this volume).

⁷ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.3.6.6.

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Hertfordshire, because he had gained employment there as tutor to the young Marquess of Annandale. With politicking in Edinburgh in full flood, it seems likely that, in his English retreat, Hume turned to what would become the *Enquiry*. It is probable that he began by fleshing out the argument of the *Abstract*, since the argument outlined there closely resembles the *Enquiry*'s epistemological backbone. On that backbone, however, the *Enquiry* constructs a polemic against false philosophy and the religious prejudices to which such philosophy gives shelter. It is not hard to understand why.

In May of 1745, at work on his philosophical reconstructions, news reached him, in a letter, that William Wishart, the Principal of the University, had been circulating a pamphlet against him because of the views expressed in the *Treatise*. The pamphlet was enclosed, so, although he did not have the *Treatise* with him, Hume dashed off a reply to the charges the same day. The letter then came into the hands of Henry Home, who edited and perhaps added some introductions to Hume's various replies, and rushed it into print under the title *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*. The *Letter* responds to Wishart's charges point by point, and so is a valuable guide to what were taken to be the *Treatise*'s unacceptable implications for religion and morality. It also shares some passages with the *Enquiry*; passages presumably cannibalized from the draft manuscript in the rush to despatch the reply. But the *Letter* did not avail: the position went, eventually – as positions so often do – to the incumbent.

Hume was deemed unsuitable because the *Treatise* was held to contain unacceptable religious and moral positions, expressed or (allegedly) implied. Conspicuous amongst Hume's opponents were Hutcheson and other Shaftesbury-influenced Christian Stoics – despite his attempt to avoid offence by pruning its treatment of religious topics. It is not surprising, then, that he chose to go on the attack. In sharp contrast to the *Treatise* – which had presented itself as contributing to a new spirit in philosophy already abroad amongst English philosophers – the *Enquiry* presents itself as a defence of serious thinking against shallowness, obscurity and superstition. It fleshes out the epistemological skeleton inherited from the *Abstract* with two sections critical of religion, the first a reinstated (probably expanded) critique of miracles, the second a dialogue critical of the argument from design, and so of the philosophical religion characteristic of Stoicism – and set (strikingly) within a defence of philosophy against political interference. Along the way, it also explicitly (and

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gratuitously) attacks Stoicism, implying it to be no better than the Epicureanism against which it defines itself. Moreover, it begins with a defence of serious philosophy that is plainly a sally against Shaftesburian and Hutchesonian themes. So there is no doubt that Shaftesbury and the Christian Stoics are an important target.⁸

They are not, however, the whole target, nor even the ‘official’ target. The first section promises that the benefits of serious thinking will be to demolish ‘superstition’, and the last section concludes that the argument has established that all books of ‘divinity and school metaphysics’ are fit only to be burnt. These remarks do not fit a Protestant Stoic target. In the first place, ‘school metaphysics’ – like its synonym, ‘scholastic philosophy’ – was a common, and commonly abusive, term for the Aristotelian-derived philosophy taught in Catholic universities. Secondly, the term ‘superstition’ was also, at the time, something of a Protestant code-word for Catholicism, applied because of the latter’s emphasis on ceremonies and observances endowed with mysterious powers. Hume himself illustrates the connection in his essay ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’, where he treats Catholicism as a prime example of the superstitious frame of mind. The (radical) Protestants, in contrast, are classed as ‘enthusiasts’, meaning those religious believers who believe themselves blessed with divine favours, and so who possess a self-confident frame of mind quite at odds with the anxious or self-doubting mind characteristic of ‘superstition’. This is enough to suggest that Shaftesburian Protestant Stoicism is unlikely to be the official target; a conclusion further supported by the fact that Shaftesbury himself referred to his philosophical outlook as a kind of enthusiasm.⁹

So it rather looks as if Hume’s official target is Catholicism. If this thought is pursued, there turns out to be a striking piece of supporting evidence. This is the famous section on miracles. The anti-Catholic air of this section tends to be missed because the points of dispute between

⁸ These three paragraphs are heavily indebted to M. A. Stewart, ‘Two Species of Philosophy: The Historical Significance of the First *Enquiry*’, in Peter Millican (ed.), *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 67–95.

⁹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, ‘A Letter concerning Enthusiasm’, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4–28 (esp. 27–8). Cf. also Voltaire’s entries for ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘superstition’ in the *Philosophical Dictionary* (first published 1764). The latter of these both signals a debt to the works of Cicero, Seneca and Plutarch (Hume’s favourite ancient authors), and also mentions, amongst others, the Protestant criticism of Catholicism as superstitious. Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin, 2004), 187–8, 382–5.

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Protestants and Catholics in the shadow of the Reformation have been forgotten by all but specialists, and also because present-day Protestantism makes much of miracles as a foundation for belief. In Hume's day, however, the issue was a subject of Protestant attack on Catholicism. It was so because, although Protestants accept miracles, they allow them to have occurred only in a past apostolic age, a special period of divine activity in the world. In contrast, Catholics hold miracles to be a permanent feature of the world: they are evidence of ongoing divine engagement with the world, primarily through the activities of particular holy men and women. Thus beatification requires proof of a miracle, and canonization of saints requires proof of several. This means that the Catholic, unlike the Protestant, is committed to the necessity of identifying miracles in the common course of daily life. So a critique of miracles does fit into a Protestant critique of Catholicism.¹⁰

Hume plainly exploits this connection. He bookends the section with Protestant rhetoric: he begins with the former Archbishop of Canterbury's attack on the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, promising a similar argument that will check 'superstitious delusion'; and he concludes by insisting that faith, not reason, is the highest court of appeal in religious matters, thereby invoking not only the characteristic position of the Christian Sceptic, but also echoing the Protestant dictum of justification by faith alone.¹¹ Moreover, his examples of absurdly unbelievable modern miracle-claims are from France and Spain, both Catholic countries (and Britain's traditional political enemies). So in this section an anti-Catholic air is undeniable; and this fact, combined with the anti-Catholic framing of the whole, plainly shows the *Enquiry* to be packaged as an anti-Catholic tract.

Why might this be? The clue is provided in the political circumstances obtaining in 1745 and the immediately following years, the period in which

¹⁰ See Hume's letter to George Campbell (included in this volume), which illustrates this source of dispute between Protestants and Catholics. The focus on miracles in modern Protestantism – bringing with it a tendency to misread the purpose of Hume's section – owes most to the decline of natural religion brought about by evolutionary theory, with its non-purposive explanations for observable natural order. See Stephen Buckle, 'Marvels, Miracles, and Mundane Order', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79 (2001), 23–30.

¹¹ The Catholic Sceptic Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) and the Protestant Sceptic Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) both accepted that there is no going beyond faith in religious matters. But Hume's remark also makes sense as an appeal to the Scottish Calvinists against the Christian Stoics. As such, it can be supposed to be an attempt to persuade conservative elements of the Scottish Church that a Sceptic in matters of religion, because mindful of the mysterious power of faith, is, in important respects, more akin to Calvinism than those pretended friends. See James Harris, 'Hume's Use of the Rhetoric of Calvinism', in Marina Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail (eds.), *Impressions of Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 141–59.