

## 16. Hume's Philosophical Works

**T**HE year just passed was the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of David Hume, who is generally regarded as the greatest British philosopher. He also deserves to rank among the greatest Humanist thinkers, for he was the first writer to demonstrate rigorously that knowledge, morality and politics do not need any sort of religious basis. Indeed, it was Hume, above all, who laid the intellectual foundations of modern Humanism.

David Hume was born on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1711 (old style; 7<sup>th</sup> May, new style) in Edinburgh. His fairly affluent Presbyterian family of landed gentry was a minor branch of the line of the earls of Home which produced a Conservative British Prime Minister in the 1960s, but he changed his name in the 1730s because the English had difficulty pronouncing 'Home' in the Scottish manner. Most of his childhood was spent on the family estate of Ninewells, near Berwick. His father died in 1713 when he was still an infant, the estate passed to his elder brother, and he was left with a small patrimony of about £50 a year.

At the age of barely 12 he went to Edinburgh University but did not graduate, leaving after three years to pursue a legal career. However, he soon discovered that his interests lay elsewhere in the classics, particularly Cicero and Virgil, and in philosophy and history. As he himself said: "I was continually fortifying myself with reflections against death, and poverty, and shame, and pain, and all the other calamities of life". He also decided – in a typically Presbyterian way – that the existing philosophy contained 'little more than endless disputes', and set out instead to find 'some medium by which truth might be established'.

On the verge of a nervous breakdown, he left Scotland in 1734 and went first to Bristol and then to live cheaply in rural France, and to write. He spent a year at Rheims and then settled at La Flèche, the town where Descartes had studied a century before. He made friends with the fathers in the Jesuit college and took advantage of their extensive library. Here, over the course of two years, he wrote his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. He returned to Britain in 1737 to find a publisher. Eventually, in 1739 the work appeared, anonymously, but Hume was disappointed by its reception, one critic describing it as 'abstract and unintelligible'. Three of the most eminent thinkers of the day, Bishop Berkeley, Bishop Butler and Frances Hutcheson, made no comment on it. As Hume joked much later in his brief autobiography *My Own Life*, "it fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots".

The *Treatise* was actually published in three volumes, the first two in 1739 and the third, 'Of Morals', in 1740. Hume blamed himself for its 'failure' and produced an anonymous pamphlet in 1740 advertised as an 'abstract' of the *Treatise*, which fell into oblivion until it was rediscovered and published by Keynes in the 1930s. He also continued writing, and in 1741-42 published his two-volume *Essays, Moral and Political*, which were written in an accessible style and



were more successful than the *Treatise*. He now became convinced that the poor reception of the *Treatise* was caused by its presentation rather than its content, so in 1748 he published his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which reworked portions of Book I of the *Treatise*. The *Enquiry* also includes two sections that he had cut from the earlier work containing direct attacks on religious belief: 'Of Miracles' and a dialogue entitled 'Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State'. In 1751 he followed with his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which recasts parts of Book III of the *Treatise*. It advocates a system of morality based on

utility and human sentiments alone, and without appeal to divine commands.

In the 1750s Hume also wrote two substantial works on religion: *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *The Natural History of Religion*. The latter appeared in 1757 but, on the advice of friends who wished to steer him away from religious controversy, the *Dialogues* remained unread until 1779, three years after his death, when they were published by his nephew.

In 1756 a volume of Hume's essays titled *Five Dissertations* was printed and ready for distribution. They included 'The Natural History of Religion', 'Of the Passions', 'Of Tragedy', 'Of Suicide' and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul'. The latter two essays made direct attacks on common religious doctrines by defending a person's moral right to commit suicide and by criticising the idea of life after death. Early copies were passed around, and Hume's publisher was threatened with prosecution if the book was distributed as it was. The printed copies of *Five Dissertations* were then physically altered by removing the essays on suicide and immortality, and inserting a new essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' in their place.

Hume's writings also inhibited his own career. When the Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh became vacant in 1744, he was advised by his friend Lord Coultts, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, to apply for the post, but his reputation provoked vocal opposition. Edinburgh ministers petitioned the town council not to appoint him because he was seen as an atheist. Six years later, he stood for the Chair of Logic at Glasgow, only to be turned down again. In fact, Hume never held an academic post; instead, at various times he was a librarian, historian, diplomat and political essayist. In the 1760s he was for a time private secretary to Lord Hertford, the Ambassador to France, and spent three years in Paris, where he became friendly with many of the Philosophes, including Diderot, D'Alembert, and d'Holbach. He also befriended Rousseau, who was then fleeing persecution in Switzerland. In 1766 he brought Rousseau back to England, but their friendship ended abruptly when the paranoid Rousseau became convinced that Hume was masterminding an international conspiracy against him.

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Hume's entire philosophy does not concern us here but only those aspects that directly relate to Humanism. There is much debate about whether he was atheist or agnostic. He never called himself an atheist. The story has come down to us of his attendance at one of d'Holbach's famous dinner parties, when he asserted that he didn't believe in the existence of atheists, and had never met one; whereupon d'Holbach retorted that he must have been unfortunate – and now he was surrounded by seventeen.

One thing is certain: he had nothing but contempt for Christianity and all the major creeds. In a conversation with Lord Charlemont, he described Rousseau as someone who 'has a hankering after the Bible, and is indeed little better than a Christian in a way of his own'. Writing to his friend Hugh Blair, he referred to the English as 'relapsing fast into the deepest stupidity, Christianity and ignorance'.

His philosophical works suggest that he was an atheist as far as orthodox religions are concerned. Much of it is actually designed to discredit religious belief. Take the following statement from *A Natural History of Religion*: "Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are other than sick men's dreams; or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational". Then there is the final paragraph of his essay 'Of Miracles' in the *Enquiry*: "the Christian religion not only was at first attended by miracles, but even to this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one".

His hostility to Christianity is non-discriminating. In the *Natural History*, he swipes at Catholicism by quoting with approval the verdict of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Islamic philosopher Averroes that "of all religions, the most absurd and nonsensical is that, whose votaries eat, after having created, their deity". He adds that "there is no tenet in all paganism which would give so fair a scope to ridicule as that of the *real presence*; for it is so absurd, that it eludes the force of all argument". As for the Calvinists, their God "is a most cruel, unjust, partial and fantastical being".

In the posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, he addresses some of the main arguments for the existence of a God, including the cosmological and ontological 'proofs', but especially the teleological argument from design of which he gives a devastating critique. The three participants in the dialogue are Demea, who believes that the existence of God can be demonstrated *a priori*, Cleanthes, who argues that the proof of God's existence is found in the world's wonders, and the sceptical Philo, who agrees with Cleanthes that the argument from design is the only one worth considering.

Philo clearly speaks for Hume and makes a number of objections to the design argument. First, we cannot infer from the fact that examples of order in the universe have human causes, that order in the universe as a whole has a cause, since we are not acquainted with a multiplicity of worlds but only with this one unique universe. Second, if the universe was designed, who designed the designer? Third, the argument makes God too anthropomorphic, i.e. too much like a human being. Hume mocks both the believer's attribution of human emotions such as anger and jealousy to a deity and the inference of a god's infinite goodness from his often miserable and suffering creation. Fourth, why should there be only one designer? Many people work together to build a house or a ship.

Fifth, why can we not regard the universe as a living organism, which grows and reproduces in a regular manner, rather than a machine or an artefact? Sixth, the universe could be the result of chance, i.e. there are periods of chaos and order and we are, luckily, living in a period of order. There is also another argument against any monotheistic god which Hume makes in the *Enquiry*, namely, that we can only ascribe to a cause whatever qualities are needed to produce the effect, so the design argument could only prove the existence of a design-producing being, not one with any of the other attributes often ascribed to God.

Yet, although Hume strongly doubts the existence of any monotheistic god, he concedes that "the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence"; and he is agnostic about ultimate reality. In his *History of England* he writes: "While Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he showed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity in which they ever did and ever will remain".

Philosophically, Hume is the arch-empiricist and arch-sceptic. He puts it bluntly in the *Enquiry*: "When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion". But he also described himself as 'mitigated' sceptic, suggesting that while humbly accepting the limitations of human knowledge and pursuing the legitimate aims of logic and science he also in his non-philosophical moments relied on the natural beliefs of everyday life.

A further aspect of Hume's Humanism is his ethical concern. In the *Enquiry* he defines moral philosophy as 'the science of human nature'. But there is no ultimate justification for our moral ideas because we cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is' (sometimes called Hume's Law). Moral judgments are neither 'relations of ideas' nor 'matters of fact'. Psychological laws, not reason, provide us with moral guidance, because "tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (*Treatise*). Instead, "reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (*Treatise*).

Reason, according to Hume, can at best suggest means for attaining a given end, but it cannot recommend ultimate ends. It can provide no motive to action as reason alone is insufficient to produce moral blame or approbation; for that we need sentiment and motivation. Morality therefore derives from feeling. He argues that we are innately social and benevolent creatures and that the principle of 'humanity' or fellow-feeling is the basis of ethics. Modern Humanists would certainly concur with that.

Perhaps he underestimated the role of reason in ethics and derived an 'ought' from an 'is' in basing his morality on the facts of human nature, but it is a matter of degree. As he wrote: "generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous". As in his philosophy, so in his life, Hume was a model Humanist. Adam Smith wrote: "Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime, and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will admit".

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