

David Hume (1711–1776)

Soon after completing his studies at Edinburgh, Scottish philosopher David Hume began writing his comprehensive statement of the views he believed would contribute to philosophy no less than Newton's had to science. But the public reception for the three books of his magisterial *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) was less than cordial, and Hume abandoned his hopes of a philosophical career in order to support his family as a librarian, historian, diplomat, and political essayist, a course of action he described in the autobiographical *My Own Life* (1776). Although he spent most of his life trying to produce more effective statements of his philosophical views, he did not live to see the firm establishment of his reputation by the criticisms of *Kant* and much later appreciation of the logical positivists.

The central themes of Book I of the *Treatise* receive a somewhat more accessible treatment in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), a more popular summary of Hume's empiricism. According to Hume, little human knowledge can be derived from the deductively certain relations of ideas. Since the causal interactions of physical objects are known to us only as inherently uncertain matters of fact, Hume argued, our belief that they exhibit any necessary connection (however explicable) can never be rationally justified, but must be acknowledged to rest only upon our acquired habits. In similar fashion, Hume argued that we cannot justify our natural beliefs in the reality of the self or the existence of an external world. From all of this, he concluded that a severe (if mitigated) skepticism is the only defensible view of the world.

Hume recast the moral philosophy of the *Treatise's* Book III in *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). In both texts Hume clearly maintained that human agency and moral obligation are best considered as functions of human passions rather than as the dictates of reason. In the posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1780), Hume discussed the possibility of arriving at certain knowledge of god through the application of reason and considered defense of a fideistic alternative.

LIFE AND WRITINGS. David Hume was born in 1711 to a moderately wealthy family from Berwickshire Scotland, near Edinburgh. His background was politically Whiggish and religiously Calvinistic. As a child he faithfully attended the local Church of Scotland pastored by his uncle. Hume was educated by his widowed mother until he left for the University of Edinburgh at the age of eleven. His letters describe how as a young student he took religion seriously and obediently followed a list of moral guidelines taken from *The Whole Duty of Man*, a popular Calvinistic devotional.

Leaving the University of Edinburgh at around age fifteen to pursue his education privately, he was encouraged to consider a career in law, but his interests turned to philosophy. During these years of private study he began raising serious questions about religion, as he recounts in the following letter:

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 [i.e. religious belief]. 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.

Although his manuscript book was destroyed, several pages of Hume's study notes survive from his early twenties. These show a preoccupation with the subjects of proof of God's existence and atheism, particularly as he read on these topics in classical Greek and Latin texts and in Pierre Bayle's skeptical *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. During these years of private study, some of which was in France, Hume composed his three-volume *Treatise of Human Nature*, which was published anonymously in two installments before he was thirty (1739, 1740). The *Treatise* explores several philosophical topics such as space, time, causality, external objects, the passions, free will, and morality, offering original and often skeptical appraisals of these

notions. Although religious belief is not the subject of any specific section of the *Treatise*, it is a recurring theme. Book I of the *Treatise* was unfavorably reviewed in the *History of the Works of the Learned* with a succession of sarcastic comments. Although scholars today recognize it as a philosophical masterpiece, Hume was disappointed with the minimal interest his book spawned.

In 1741 and 1742 Hume published his two-volume *Essays, Moral and Political*. The essays were written in a popular style and met with better success than the *Treatise*. In 1744–1745 Hume was a candidate for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. The position was to be vacated by John Pringle, and the leading candidates were Hume and William Cleghorn. The Edinburgh Town Council was responsible for electing a replacement. Critics opposed Hume by condemning his anti-religious writings. Chief among the critics was clergyman William Wishart (d. 1752), the Principal of the University of Edinburgh. Lists of allegedly dangerous propositions from Hume's *Treatise* circulated, presumably penned by Wishart. In the face of such strong opposition, the Edinburgh Town Council consulted the Edinburgh ministers. Hoping to win over the clergy, Hume composed a point by point reply to the circulating lists of dangerous propositions. It was published as *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*. The clergy were not dissuaded, and 12 of the 15 ministers voted against Hume. Hume quickly withdrew his candidacy. In 1745 Hume accepted an invitation from General St Clair to attend him as secretary. He wore the uniform of an officer, and accompanied the general on an expedition against Canada (which ended in an incursion on the coast of France) and to an embassy post in the courts of Vienna and Turin.

In 1748 he added to the above collection an essay titled "Of National Characters." In a lengthy footnote to this piece, Hume attacks the character of the clergy, accusing this profession of being motivated by ambition, conceit, and revenge. This footnote became a favorite target of attack by the clergy. Given the success of his *Essays*, Hume was convinced that the poor reception of his *Treatise* was caused by its style rather than by its content. In 1748 he published his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, a more popular rendition of Book I of his *Treatise*. The *Enquiry* also includes two sections not found in the *Treatise* and which contain fairly direct attacks on religious belief: "Of Miracles" and a dialogue titled "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State."

In 1751 Hume published his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, which recasts in a very different form parts of Book III of his *Treatise*. Although this work does not attack religion directly, it does so indirectly by establishing a system of morality on utility and human sentiments alone, and without appeal to divine moral commands. Critics such as James Balfour criticized Hume's theory for being Godless. However, by the end of the century Hume was recognized as the founder of the moral theory of utility. Utilitarian political theorist Jeremy Bentham acknowledges Hume's direct influence upon him. The same year Hume also published his *Political Discourses*, which drew immediate praise and influenced economic thinkers such as Adam Smith, Godwin, and Thomas Malthus.

In 1751–1752 Hume sought a philosophy chair at the University of Glasgow, and was again unsuccessful. In 1752 Hume's employment as librarian of the Advocate's Library in Edinburgh provided him with the resources to pursue his interest in history. There he wrote much of his highly successful six-volume *History of England* (published from 1754 to 1762). The first volume was unfavorably received, partially for its defense of Charles I, and partially for two sections which attack Christianity. In one passage Hume notes that the first Protestant reformers were fanatical or "inflamed with the highest *enthusiasm*" in their opposition to Roman Catholic domination. In the second passage he labels Roman Catholicism a superstition which "like all other species of superstition... rouses the vain fears of unhappy mortals." The most vocal attack against Hume's *History* came from Daniel MacQueen in his 300 page *Letters on Mr. Hume's History*. MacQueen combs through Hume's first volume of the *History*, exposing all the allegedly "loose and irreligious sneers" Hume makes against Christianity. Ultimately, this negative response led Hume to delete the two controversial passages from succeeding editions of the *History*.

At about this time Hume also wrote his two most substantial works on religion: *The Dialogues Concerning*

Natural Religion and *The Natural History of Religion*. The *Natural History* appeared in 1757, but, on the advice of friends who wished to steer Hume away from religious controversy, the *Dialogues* remained unpublished until 1779, three years after his death. The *Natural History* aroused controversy even before it was made public. In 1756 a volume of Hume's essays titled *Five Dissertations* was printed and ready for distribution. The essays included (1) "The Natural History of Religion," (2) "Of the Passions," (3) "Of Tragedy," (4) "Of Suicide," and (5) "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 criticizing the idea of life after death. Early copies were passed around, and someone of influence threatened to prosecute Hume's publisher if the book was distributed as is. The printed copies of *Five Dissertations* were then physically altered, with a new essay "Of the Standard of Taste" inserted in place of the two removed essays. Hume also took this opportunity to alter two particularly offending paragraphs in the *Natural History*. The essays were then bound with the new title *Four Dissertations* and distributed in January, 1757.

In the years following *Four Dissertations*, Hume completed his last major literary work, *The History of England*. In 1763, at age 50, Hume was invited to accompany the Earl of Hertford to the embassy to Paris, with a near prospect of being his secretary. He eventually accepted, and remarks at the reception he received in Paris "from men and women of all ranks and stations." returned to Edinburgh in 1766. Among these was Jean Jacques Rousseau who in 1766 was ordered out of Switzerland by the government in Berne. Hume offered Rousseau refuge in England and secured him a government pension. In England, Rousseau became suspicious of plots, and publicly charged Hume with conspiring to ruin his character, under the appearance of helping him. Hume published a pamphlet defending his actions and was exonerated. Another secretary appointment took him away from 1767–1768. Returning again to Edinburgh, his remaining years were spent revising and refining his published works, and socializing with friends in Edinburgh's intellectual circles. In 1776, at age 65, he died from an internal disorder which had plagued him for many months.

After his death, Hume's name took on new significance as several of his previously unpublished works appeared. The first was a brief autobiography, *My Own Life*, which many have praised as the best short autobiography in English. Even this unpretentious work aroused religious controversy. As Hume's friends, Adam Smith and S.J. Pratt, published affectionate eulogies describing how he died with no concern for an afterlife, religious critics responded by condemning this unjustifiable admiration of Hume's infidelity. Two years later, in 1779, Hume's *Dialogues* appeared. Again, the response was mixed. Admirers of Hume considered it a masterfully written work, while religious critics branded it as dangerous to religion. Finally, in 1782, Hume's two suppressed essays on suicide and immortality were published. Their reception was almost unanimously negative.

David Hume was a Scottish empiricist philosopher and historian. At the age of 12 he entered the University of Edinburgh, where his family intended that he should study law. He showed little taste for law, however, and even less for business, which he briefly pursued after leaving the university.

In 1734, Hume decided to devote himself to a life of learning and went to study in France, where he wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). He was disappointed by the indifferent reception that this received, but *Essays Moral and Political* (1741–42) was more popular and successful. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) were efforts to put the primary doctrines of his earlier *Treatise* into more popular form. In 1744 he attempted to gain a professorship at Edinburgh, but his religious views were regarded as too skeptical by the Calvinistic authorities. In 1752, Hume became librarian of the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, an opportunity he used to produce a six-volume *History of England* (1754–61); this work went through many editions and became a standard text. Although Hume lived in France, where he was a favorite of Paris society, and in London, he spent most of his life in Edinburgh reading, writing, and editing. He died there after a lingering illness during which he faced death with calm and even humor. His *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), a criticism of rational arguments for the existence of God, was published posthumously to avoid further controversy with the religious establishment. During his lifetime he enjoyed a wide reputation as an essayist, economist, historian,

and man of letters. Today he is chiefly known for his philosophical writings, which are widely studied, particularly in Great Britain and the United States.

A Treatise of Human Nature is generally regarded as Hume's most important work. It reveals the philosophical influence of John Locke, and George Berkeley, though recent scholarship has emphasized the broader origins of his ideas. Hume's ambition in that work was to introduce into philosophical analysis those experimental methods by which Isaac Newton had been able to make such strides in the explanation of natural phenomena. As an empiricist, Hume attempted to show how human knowledge arises from sense experience. His method led him to conclusions that were skeptical of many established beliefs. Perhaps his most famous discussions concern the idea of causality. Hume argued that belief in a necessary connection between cause and effect is based on habit and custom rather than reason or observation. When one ball strikes another and apparently causes it to move, observers cannot see any force that literally connects the two movements. As all observation of causes are confined to the past, it cannot be known that causes that have operated in the past will do so in the future.

Joining many of the ideas of British Empiricism with French skepticism, Hume attempted to undermine superstition and authority as the basis of belief. His influence has been extensive; most recently his ideas have influenced logical atomism, and in the philosophy of science, logical positivism.