

# Hume's **Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**

Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien

**HUME'S *ENQUIRY CONCERNING HUMAN  
UNDERSTANDING***

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*Reader's Guide*

ALAN BAILEY AND DANIEL O'BRIEN



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80 Maiden Lane  
Suite 704  
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## PREFACE

This book is a guide to what we consider to be one of the greatest works of western philosophy. The *Enquiry* has been long neglected and dismissed as a watered-down and popularized version of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. Part of our motivation for writing the present book is accordingly the wish to contribute to a reassessment of the *Enquiry*: the *Enquiry* should be seen as the most developed and ambitious product of Hume's secular and naturalistic approach.

The main body of the guide consists of a step by step exposition and critique of Hume's arguments in the twelve sections that make up his *Enquiry*. We begin, however, with a little history: both personal and philosophical. Hume's life was far from the closeted life of the typical academic; and we shall discuss Hume's milieu and certain important philosophical influences on his thinking. At the end of the book we shall take a selective look at how Humean themes permeate contemporary philosophy.

References are given both to the Oxford Philosophical Texts version of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* edited by T. Beauchamp (1772) and to the version edited by Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (1777). Thus (12.16 / 155) refers to paragraph 16 of Section 12 of the Beauchamp edition and page 155 of the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch edition.

A. B.  
D. O'B.  
February 2006



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Edward Craig's lectures on Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* at Cambridge helped to reinforce my early interest in Hume, and I was also fortunate enough to have been assigned John Kenyon, a formidably enthusiastic Humean, as my doctoral supervisor at Oxford. Other important personal influences on my understanding of Hume have been Marie McGinn, Galen Strawson, Bridget Clarke and Helen Steward; and I would also like to express my thanks to the following colleagues at Birmingham and Keele: Harold Noonan, Joss Walker, Iain Law, Josie D'Oro, Geraldine Coggins and Monica Mookherjee.

References within the main body of the text have deliberately been kept to a minimum. It is all the more important, therefore, to acknowledge some key literary influences at this point. The work of Richard Popkin and Robert Fogelin on the nature of Hume's scepticism and his relationship to Pyrrhonism has had a major impact on my understanding of Hume, and that influence will be evident throughout this book. Stephen Everson's work on the nature of the difference between Humean ideas and impressions has been equally influential with regard to that particular topic, and John Gaskin's writings on Hume's philosophy of religion have played a crucial role in bringing home to me the extent to which the *Enquiry* is aimed at undermining the unjustified pretensions of organized religion.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to Susan-Judith Hoffmann, Bridget Clarke, Paul Muench and the city of Providence, Rhode Island, for their hospitality at a crucial time in the writing process.

A.B.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest and admiration for Hume were kindled by the lectures of Barry Falk and Harold Noonan, and my conversations with Martin Hall have a habit of concluding with ‘well, that’s what Hume would say’. Thanks also to the Department of Philosophy at Birmingham, past and present, and especially to Joss Walker, Darragh Byrne, Alex Miller and Iain Law for their encouragement over the years. Parts of Chapter 5, ‘Hume’s Influence’ are taken from O’Brien, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006.

This book is dedicated to Lucy for all those times when I didn’t have time to dine and play backgammon.

D. O’B.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE *ENQUIRY* AND ITS CONTEXT

The case for regarding David Hume as the greatest of all British philosophers is a strong one. Certainly his only plausible rival would be John Locke (1632–1704), whose principal philosophical work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was a remarkable attempt to reshape philosophical inquiry so as to accommodate the methods and increasing authority of the experimental science that developed in Europe over the course of the seventeenth century. The influence of the *Essay* on the intellectual climate in Britain during the hundred years or so after its publication in 1689 can scarcely be overestimated, and no one reading Hume's own writings can be in any doubt that they are the product of an author whose thinking has been profoundly shaped by both the spirit and the content of the *Essay*. But once these points have rightly been acknowledged, it nevertheless still seems true that Hume is someone who generally looks more deeply than Locke into the status and nature of philosophy as an intellectual activity. He is also the first author writing in English to provide a comprehensive articulation of a secular world-view, and his devastating critique of the design argument for the existence of a deity played a major part in breaking the grip of Christianity on educated opinion within Britain.

David Hume was born in Edinburgh on 26 April 1711; and in his brief autobiography, 'My Own Life', he is at some pains to emphasize his family's connections within Scottish society: he describes his father's family as 'a Branch of the Earl of Home's, or Hume's', and he tells us that his mother 'was Daughter of Sir David Falconer, President of the College of Justice' (1776: 611).

When he was 12, Hume enrolled as a student at the University of Edinburgh, but, like most of his contemporaries, he left university

without being awarded a degree. He then half-heartedly applied himself to studying to be a lawyer. However while Hume was ostensibly perusing legal textbooks, he was primarily devoting himself to reading books dealing with philosophy and literary matters. As a result of this reading, Hume became increasingly convinced of the need to find some new method for resolving disputes in these areas of inquiry, and he reports that:

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. (1993: 346)

Hume's initial efforts to develop these insights about philosophy and the other moral sciences led to a nervous breakdown. A ravenous appetite transformed him in the space of a few weeks from a thin, gangly youth into the rotund and corpulent figure familiar to us from portraits of Hume in his later years. He also found himself unable to concentrate on the task of shaping his voluminous notes and writings so as to make their sense perspicuous to potential readers. These problems persuaded Hume to seek out a more active way of life. Although he was still convinced of the importance and significance of his intellectual studies, he decided 'to lay them aside for some time, in order the more effectually to resume them' (1993: 350). Thus in 1734 he left Scotland in order to take up employment in a merchant's office in Bristol. However, this turned out to be a very unsatisfactory appointment, and Hume soon decided instead to move to France to resume his attempt at putting his philosophical ideas into a presentable form. He eventually settled in La Flèche, the town in Anjou where Descartes received his school education, and during his three years in France he wrote his first and longest philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume returned to London in 1738 in order to seek out a publisher, and Books One and Two of the *Treatise* were published anonymously in 1739. Book Three then followed in 1740.

The critical reception received by the *Treatise* was not of the kind sought by its young author. In 'My Own Life', Hume expressed his disappointment with this reception in dramatic terms:

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 amongst the Zealots. (1776: 612)

Hume's next literary project, however – two volumes of short essays on topics in the areas of morality and politics – was favourably reviewed, and this success reinforced Hume's determination to continue to put his ideas before the public.

In 1745, though, Hume suffered a serious personal set-back when his candidature for the vacant Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh ended in failure. This persuaded him to accept a post as tutor to the Marquess of Annandale. Unfortunately, by the time Hume actually took up his duties, the Marquess had gone hopelessly insane. Not surprisingly, then, Hume lasted less than a year in this post, though he nevertheless seems to have managed to find sufficient free time from his duties to write most of the work that would subsequently become known as *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

Hume's next post was that of a secretary to a military expedition commanded by a distant relative, Lieutenant-General James St Clair, and he took on the pensionable army rank of Judge-Advocate. At the time Britain was fighting against France as part of the War of the Austrian Succession, and this eventually led to Hume finding himself part of a British force besieging the port of Lorient in Brittany. This siege culminated in the British troops retreating back to their ships just when the French garrison had decided to surrender, and the resulting scandal back in Britain saw Hume energetically employed in writing letters and official memoranda defending his relative's reputation and judgement.

In 1748, two years after this military debacle, Hume published the book he had put together while working as a tutor. In many ways it can usefully be seen as a substantial reworking of Book One of the *Treatise*, and it was originally published under the title *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* before being given its present title in 1757. In style, it is a marked advance on the *Treatise* as it is much more elegant and lucid. It is also very noticeable that the *Enquiry*, unlike the *Treatise*, includes explicit discussions of the rational status of religious belief. Some hostile critics of Hume have interpreted these additions as part of an opportunistic attempt at

garnering literary notoriety. In reality, however, it seems clear from a letter written by Hume in 1737 that these discussions actually constitute the return of material cut from Hume's original drafts of the *Treatise* in an effort to make it more acceptable to the religiously orthodox. In this letter Hume discusses his desire to seek the opinion of Dr Joseph Butler, an Anglican bishop and highly regarded theologian, on the merits of the *Treatise*, and Hume makes the following comments about the changes he has made to the body of the text:

I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring that it shall give as little offence as possible, before which, I could not pretend to put it into the Doctor's hands. This is a piece of cowardice, for which I blame myself, though I believe none of my friends will blame me. (1932: 25)

Three years later, in 1751, Hume published the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. This too can be seen as a reworking of one of the books of the *Treatise*, in this case Book Three, and we know from 'My Own Life' that Hume regarded this *Enquiry* as 'incomparably the best' of all his writings (1776: 613). Eventually Book Two of the *Treatise* was similarly reworked, but in this case the result was less impressive. The resulting *Dissertation on the Passions* is probably the least read of Hume's substantial works, and even Hume seems to have had a low opinion of its merits.

Hume's next major literary project was his *History of England*, and he published the first volume in 1757. Within ten years the completed *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Glorious Revolution* became the most popular and best-selling history book published in Britain prior to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This book made Hume's reputation, and it also brought in substantial amounts of money. Indeed, Hume's *History* was so influential that even in the second half of the twentieth century, the catalogues of the British Museum Library referred to Hume as a historian rather than a philosopher.

In 1763 Hume became Secretary to the British Embassy in Paris. He was a huge success in the fashionable salons of that city despite his tendency to speak French with a heavy Scottish accent. Upon Hume's return to London in 1766, he took up the post of Under-Secretary of State in the Northern Department for a year. He then

gave up public office and retired to Edinburgh. At this point in his life, Hume's *Treatise* became a renewed object of critical attention. The discussions of the *Treatise* by Thomas Reid were presented in a polite and judicious manner, but the treatment meted out to the book by other critics was far more hostile. Hume's own policy was to abstain from publicly responding to such attacks, but they did persuade him to instruct his publisher in 1775 to affix an advertisement to all future editions of his collected works repudiating the *Treatise*.

Hume died of cancer on 25 August 1776. He had known for some time that his condition was incurable, and he spent the last months of his life engaged in revisions to his philosophical and historical writings. In particular, he worked on alterations to his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which were eventually published posthumously in 1779 by his nephew. About six weeks before Hume's death, he was visited at his home in Edinburgh by James Boswell, who was eager to discover Hume's views on immortality and religion as his life drew to an end. Hume apparently said that he had never 'entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke' (Mossner 1980: 597). Boswell also records that when he asked Hume whether it was possible that there might be a future state, Hume answered that 'it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn' and that 'it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist for ever'.

After Hume's death, his good friend Adam Smith, the economist, wrote the following assessment of his character, which was published alongside Hume's 'My Own Life' in 1777.

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. (Mossner 1980: 604)

Given the many slights directed against Hume's character and philosophical sincerity both during his life and more especially after his death, Smith's remarks provide a salutary corrective. How many of us could seriously expect to be remembered in such terms even by our closest friends?

As the content of the *Enquiry* overlaps substantially with that of the earlier and much longer *Treatise*, there has been a tendency to



regard the *Treatise* as Hume's philosophical masterpiece and the *Enquiry* as little more than a truncated popularization prepared by Hume to further his pursuit of literary fame. In reality, however, there is a strong case for holding that the *Enquiry* is, in the areas it explicitly covers, the work that better represents Hume's mature philosophical vision.

Hume's own opinion on such a matter must be given considerable weight, and one forthright expression of his views can be found in the advertisement repudiating the *Treatise* that has already been mentioned. Hume drew up this advertisement or notification himself, and he instructed his publisher to place it at the start of the volume of his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* that began with the *Enquiry*. It opens with the statement that 'Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature*', and it goes on to say that the author 'not finding it successful . . . cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected' (p. 83 / 2). The advertisement then denounces critics who have chosen to take the early formulation of the author's views found in the *Treatise* as the target for their attacks, and culminates in the asseveration that: 'Henceforth, the Author desires that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles'.

These remarks are sometimes dismissed as the ill-tempered judgments of an exhausted invalid who had lost interest in philosophy as an activity, and was simply seeking the easiest possible way of protecting his public reputation as a literary figure and intellectual. However, Hume expressed substantially the same opinion nearly 25 years earlier in a private letter written to one of his closest friends, Gilbert Elliot of Minto, in 1751:

I believe the philosophical Essays [i.e. the *Enquiry* under its original title] contain everything of Consequence relating to the Understanding, which you would meet with in the *Treatise*; & I give you my Advice against reading the latter. By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete. *Addo dum minuo*. The philosophical Principles are the same in both. But I was carry'd away by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately. So vast an Undertaking, plan'd

before I was one and twenty, & compos'd before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. (1932: 158)

In this latter instance, it is clear that Hume's expressed preference for the *Enquiry* was not part of a defence of his popular image: he was instead simply trying to assist a friend to comprehend his philosophical position. Moreover, this was actually a philosophically productive period of time for Hume as he was in the process of writing an initial draft of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, a book that has a fully deserved reputation as one of the most incisive and elegant philosophical works ever written on the topic of the rational status of religious belief.

On the basis, then, that we should, whenever possible, defer to the dispassionate and reflective judgement of an author on the issue of which of his works most accurately expresses his philosophical views, we seem to be led towards some important conclusions about how we can best understand Hume's true views on those topics that are covered in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. The overwhelming presumption must be that we are required to give interpretative priority to the *Enquiry*. In particular the common practice of using the *Treatise* as a guide to Hume's position, and then appealing to a few supporting passages from the *Enquiry*, is entirely wrong-headed. If there is anything in the *Treatise* that is incompatible with what Hume says in the *Enquiry*, then the correct assumption to make is that the mature Hume came to regard those former claims as mistaken. Furthermore the fact that Hume specifically wrote the *Enquiry* to correct misunderstandings of the *Treatise* and to make it easier to understand his views means that where we find ourselves confronted by exegetical ambiguities, we should use our understanding of what Hume says in the *Enquiry* to correct our reading of what he seems to be saying in the *Treatise*.

In addition to the evidence provided by Hume's own judgement on the respective merits of the two works, the view that the *Enquiry* represents a philosophical advance over the *Treatise* seems to find significant confirmation in the way Hume has reorganized his material. Hume's account of the nature of causal inference is acknowledged today as one of the most important aspects of his overall philosophical position, and one that has major implications for all of his thinking about the rational status of beliefs concerning existence and matters of fact. In the *Treatise* this account is hidden away