



David Hume

In about 2 weeks we commemorate 246 years since the passing of the great Scottish Philosopher and Historian, David Hume, on 25 August 1776 at the age of 65. I regard him as one of the great Philosophers of the Western tradition, and I really value some of his key contributions which are still relevant today. He is also one of my favourite philosophers and his life is a good demonstration of how world-class secular philosophers faced open discrimination in Europe as recently as the 18th century.

Brief Bio

Hume was born on 7 May 1711 in Edinburgh, where he spent most of his life apart from 2 stints in London and a few years in France. He studied at the University of Edinburgh, spent 3 years in France (from 1734-1737) where he met Voltaire and started writing his famous "A Treatise of Human Nature". He published the 1st two volumes on his return to Scotland in 1739 at the age of 28, and the 3rd and last volume in 1740. Later in life he denounced this publication and rewrote it, but it remained a highly regarded Philosophical publication [1].

He was a very good-natured and popular man, and was regarded as an exceptional conversationalist, but never married. He also became the leading figure among Scottish intelligentsia.

One of the most interesting and consequential friendships between high profile Philosophers was between David Hume and Adam Smith (the famous Adam Smith, author of "The Wealth of Nations"). Smith was Hume's junior by 12 years, but both were Scottish Philosophers and they became close friends, especially later in life. Although Smith is regarded as an Economist these days (and he indeed got involved with Political Economy), he was mostly known as a Moral Philosopher in his time. His first academic position was Chair of Logic at Glasgow University, then Chair of Moral Philosophy and he regarded his first book ("The Theory of Moral Sentiments", published in 1759) as his major work. However, he received much more fame after his death for "The Wealth of Nations", which he published in 1776). These two friends had a high regard for each other's writing and were quite aligned in their thinking on Morality: "Smith joins Hume in viewing morality an eminently practical and human phenomenon rather than one based on any kind of sacred, mysterious or otherworldly authority" [1]. This is a quote from a delightful book covering this friendship as well as their lives and work, which I can highly recommend: "The Infidel and the Professor - David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought" by Dennis C. Rasmussen. Two other good biographical sources are [2] [3].

What they also had in common, was that they were both secular. Hume was quite open about his lack of faith and his criticism of the Church, while Smith was much more diplomatic and avoided religious controversy with his writing. Consequently, Smith had a stellar academic career in Scotland, while Hume was unable to get any academic position due to the strong opposition of the Church. Hume's biographer pointed out the irony that "Scotland's most distinguished Philosopher never held a Philosophy Chair" [4].

Hume died on 25 August 1776 from what his physician called "night fevers, internal bleeding, and severe diarrhea"; the same way his mother died. Today it might have been diagnosed as colon cancer. Based on the account of his last visitors and his doctor, he died "cheerful" and "in such a happy composure of mind" [5]. Smith was his literary executor and published a moving 6-page eulogy and tribute to his friend, called "Letter to Strahan" (William Strahan

was Hume's publisher). In this letter Smith used the term "friend" 17 times in 6 pages and heaped very high praise on Hume. He concluded the letter with the following heartfelt statement about his closest friend "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 permit" [6]. High praise indeed, and a brave move from a cautious man to express his sincere views about his late, secular friend. See the Secularism section below for the firestorm that followed.

The content of Hume's publications can be found online [7]



David Hume [Image credit: National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh - Heritage Images]

Hume's Contributions

He made major contributions to Epistemology, Logic, History, Moral Philosophy and Secularism in general.

- Epistemology.
 - Hume, with English Philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), were influential proponents of Empiricism at a time when Rationalism was widespread. Empiricists maintained that knowledge could only be obtained through the senses and observation, not through reason and access to innate ideas. While Locke still argued that humans were born as an empty slate (without innate ideas), Hume already had a more advanced concept of human nature and argued that humans were hardwired by nature with instinct, like other animals [8].
 - Hume and Empiricism made a significant contribution to Epistemology to the extent that it forms a fundamental part of the Scientific Method. It also formalized the provisional nature of scientific knowledge.

- Immanuel Kant published his famous “Critique of Pure Reason” in 1781, 5 years after Hume’s death and stated that he was woken from his “dogmatic slumber” after reading Hume. It would have been very interesting to see Hume’s response to “Critique of Pure Reason”. Charles Darwin also cited Hume as a major influence.
- Logic. As part of developing an epistemology, Hume outlined “the problem of Induction” and showed that observation and Induction could not conclusively prove any theory. Karl Popper (1902-1994), one of the most influential Philosophers of Science, was influenced by Hume, acknowledged his work on Induction and argued that Scientific Theories can only be falsified instead of conclusively proven (and that they also can only be regarded as scientific if they are indeed falsifiable) [9].
- History. Hume was unsuccessful in securing an academic position in Scotland (see Secularism below for more detail) and had several occupations along the way, like tutor to an aristocratic family, secretary to a general, secretary to the English Embassy, etc. In 1752 he became the keeper of the Advocates’ Library in Edinburgh. This gave him the opportunity to indulge in historical writing. His 6-volume History of England (published between 1754 and 1762) made him famous and gave him a reputation as one of the world’s leading historians. He had the firm view that there was nothing inevitable about historical progress, and many unintended consequences in the emergence of civil society and the success of nations.
- Moral Philosophy. Although his initial “A Treatise of Human Nature” is still regarded as his major Philosophical achievement, and his “History of England” gave him public fame, he was a Moral Philosopher at heart and regarded “The Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals” which he published in 1751 as his best work. It was very insightful, especially for its time. I find some of these insights quite relevant for the CSF Morality Series, which you can find here:<https://thecsf.xyz/category/morality/>. I will return to Hume in future articles of this series.
 - Almost the entire Western Philosophical tradition until then held that emotions were inferior and should be subordinate to reason, Hume maintained the opposite: that morality could not be abstractly determined by reason, but that morals flow from our “moral sentiments” (and is therefore rooted in feelings). This was a significant insight before Darwin was even born and more than 100 years before Darwin published “On the Origin of Species” in 1859.
 - He made the famous claim that an “ought” cannot be deduced from an “is”. Factual (non-moral) premises cannot lead one to valid normative conclusions [10]. Moral sentiments have to be the starting point.
- Secularism.
 - For historical context, the Roman Catholic Church executed the last person (a Spanish Schoolmaster) for blasphemy in 1826 (50 years after Hume’s death). See this CSF Historic Moments article for details: <https://thecsf.xyz/christianity-starts-its-1500-years-of-persecution/>. The last execution for blasphemy in Scotland was in 1697, only 14 years before Hume’s birth. [11]
 - Despite the fact that Christianity still had considerable political power in the 18th century and there were numerous risks involved, David Hume was openly secular. He was completely open with his friends about the fact that he was not religious and he published several controversial books. However, he also showed some caution, by never labeling himself an atheist, editing his first publication (at the age of 28) to appease Bishop Butler, and arranging for his most controversial work to be published after his death. His “Dialogues Regarding Natural Religion” was only published in 1779.
 - He paid quite a price for being openly critical of the Church, the biggest of which was that the Church prevented him from getting an academic position, even with support from leading academics like Adam Smith. Every time he applied for an academic role, he was explicitly denounced for his atheism.
 - The Roman Catholic Church added all his writings to their list of forbidden books in 1761
 - It is an eye-opener to look at the obsession religious figures had with Hume’s death. Many of them had a morbid curiosity whether he would convert in the face of death or at least die fearfully.
 - The writer, James Boswell, visited Hume shortly before his death to quiz him about his fear of death, hell or annihilation. Hume’s response was that “he was no more perturbed by the idea of ceasing to exist than by the idea that he had not existed before his death” [5]
 - Another example is English cleric, William Johnson Temple, who was a friend of Boswell, and a Hume admirer, who called Hume the best writer in Scotland. He questioned Boswell about his last visit to Hume.

When he heard that Hume did not convert and was in good spirits his contemptuous response was “If he continue obstinate [he] will die the death of a Dog.... Let him die then & be thrown into the ditch” [5]

- But most telling was the large-scale and quite vindictive outlash at Smith in response to his “Letter to Strahan”.
 - What really irked the devout was not only the openly secular Hume meeting his death “cheerful” and with dignity, but that the most prestigious Moral Philosopher of the time (Adam Smith) pronounced Hume a nearly “perfectly wise and virtuous man” [6]. They would not have it that a secular person could be either of the two. This endeavour to monopolize morality is still with us today and addressed in this Morality article: <https://thecsf.xyz/does-christianity-have-an-objective-morality/>
 - Boswell and Temple were among the many prominent Christians who published strong emotional responses. Temple, for example, recommended that “noxious weeds in the moral garden” (like Hume and Smith) should be “crushed”. But the attacks were lead by George Horne, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, Chaplain to King George III and later the Dean of Canterbury. Among many strong and sarcastic statements, Horne concluded that the conduct of both Hume and Smith were the sure sign of “baneful and pestilential influences of false philosophy on the human heart” [6].
 - This controversy raged for more than a decade, prompting Smith to state “a single, and as, I thought a very harmless Sheet of paper, which I happened to Write concerning the death of our late friend Mr Hume, brought upon me 10 times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain”. However, he never detracted his “Letter to Strahan” [6].
- David Hume was in life, during his death and posthumously an intellectual giant who made a major contribution to human knowledge, morality and secularism.



David Hume's Mausoleum in Edinburgh [Image credit: Dreamstime]

Hume Quotes

“A wise man proportion his belief to the evidence”

“It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause”

“The greater part of mankind may be divided into two classes; that of shallow thinkers who fall short of the truth; and that of abstruse thinkers who go beyond it”

“Nothing is more surprising than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few”

“To philosopher and historian the madness and imbecile wickedness of mankind ought to appear ordinary events”

“The life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster”

“The rules of morality are not the conclusion of our reason”

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Next Secular Thinkers article

Bart Ehrman by JJ Brits

Scheduled for 5 Oct 2022

Sources

[1] “The Infidel and the Professor - David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought” by Dennis C. Rasmussen, Chapter 5

[2] “David Hume, Scottish Philosopher” - Britannica

Link: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/David-Hume>

[3] <https://www.humesociety.org/about/hume>

[4] “The Infidel and the Professor - David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought” by Dennis C. Rasmussen, Chapter 3

[5] “The Infidel and the Professor - David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought” by Dennis C. Rasmussen, Chapter 11

[6] “The Infidel and the Professor - David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought” by Dennis C. Rasmussen, Chapter 12

[7] Link: <https://davidhume.org>

[8] "The Philosophy Book" by Gregory Bassham, p250

[9] "The Philosophy Book" by Cecile Landau, Andrew Szudek and Sarah Tomley (editors), Chapter 148

[10] "Hume's Moral Philosophy" - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Section 5)

Link: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/>

[11] "A Scottish Martyr" - Humanist Society Scotland

Link:

<https://www.humanism.scot/what-we-do/humanitie/a-scottish-martyr/#:~:text=At%20pm%20on%20the%208,to%20be%20executed%20for%20blasphemy.>