

The Life and Times of David Hume

[26th April 1711 – 26th August 1776.]

Who was David Hume?

David Hume was an 18th century “Man of Letters”. A Philosopher and Historian who was also a student of evolutionary psychology, economics, science and political theory. His main interest was in the ‘science of human nature’ which was where his philosophical studies were rooted. Hume was a lover of life – of people and of animals. In later life he was a gourmet cook who loved to entertain – enjoying good company, good food and wine and stimulating intellectual conversation. He enjoyed the company of women without whom any social gathering was lacking. He had many female friends and admirers, but the high price he put on his independence and freedom to travel meant that the opportunities for marriage passed him by. He was a warm and compassionate man and this showed in both his philosophical writings and in the way he lived his life. He was good-natured – cheerful, optimistic and – in the main – tolerant of the views of others. He was loved by many and hated by a few. He was known variously as “The Socrates of Edinburgh” the “Great Infidel” and “That wretched Scotchman”.

Hume wasn’t in sympathy with the philosophies of the Stoics – of Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca et al. He didn’t accept that this life is merely a prelude to a better one to come – of the need to live the ‘good life’ here in order to gain happiness in the next one. For Hume this life was to be enjoyed – eating was not just to keep you alive but for enjoyment – as was everything else about being human. He disliked the self-denial of the Stoics – their constant awareness that you – and those you love – are mortal and will die. The imperative not to become attached to earthly things because they are transitory. He disagreed with religious belief – seeing this – among other things – as a form of social control.

Hume was an Empiricist believing that “All our knowledge is derived from experience.” As a philosopher he was – in many ways – ahead of his time. He was a “skeptic” [agnostic] – who didn’t believe there was any evidence for the existence of God – while acknowledging that neither was there any hard evidence to prove that God did not exist. His close friend Adam Smith – the philosopher and economist – recorded that David Hume “reasoned himself out of religion.” Throughout his life-time Hume never changed his position on this – much to the dismay of believers – especially Samuel Johnson and James Boswell – who were convinced that – when faced with imminent death – Hume would recant. He didn’t.

David Hume was highly educated and widely read. There is evidence that he was familiar with the works - of among others - John Locke and Sir Isac Newton. Hume himself influenced some of the great thinkers who came after him – among them Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russell and Emmanuel Kant – who claimed that reading the works of Hume had “shaken him out of his dogmatic slumbers.”

Hume is now generally recognised as one of the greatest European philosophers. Currently, his writings are pored over in Academia – especially in America – even if he is barely known in his home country of Scotland. Recently, when thousands of academic philosophers were asked which non-living Philosopher, they most identified with Hume came top of the list – ahead of Kant and Aristotle.

The Edinburgh Of David Hume.

Edinburgh in the 18th century was the largest city in Scotland. It was over-crowded and bustling, with filthy streets and open-sewers. A city of teetering tenement buildings which were occupied by both rich and poor- the richer you were the higher up you lived to escape the inescapable stink of the streets below. After the evening curfew housemaids would lean out of the windows of top floor flats to empty full chamber pots onto the streets below – shouting the warning “Gardy-loo” – the Scottish-French for “gardez-l’eau”- [look out for the water!] to warn any unwary passers-by of the coming deluge. A tourist to Edinburgh at this time described it as being both “sophisticated and stinking.”

This was the period of the Scottish Enlightenment – “that wondrous flowering of ideas” that was spreading through Europe from the end of the 17th century. And Scotland – especially Edinburgh – was at the heart of it. Not just in philosophy and the arts – but in developments in transport, engineering, the sciences, medicine, geology, art and architecture. Historically, education had always been important in Scotland. By the time the University of Edinburgh was founded in 1583 there were already four flourishing universities – in Glasgow, St Andrews and two in Aberdeen. Unlike these Edinburgh was a secular and not a religious foundation. Historically, Scotland had a strong relationship with mainland Europe – especially France and the Netherlands. The sons [and it was the sons!] of the noble classes were sent to Paris and the Hague to complete their education. Joseph Hume- David’s father – had completed his legal training in Utrecht where he studied Roman Law on which the law of Scotland was – and is – based. Many of the ideas and inventions of the major figures of the Enlightenment are recognised to day – among others’ - Adam Smith, James Hutton, Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, Allan Ramsay [father and son] – architecture and painting – Hugh Blair and Thomas Reid – known for his ‘Common Sense Philosophy’ which in time made its way across the Atlantic to America.

Scotland put a high value on education and – thanks largely to the establishment of John Knox’s parish schools – every girl and boy learned to read and write – the better to read and interpret the Bible. It is estimated that by the 18thC 68% of the Lowland population were literate. This was fertile ground for the blossoming of ideas when newspapers and journals were being printed and distributed – the Paris Review, the London Review were ‘imported’ and where necessary, were translated and adapted for the local population. A plethora of

other more local publications and journals appeared in the Coffee Houses and Taverns that were springing up in the Old Town of Edinburgh. Here the local folk could read – and discuss – the news from afar. Bookshops and libraries were also being opened – not just in Edinburgh but in other Scottish towns and cities. The first such library opened in the small town of Dunblane.

Trades and professional associations were being formed – the legal and medical professions becoming highly influential in the city. Clubs and societies where like-minded folk could gather were also springing up and were hotbeds of lively discussions about the politics of the day – Whigs, Tories and Jacobites slugged it out in the taverns and proliferating clubs. Both Adam Smith and David Hume belonged to the Oyster Club in the Grassmarket where they met weekly to discuss and share ideas. Hume also belonged to the Rankenian Society in the High Street – named after the landlord – Rankin – in whose pub they congregated. The Philosophical Society was formed – and still exists today as the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Ideas flowed – as did other good things. An bill for one evening’s gathering for twelve people in 1687 – so a bit before Hume’s time – itemises the goodies which were consumed. -

“28 Bottles of claret [56s] 5 bottles of wine [12s] 2 pint bottles of claret [12s] 1 bottle of hock [4s] 5 bottles of rum for punch [30s] Supper was 55s – which included jellies, raisins, biscuits and almonds. Plus, one shilling for broken glasses.”

Scotland was proud of its tradition of education – encouraging literacy and the free and open debate of ideas and political matters among the general population. At this time David Hume exulted in the fact that he lived in a country where you could “think what you liked – and say what you think.”

Hume’s Early Life and Education.

The entry in the Edinburgh Register of Births for 26th April 1711 records the arrival of “David, son of Joseph Hume [Advocate] and Katherine Ffalconer his lady.” He was born in the family home in the Lawn Market in the Old Town – the second son and middle child. The family was comfortably off with a country estate at Ninewells in the Borders. His father died when David was a very young child and he, with his elder brother, John, and younger sister, were brought up by their mother and educated at the family home in Ninewells where there was an extensive library. From early on David was a voracious reader and in 1723 – aged eleven – he and his brother John went to Edinburgh University where they learned Latin and Greek. David was not impressed by his time here and is on record as claiming that “There is nothing I can learn from professors that I cannot learn from books.” As a second son he had to earn his living and he considered a legal career – which didn’t suit him. He returned to Ninewells where he spent the next couple of years reading and thinking – and here the foundations of

his seminal work “The Science of Human Nature” were drafted. By this time, he was early twenties and the intensity of his study and isolation of his existence at Ninewells took its toll. He became deeply depressed and -although he sought medical help from a variety of doctors – none of them could offer him a remedy. Unable to study he spent many hours riding around his family estate and gradually his mood improved. This experience made him rethink his approach to life and study and he came to realise how important good company and plenty of exercise was for his mental health. From this time on he advocated “A mixed kind of life – fresh air and exercise and good company. Not just study. In his later years he advised David - his nephew and namesake – “Every day – fair or foul – you ought to use some exercise.”

England, France and Scotland

Following this bleak period, he tried a career in commerce and got employment with Mr Michael Miller, a sugar merchant in Bristol. However, this didn’t suit him any better than the legal profession – and he was sacked by Mr Miller for correcting his spelling and grammar. In 1734 – following this dead end, he moved to France where he remained until 1738. He settled in La Flesche in the Loire valley where he lived - frugally – and devoted himself to study and writing. It was here – aged twenty-five – that he completed “A Treatise on Human Nature” which – to his bitter disappointment – failed to attract much attention at that time.

When he returned from La Flesche he moved to London where he lived for some time – the first of several visits to the capital. However, he was not as well received in English society as he had been in France. Being a secular country his controversial views on religion were very well received. This was not the case in religious England where they were most unwelcome. Samuel Johnson is reported to have detested him for being a non-believer. When he returned to Edinburgh Hume reported that – in England “some people hated me because I’m a Whig – some people hated me because I’m a skeptic – but everybody hated me because I’m a Scotchman.”

Back in Edinburgh he worked at the Advocates Library, which was not entirely to his liking. Because of his views on religion, he was never offered the Chair of Philosophy at Edinburgh University – an ongoing source of embarrassment to the native city of this great figure of the Enlightenment. Neither was he offered a Professorship at the University of Glasgow, despite the strong backing of his friend, Adam Smith.

France Again.

Hume returned to France in his later years and settled in Paris where he considered remaining for the rest of his life. Here he was received enthusiastically, being the centre of attention among the intellectual classes. In Paris he was 'Le Bon David' – the great philosopher and skeptic. He enjoyed the lively intellectual life of the Salon and the wide range of people he met. Here he was introduced to Mme Boufflers who, apparently, took a fancy to him. She is reported to have "intrigued him, flattered him – and finally scared him." Here he joined the Society of Atheists – where he was teased for not being enough of an Atheist. He bemoaned the fact that "in England and Scotland he suffered for not having enough religion. In France he had too much."

Final Return to Edinburgh.

In 1769 he returned to Edinburgh where – apart from a couple of brief trips to London – he remained for the rest of his life. Here he devoted himself to entertaining and gourmet cooking. His writings – unusual for that time – had made him a wealthy man and he decided that his small flat in the Old Town was "too small to display my great talent in cookery." He built a large house in the New Town where he moved with his sister Katherine and his small Pomeranian dog. The street was jokingly called St David Street by his women friends – and that is what it has remained to this day. Hume boasted about his cookery skills to his friends – writing that "I have just now, lying on the table before me a recipe for making soup a la reine – copied with my own hand. For beef and cabbage [a charming dish] no body excels me. I also make sheep's head broth in a manner that the Ambassador speaks of it for eight days after." He did however, admit that he was not an epicure – merely a glutton.

By now Hume was a rich man and he made generous gifts to members of his family and to a variety of other causes. In 1775 he became ill with what is thought to have been either bowel cancer or acute ulcerative colitis. He took time to set all his affairs in order and to writing his Will. He appointed his friend Adam Smith as his executor with whom he discussed the publication of his remaining- and most controversial writings – among them his essay on suicide. He also wrote his autobiography "My Own Life" which he completed in one day. A few weeks before he died, he had a lavish farewell dinner for his closest friends.

When news of his fatal illness spread there was much speculation among his God-fearing friends – and enemies – about whether fear of impending death would lead to a conversion – a flight into religious belief. On several occasions James Boswell was sent to Edinburgh by Samuel Johnson to call on Hume and beg him to recant. But, according to Adam Smith, Hume remained true to his disbelief and "died like a philosopher" on 26th August 1776.

On news of his death a crowd gathered outside his flat to watch his coffin being taken from the house. It's reported that a man was heard saying "He was an atheist." Another replied "Aye, but he was a good man." He was buried in the Old Calton graveyard where a monument was later erected. For the few days after his funeral his family had to keep watch by the grave for fear that it would be desecrated. Overall, however, he was remembered by his family and friends as "A cheerful, genial man who died at the age of 65, loved and renowned."

His epitaph simply says "David Hume: Philosopher and Historian: Scot and European. Man of Enlightenment."

Hume's Most Controversial Beliefs.

Many of David Hume's views were controversial – many of them during his lifetime and some remain so today:-

Religion: Hume entirely rejected all religious belief – although he acknowledged that it was not possible to disprove the existence of God – hence he called himself a 'skeptic' rather than an atheist. He regarded religion as a negative influence - a form of social control – and a means of stifling intellectual thought and debate.

Women: For all that Hume greatly enjoyed the company – and conversation – of women, he still believed that "Nature has given man superiority over women by endowing him with greater strength of both mind and body."

Suicide: Hume believed that people had the right to decide when to end their lives – "when life become an intolerable burden due to age, sickness and disability." "Taking your own life is justifiable when people have a stable and settled will to do so." Because of its controversial nature this essay was not published until after his death.

Animals: Hume believed that in essence, animals were no different from humans. They were more intelligent than humans believed – "because humans are less intelligent than they think they are." Animals are as capable of feelings as humans and can experience grief, love, hatred and pride – and he gave examples of this - eg the peacock.

And – egregiously – his views on race, about which he wrote that he was "Apt to suspect that negroes – and in general all other species of man – are inferior to the whites." His loyal friend and supporter Adam Smith – who clearly did not share these views – discouraged him from publishing this paper, but although Hume toned it down, he appeared to remain of that opinion. Interestingly, in one of his earlier essays Hume had observed that – however intelligent and erudite a man is – he will always have a blind spot that he is unaware of. Sadly, this was clearly his.

Sources of Information.

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