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Hume and his Heirs

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"A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast," Hume observes in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, "may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself." The words would have applied very well to Marx; and Hume, later in life, could have made them fit his acquaintance Rousseau, whom he treated with invariable kindness, but who—Hume at length concluded—was little better than a madman.

Now Hume has a place in the calendar of philosophy; but, being a jolly, fat, witty, cosmopolitan gentleman, he did very well as respects intimacy and society. The ladies, especially, doted on Hume, though he was a confirmed bachelor who thought marriage too much of a luxury for a frugal Scot. Once, in a French tableau, he figured as a sultan between two houris, in the form of Parisian beauties: thus, between conviviality and books, his life was spent. Adam Smith, his best friend, considered him "as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will admit."

Born in 1711, the second son of a Border laird, Hume made a good deal of money from his books (which no philosopher does nowadays), twice went on diplomatic missions, was an undersecretary of state for a time, served as Keeper of the Advocates' Library for years, lived on sixpence a day in his rooms in the towering pile of James' Court by the Lawnmarket, and knew nearly everyone of the world of fashion and letters in France and Scotland. If the mind and character of the eighteenth century

may be represented by any one man, that man is Davy Hume. He spent his days in dissipating philosophical illusions, and his influence, as a destructive critic of ideas, is at work among us still. T. H. Huxley observes that " if you want to get a clear conception of the deepest problems set before the intellect of man, there is no need, so far as I can see, for you to go beyond the limits of the English tongue. Indeed, if you are pressed for time, three English authors will suffice, Berkeley, Hume, and Hobbes." However this may be, certainly Hume is one of the most powerful of modern thinkers—and his work is a model of philosophical style —more influential than either Berkeley or Hobbes.

Samuel Johnson, who detested him, said that Hume was a Tory only by accident. He meant principally that Hume's scepticism in religion made him a curious partisan of the faction of King and Church. An ardent High Tory Hume was, for all that, venerating Charles I and Strafford in his *History of England*. Our impressions, morals, and tastes are the products of Nature, rather than Reason, Hume argued in his books; there is not much accounting for them; and so, perhaps, it was with his own politics. A contemner of enthusiasm, a being possessed of scarcely a strong emotion of any sort, Hume nevertheless stood for the Old Cause against Whiggery, for Faith against Reason, for Nature against the Rights of Man. To understand his work properly, one needs to read *A Treatise of Human Nature* (written when he was twenty-four), *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). Of these, Hume himself believed *Human Understanding* to be the most important.

The great philosphical systems are perennial. Hume was in the line of the Greek Sceptics, or the medieval Nominalists: his pleasure was to puncture balloons. The biggest balloon that came his way was John Locke, whom he undoes thoroughly in *Human Understanding*. Reason with a Roman R, pure rationality as the guide to morals and politics, dominated the first half of the eighteenth century, and Locke was the great champion and exponent of this system. Pure Reason never recovered from Hume's needle-prick, and Kant carried on Hume's criticism; but philosophical systems last a long while, in the public consciousness, long after they have been mortally wounded, so that journalists like Tom Paine were crying up the Age of Reason well into the nineteenth

century, and Reason has its worshippers still.

" Religion is irrational, theism is permissible only in utter attenuation: oh for a revelation! but not, if you please, the one we are supposed to have had already." So Basil Willey sums up Hume's theology. The thread of Hume's discourse runs thus. Locke did not understand the nature of innate ideas. They do exist; they form, indeed, our human nature, which we know through the study of history; and it is these innate ideas, or impressions, which guide us through life. The knowledge we pick up in life is fragmentary, and necessarily imperfect because of the imperfection of our senses; these are vast realms of which we can know nothing; and we do not form our judgements upon the basis of logically-arranged accumulations of experience, but rather attach these experiences to general ideas. Those ideas are produced from " impressions"; but the origin of impressions is inexplicable. We cannot say whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produced by the creative power of the mind, or are derived from God. The imagination, rather than mere experience-knowledge, is the source of whatever wisdom we have. And no one can account for the existence of the imagination in individuals, varying so greatly: it is literally *genius*, though Hume does not say so.

What we learn in this world we learn through custom, repeated experiences, rather than pure Reason. " Our reason never does, nor is it possible that it should upon any supposition, give us an assurance of the continued and distinct existence of body." Education really is the accumulated custom of the race. The ways of society are not the products of reason, but of the customary experience of the species, beginning with small family-groups and growing upward into the state. It is perilous to meddle, on principles of pure rationality, with valuable social institutions that thus are natural developments, not logical schemes. All religion is irrational; it is derived from Revelation and Faith; it cannot be sustained by logical argument, which only betrays Christianity to its enemies. (This was the stand of the Nominalists.) In nature are vast mysteries which we cannot possibly apprehend. There are no metaphysical or supernatural sanctions for morality; reason only reveals a universe in which the great mysterious powers have no regard for human good or evil; no, our morality—which Hume was sedulous to uphold—is obedi-

ence to the rules of approbation and disapprobation by our fellows; and the standard of morality is shown to us by the study of history, and its arbiters are men of strong sense and delicate sentiment, whose impressions force themselves upon the wills of their fellow-men.

A moderate scepticism of this sort, Hume declared, is the only real defence of Christianity, morality, and established social institutions. Follow Nature, not a vain illusory Reason; understand the nature of man, and be guided accordingly; we cannot know more; our intellects are puny. "Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature." This chain of argument is formed with consummate skill and power, and expressed with an urbane good humour. The effect of Hume's books, joined to the general influence of similar reflections by other men, began very promptly to change the climate of opinion among advanced thinkers, so that the *philosophes*, after the middle of the eighteenth century, turned reluctantly away from pure reason and busied themselves with history, political reform, and scholarly concerns that did not aspire to perfect knowledge of universals.

As a congenital Tory, Hume had every desire to preserve the pleasant society of the eighteenth century, of which he was an ornament. He did not desire to alter the established morality of the age, nor to destroy religious faith, nor to make any radical change in social institutions. Revolutionaries of every description, he said, the civil magistrate justly puts on the same footing with common robbers. He was well aware of the inflammatory power of certain concepts, once they have been vulgarized, and said so. "Why rake into those corners of nature, which spread a nuisance all around?" The obsession of *philosophes* with abstract reason, *a priori* systems, and dialectics tends towards this. "Truths which are *pernicious* to society, if any such there are, will yield to errors, which are salutary and *advantageous*." It is quite possible to reason ourselves out of virtue and social enjoyment. "The passion for philosophy, like that for religion, seems liable to this inconvenience, that, though it aims at the correction of our manners, and extirpation of our vices, it may only serve, by imprudent management, to foster a predominant inclination, and

push the mind, with more determined resolution, towards that side which already *draws* too much, by the bias and propensity of the natural temper." Nor had a man ought to let his speculations disturb the even tenor of his ways: Hume himself postponed the publication of his *Natural History of Religion* until his death, to spare himself the fury of outraged orthodoxy.

Yet, in the long run, Hume's ideas had their revolutionary consequences. It was sufficient unto his time that the gentleman and the scholar, like Hume himself, should set the standard of taste and morality; their approbation secured the substantial emulation of the mass of men. But when the gentleman and the scholar ceased to fix the tone of life, the fate of morality became in question; transcendent sanction lacking, and deference from the crowd gone, every appetite might be indulged. It was sufficient unto his time that moderate scepticism should chasten the presumption of established churches: those churches seemed very secure indeed, with the mob on their side, so that when Hume died, in 1776, it was found prudent to set a watch by his grave on the Calton Hill for eight days, lest the Edinburgh zealots for religion wreak their vengeance on the sceptic's corpse. But a time would come when faith would go out of the masses, and revelation would be forgotten: and then religion might need the Schoolmen's bulwark of reason.

And though Hume's books undid Locke and the French philosophers of pure rationality, philosophical systems and their refutations work their way only slowly to the congnizance of the great public. By the last decade of the century, Reason was enthroned in Notre Dame, and *a priori* notions were applied to the governance of great states, and the Rights of Man triumphed over custom and prudence. That urbane, leisurely, orderly world of Hume's was submerged in France and much of the rest of Europe; it has been sinking ever since; and what remains of it now is in peril everywhere. Whether human nature, as Hume described it, can endure the assault of modern armed doctrines is now a question ominously debated by the philosophers of our own century.

Two hundred and fifty years after Hume's birth, we live in a society—what with his dislike of all things vulgar—the sage of Ninewells would have despised. And yet our era was of Hume's making, in part. In France, d'Alembert and Turgot were Hume's

intimates: the great rationaliser and the great centralizer, the advocates of radical social reform and democracy, who reaped the whirlwind—curious friends for the champion of customary ways and Stuart causes.

At home, Hume found for his disciple Adam Smith, the philosopher of the new industrial and commercial order that would give the quietus to the old rural Scotland of which Hume was patriotically proud. In England, Jeremy Bentham, "the great subversive", took his ethics straight from Hume—Bentham, whose jurisprudence and political utilitarianism led to a domination that would have been more repugnant to Hume than the ascendancy of the Whigs whom he mauled so cavalierly.

It was in 1776, the year of *The Wealth of Nations* and of the Declaration of Independence, that Hume went to his grave on the Calton. In his will he left a sum for the repair of a bridge near Ninewells, specifying that the work must not injure the aspect of a charming old quarry which he had admired for years. Despite all his causticity, to the last Hume stood by ancient usage, prescription, old sights and ways, and refined taste. As the sardonic critic of fashionable delusions, and as the exemplar of scholarly candour, Hume ought to endure. The Whigs, with their abundant preferment to bestow upon men of letters, he once wrote to the Earl of Balcarres, do not rest content with *small* lies. And Hume never condescended to tell any big ones.