

# Learning from 300 Years of Hume

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## 1. Dinosaurs, Antiquarians, and Traditional Teaching

Why, as we celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, do we still study David Hume's philosophy? Hume wrote copiously on many things, including economics, politics, psychology, religion, and especially history. Yet few historians – either students or academics – now read Hume's monumental *History of England*, unless they are *historiographers*, concerned with the development of historical writing itself. Even fewer economists – as opposed to scholars of the history of economic thought – pay any attention to Hume's *Essays*, and most of them never even engage with the writings of Adam Smith, widely recognised as the greatest founding father of the subject, whose work built in so many ways on that of his close friend Hume. Psychology, again, is now well-established as an experimental science, with little serious scientific interest remaining even in the once-influential theories of Sigmund Freud, let alone the much earlier psychological discussions of Hume's *Treatise* and *Dissertations*. So why do philosophers – including philosophers of political thought and of religion – continue to study Hume so intently? Are they just dinosaurs whose lack of new ideas condemns them to rehashing forever the same old stuff? Is there really no progress in philosophy?

More specific questions can be asked of historians of philosophy, who are typically also active philosophers in their own right. Granted, they have a specialist interest in the history of the discipline, earning (at least some of) their bread by exploring the past, and teaching and publishing their discoveries. No doubt there is plenty more to learn here, extending the “canon” by scouring libraries, physical or virtual, for old texts whose place in the history of thought might be unjustly neglected. But does anyone really need to research Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiries* any more? Haven't these been adequately worked over for centuries, dozens if not hundreds of times? And what do historians of philosophy think they are doing, when they keep coming up with “novel interpretations” of Hume's thought? If Hume couldn't write clearly, then why on earth is he accorded such respect? And if he could write clearly, then surely by now we must know what he said. So isn't it about time that people stopped trying to dream up new ways of reading *into* his texts (rather than *from* them) innumerable ideas that he didn't express himself, and the majority of which must surely misrepresent his thought?

Such doubts about the history of philosophy might provoke some concern even about our traditional teaching practices, whereby students are introduced to standard philosophical issues through the writings of the “great, dead philosophers”. This does have an obvious point when so much of our terminology is infused with allusions to the philosophers who first developed familiar positions (e.g. “Cartesian dualism”, “Berkeleyan idealism”, “Humean

scepticism”). But such terminology could easily be taught with little reference to the original writings, by presenting simplistic caricatures that will often be quite adequate for the purpose of broadly outlining those familiar options (and may, indeed, be *more* reliable as a guide to ordinary non-specialist philosophical parlance). So is there really any great value – beyond deference to tradition – in requiring students to engage *seriously* with the classics, when even specialist scholars seem to have such difficulty in going beyond these broad outlines and agreeing in detail what our great predecessors were actually saying?

All these are good questions, likely to occur to any critically-minded person who ponders the place of classic authors in the research and teaching of contemporary philosophy. Here I am focusing on Hume, but of course similar questions could be asked, perhaps even more pointedly, about the ancient sages Plato and Aristotle with their two thousand years of secondary literature. And there are plenty of others in the philosophical pantheon – Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Frege, Wittgenstein, and the rest – who could also be thought to have attracted far more than their fair share of study and scholarship. Nevertheless Hume has a special status, probably honoured more widely (at least at the present time) than any of these others amongst aestheticians, epistemologists, metaphysicians, moral philosophers, philosophers of religion, and philosophers of science, not to mention secularists and humanists. So there is good reason to focus on him here, quite apart from his tercentenary.

## **2. Difficult Questions and Evolving Disciplines**

The first point to make in reply concerns the nature of philosophy, which almost by definition focuses on *difficult* questions, whose methods of solution – let alone the answers suggested – are typically debatable and conceptually unclear. Thus at the time he wrote them, Hume’s psychological explorations in the *Treatise*, like the ideas in his essays on economics, came under the heading of “moral philosophy”, the philosophy of the human world. He was breaking new ground, developing concepts and methods that would be built on by later generations of thinkers. But once these later thinkers had established new disciplines on those foundations, future work in psychology and economics ceased to count as part of “philosophy”. Thus the questions that we continue to call “philosophical” are typically those that have *not* yet been solved, and whose very method of solution is open to live debate. There are, of course, plenty of difficult questions in biochemistry, say. But the *concepts* involved and the general *methods* of addressing those questions are well understood, and hence biochemists do not spend their time worrying about the appropriateness of the laboratory work that occupies most of their time. Physicists, by contrast, get much closer to philosophy, when they venture to speculate about the origin of the universe, the apparently indeterminate nature of the quantum world, multiple universes, and so forth: all areas where conceptual problems loom large and it remains very unclear how far experimental investigation can take us. Hence there are plenty of specialist philosophers of physics, as well as physicists with philosophical interests. A similar point would apply to much of computer science and the multi-disciplinary area known as cognitive science, both young disciplines with huge amounts of new territory to explore and

concepts to develop. Economics is a very different case, firmly established institutionally with an orthodox mathematical methodology, yet arguably on flimsy foundations. Recent events have convinced many that this emperor is at least partially naked and needs re-clothing; the philosophy of economics is consequently on the rise.

It is important to recognise, then, that progress *by philosophers* does not necessarily register – at least to the outside observer – as progress *in philosophy*. And progress by philosophers has in fact been monumental by any standards. The great intellectual developments that created the modern world were driven by philosophers, most obviously in the political, economic, and religious arenas (consider, for instance, Locke’s influence on the USA constitution, Rousseau’s on the French Revolution, the advocacy of free trade by Hume, Smith and Ricardo, and the attacks of Hume, Voltaire and others on religious dogmatism). But the same is true in physical science also: thus Bacon paved the way for experimental investigation of the natural world, Descartes and Leibniz were brilliant mathematicians and physicists, and even Kant – though his main interests were metaphysical – developed the now-dominant nebular hypothesis of the formation of the solar system, putting man firmly in his post-Copernican place. This “natural philosophy” was seen as broadly continuous with the rest of their work, well before the familiar divide came to be drawn, between speculative “philosophy” and empirical “science”. Descartes now continues to be thought of as a “philosopher” because his metaphysical views remain interesting, while his physics was ultimately eclipsed by Newton. In contrast, Newton himself (along with Galileo, Boyle and others) moved from the status of “natural philosopher” to “scientist”, because his contributions to mathematical physics proved so vastly more significant than his efforts elsewhere.

Even amongst this impressive company, Hume can claim as high a place as any, his position enduringly secure both as a “philosopher” and a seminal pioneer of the “science of man”, which since his time has grown hugely in many of the directions that he was the first to advocate and explore. All well and good, you might say – we can agree that Hume *himself* was no dinosaur – but why does this give *us* any reason to study him *now*, other than from historical interest? Psychologists who want to understand the human mind, for example, surely have no need now to study Hume’s works, or to fight again the battles that he helped to win for them. They will instead follow the *spirit* of his philosophy, relying on the empirical investigation that he himself so ardently insisted was the only route to knowledge of the world (or of ourselves). In many areas of psychology, all this is true enough, but there are other areas – particularly in the vicinity of the new multi-disciplinary field known as *cognitive science* – where things are far less straightforward, and where thinking through Hume’s problems, in his way, can open our minds to new ideas that could prove genuinely fruitful. Thus Jerry Fodor has recently found inspiration in Hume’s theory of ideas and faculties, writing a book called *Hume Variations* (2003) which argues that:

Hume is remarkably perceptive about the components and structure that a theory of mind requires. Careful study of the *Treatise* helps us to see what’s amiss with much twentieth-century philosophy of mind, and get on the right track. (Fodor 2003, cover blurb)

Perhaps surprisingly, going back to a philosopher of the eighteenth century turns out to be useful for inspiring *new* thoughts (even within a field that didn't exist in his day)! Fodor finds Hume helpful when pushing at the boundaries of our understanding into what he takes to be poorly understood phenomena. And this illustrates again how it is typically in the conceptually problematic areas, where difficult problems arise without established methods of solution, that there is a need for the kind of thinking that philosophy especially cultivates: analytical and critical, yet imaginative and open-minded to new – *and to old* – approaches.

### 3. Fashion and Forgetfulness

Even in relatively straightforward areas, going back to the classic philosophers can be useful to remind us about things that were once well understood but have been widely forgotten. Because philosophy is so focused on controversial and conceptually difficult areas, those questions that remain within its scope (and are not exported to the special sciences that it spawns) commonly provoke strong advocacy and debate, while lacking the sort of empirical anchoring that would dampen the influence of prevailing currents of thought. So philosophy is highly subject to trends and fashions, bringing a serious risk that important lessons will be forgotten and will have to be re-learned again and again if insufficient attention is paid to its history. In recent debates about the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness, for example, it is frequently claimed that any physical explanation of subjective experience must be impossible on principle. This is essentially the same point that was repeatedly urged against Thomas Hobbes – the materialist “monster of Malmesbury” – by many philosophers of the seventeenth century, a debate on which Hume expressed important new insights in his discussion of “the immateriality of the soul” in his 1739 *Treatise*. It can be almost painful to see so many philosophers now discussing these things, typically quite oblivious of the valuable lessons that could be learned from such older literature.

But fashion can bring benefits as well as costs, as long as the lessons of previous fashions – both positive and negative – remain available to study and recall. The confidence and group interactions that come from being part of a bandwagon can push things forward with an energy that would otherwise be difficult to harness, and progress tends to be much faster if, for a time at least, inhibiting quibbles and sceptical worries are quietly ignored. An example from the heart of theoretical philosophy is the current fashion for armchair metaphysics, apparently attempting to establish truths about the world in a largely a priori manner that Hume would have considered utterly impossible. My own suspicion is that this fashion will fade once its apparent successes prove to be insecure, but I fully expect that it will bear lasting fruit in other ways, by exploring new byways that would not have opened up without that initial ambition. Who knows how fertile these might prove to be in the future, or in what direction? And even if they do not, the very prominence of the bandwagon has provoked critical scrutiny and a new field of study – *metametaphysics* – whose aim is to question the foundations of metaphysics. Here Hume's writings can continue to provide nourishment for the sceptic, not just as historical documents, but as sources of live arguments that retain considerable force.

Whether believers or sceptics triumph within these debates, new insights are likely to arise (including on the strength of Hume's critical views), and some positions will be established more securely, or at the very least, the options clarified.

A contrasting example comes from economics, a field now generally regarded as independent, but widely informed by a philosophical view of human nature – as both perfectly rational and perfectly self-interested – which Hume (and Smith) would have considered a fantasy. Here the bandwagon has become established orthodoxy, generating huge quantities of theoretical results which have proved valuable in many areas, though less so in others. Recent events at least suggest that the time is ripe for review, and for more open-minded investigation of alternative approaches, as exemplified by the rise of so-called “behavioural”, “experimental”, and “agent-based” economics. But suppose this suggestion were to be opposed on principle by an orthodox economist, on the grounds that the core of his theory is palpably true: that we do in fact universally act so as to maximise our perceived “utility”. When challenged over some apparently altruistic behaviour – a woman volunteering to nurse the victims of an earthquake, say – his response is to assert that the apparently selfless outcome must, after all, be something that the woman desires, and hence counts as a component of her own utility. She might *appear* to be acting for others, but *in reality* she is just seeking the satisfaction of her own desires, and hence maximising her own personal benefit, just as much as any avaricious financier. Here is a clear case where appeal to Hume can helpfully remind us of things that were once better understood. First, we can attack this “selfish hypothesis” with a vigorous thrust of the analytical tool known as “Hume’s Fork”: *Is the claim that we act so as to maximise our utility supposed to be a relation of ideas – a mere consequence of the way the terms are defined – or a matter of fact?* If it is a relation of ideas, then “utility” is simply being used to mean whatever is the target of our actions, in which case it cannot *also* mean personal benefit: there is no *contradiction* in our desiring someone else’s benefit for its own sake (as any parent knows). If, on the other hand, the claim is understood as a matter of fact, then it can only be decided by empirical investigation, and whether the nurse who helps earthquake victims is motivated by self-interest or by genuine altruism is a matter of her psychology, not something that can be determined a priori by the tautologous observation that she desires what she desires. This argument ought to be decisive, but if further persuasion is needed, Hume again provides it, appealing to the earlier arguments of Joseph Butler to highlight the key point:

It has been prov'd [by Butler] that even the Passions, commonly esteem'd selfish, carry the Mind beyond Self, directly to the Object; that tho' the Satisfaction of these Passions gives us Enjoyment, yet the Prospect of this Enjoyment is not the Cause of the Passion, but on the contrary the Passion is antecedent to the Enjoyment, and without the former, the latter could never possibly exist.

(E 1.14, note in 1748/50 editions; cf. M Appx 2.12)

So those who account for human behaviour exclusively in terms of a desire for personal pleasure are putting the cart before the horse. It might be that the nurse gets pleasure from the recovery of her patient, but if so, that is clearly because she *first* desires his recovery. The *fulfilled desire* is what generates the *pleasure*, and to suppose the reverse is to adopt a manifestly ridiculous model of human motivation: of a self-interested nurse who, though she has not the slightest concern for the patient himself, somehow inexplicably gains pleasure from

his recovery, anticipates doing so, and plans accordingly. On this model, we never act at all from a direct desire for any outcome beyond personal pleasure. All the time, we are *calculating* to maximise our envisaged pleasure, somehow anticipating that this will mysteriously arise from certain outcomes, even though we are entirely indifferent to those outcomes themselves. Quite apart from the absurd motivational psychology here, the picture of humans as constantly calculating rather than directly desiring outcomes is implausibly rationalistic, as Hume observes with a characteristic move of his own:

Animals are found susceptible of kindness, both to their own species and to ours; nor is there, in this case, the least suspicion of disguise or artifice. Shall we account for all *their* sentiments too, from refined deductions of self-interest? Or if we admit a disinterested benevolence in the inferior species, by what rule of analogy can we refuse it in the superior? (*M* Appx 2.8)

Plenty of people, both before Darwin and since, have espoused theories of human nature that would take us out of the natural world into some theoretical wonderland. Hume continues to provide a valuable (and elegantly written) corrective, his arguments remaining as pertinent as ever they were. We need not be surprised to learn that Darwin was reading Hume on “The Reason of Animals” (in the first *Enquiry*) at the time when he devised his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Thus the writings of classic philosophers can usefully remind us of worthwhile views and arguments that might otherwise be lost in the flow of fashion. In the specific case we have just considered, no doubt these points could be preserved without reference to Butler and Hume, by simply cataloguing – in textbooks or encyclopaedia articles – their key observations and arguments that show crude “psychological egoism” to be a hopeless theory of human motivation. But quite apart from the aesthetic and cultural loss involved in this unhistorical approach, it will fail with philosophical trends that are relatively subtle and less specific, and which involve the application of common ideas, themes, and techniques to a wide range of complex and conceptually tricky issues. Here the value of older currents of thought can be fully maintained only if they are kept alive through active engagement, rather than merely recorded as positions frozen in time. And it is in this spirit that Fodor (as we saw earlier) comes to Hume, finding in him a champion for conceptual *atomism* against the dominant *pragmatism* and *holism* of Wittgenstein, Quine and others.

To sum up so far, there is indeed real progress in philosophy, but often manifesting itself within *other* disciplines. Also, the resulting movement can be in a direction that later needs to be rethought, especially in difficult, conceptually unclear areas, where the ultimate destination can be impossible to predict in advance. In these cases, keeping older patterns of thought alive is valuable for the future as well as for our appreciation of the past, enabling us to avoid being blinkered by whatever happens to be the dominant fashion. Furthermore, a writer like Hume is worth reading for the elegant beauty of his prose, even when he is expressing familiar truths that could be learned elsewhere. In his philosophy of religion, for instance, the artfully written *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* remains an essential resource for the wonderful way in which it expresses a range of interacting lines of thought which still retain their force, and are ultimately devastating to the (then universally respected) Design Argument

for God's existence. Admittedly, a new element has recently been added to this debate, in the form of the "Fine-Tuning Argument" which appeals to the apparent "anthropic coincidences" in the values of the physical constants that structure the universe. Here one must indeed go beyond Hume, but for the reader wanting to get to grips with the pros and cons of the traditional argument – including many points that can apply equally to the Fine Tuning considerations – there is no better teacher. His treatment of the Problem of Evil in Parts 10 and 11 of the *Dialogues*, for example, still deserves recommendation as essential reading for any student, and no scientific advance will depose it from that position.

#### 4. Squabbling Scholars

This brings us to my second set of initial questions, addressed to Hume scholars in particular. If Hume's writing is so wonderful, then how is it that there can be such disagreement over his meaning? And if it is so lucid, then how can it permit such a vast range of "interpretations", or demand such continued intense study? Here views may well differ considerably among scholars, so I shall just give my personal perspective. First, I believe that the proliferation of interpretations that currently exists is a sign of the relative immaturity of the field, rather than a permanent state. For most of the time since Hume wrote, his philosophy has been subject to caricature and distortion by friends and foes alike, either intent to find their own views in his canonical texts (e.g. the Logical Positivists) or else to ignore his unpalatable principles (e.g. Christians or others, offended or frightened by his various sceptical arguments). Serious, careful Hume scholarship is relatively recent as a widespread phenomenon, and when in 2000 I put together a "Critical Survey of the literature on Hume and the First *Enquiry*", aiming to select and discuss around 250 of the most useful secondary works, I was struck by the disproportionate volume of good material from just the previous decade. Certainly there is excellent scholarship from relatively early in the twentieth century, such as the well-known books by Charles Hendel, Norman Kemp Smith, and John Passmore. But in general, serious attempts to grapple carefully with Hume's texts on their own terms have dramatically proliferated over the last 30 years. This trend has also been hugely facilitated more recently by the availability of searchable electronic texts, both of Hume himself and others, removing any excuse for hand-waving generalities that fail to stand up to detailed scrutiny. Now, when a scholar claims that Hume means this or that by some key term, it is open to all – even the novice research student – to search quickly through the relevant texts and check that the claim makes sense. So I trust that it will come to be seen as a routine professional expectation, when interpretative claims are presented in any serious scholarly work, to back them up with a precision and thoroughness that would have been impossible in previous generations for all but the most devoted specialists.

My own primary ambition as a Hume scholar is, as far as possible, to find *The Truth* about what Hume thought; and although lack of evidence sometimes makes this impossible, in many cases it seems perfectly realistic. So I expect that over time, many current interpretations will be refuted and disappear, narrowing considerably the range of seriously considered views.

To take a specific example, Hume's essay "Of Miracles" – in which he argues that no report of a miracle can ever provide a rational foundation for religious belief – has generated a surprising diversity of interpretations. Not only have scholars often misunderstood key terms (e.g. "law of nature", "miracle", "proof") in ways that can be decisively refuted; many have also appealed to an implausible variety of supposedly suppressed premises or lines of argument, often with scant solid evidence in the text. Many of these, I suspect, have been motivated by an underlying desire to render Hume's argument either compelling or clearly refutable, according to the analyst's prejudice. But in any case, I believe that seriously close attention to Hume's text delivers a clear verdict on most – though not all – of the key interpretational questions that have been raised about "Of Miracles", and I expect that this will be increasingly recognised. The upshot is to reveal Hume's argument as being far better than his critics allege, while at the same time ultimately flawed. But discovering exactly *how* it is flawed, and thinking carefully through its twists and turns, is itself a wonderful learning experience, delivering insights beyond those that are directly conveyed by Hume's words.

## 5. Defensible Diversity

This last point helps to explain why – even after clearly refutable interpretations have been rejected – there will always remain room for multiple "readings" of the text. When the text is itself ambiguous or indeterminate, or leaves logical gaps, or merely provokes objections, scholars will have different preferences for how these issues are best to be resolved. Further indeterminacies will arise from divergence between Hume's language and our own, most obviously if our language is not English, or if the meaning of specific words has evolved since his time. More subtle indeterminacies can emerge through the development of new philosophical concepts, requiring Hume's thought to be "translated" (one might sometimes say "shoehorned") into categories rather different from his own. Making sense of Hume's talk of mental faculties such as "reason" and "the imagination", for instance, requires careful interpretation, because he shares Locke's scepticism about faculty language, and yet several of his most central arguments (e.g. on induction, the external world, and the basis of morality) are couched in faculty terms. In struggling to understand what he means, we have to think things through in our own minds, informed as these may be by knowledge of the contemporary categories not only of philosophy but of cognitive science and psychology. So even if we aspire only to follow Hume's own engagement with the problems – let alone to build further on his thoughts – we have little choice but to attempt such "translation". Of course there is a sense in which this process involves a distortion of his thought, but such distortions are entirely legitimate as long as we retain a clear understanding of what it is we are doing, and do not allow this to obliterate the faithful memory of (our best understanding) of what Hume is up to in his own terms.

It follows from this that interpretations of Hume will, quite legitimately, vary over time, and not only because scholars learn more about Hume himself. Even when our understanding of Hume has indeed moved forward, high quality older work (such as H. H. Price's 1940 book



on *Hume's Theory of the External World*) can retain a distinctive value precisely *because* it views him through spectacles tinted with the fashions of the time, giving later readers an appreciation of unfamiliar aspects of his thought. Inevitably, those who are immersed in the thought of a particular period will focus on elements of Hume's philosophy – including themes and subtle textures within it – that harmonise or are made vivid by their own particular context. Thus when atomism has been in fashion, scholars have recognised more easily (and been accordingly inspired by) the aspects of the *Treatise* that chime with that; when naturalism became all the rage, a different set of connections began to be appreciated which might previously have been entirely overlooked. This again shows how the coming and going of trends in philosophy, though incompatible with the steady, forward progress commonly expected in the sciences, can also bring complementary advantages. To expect such steady progress across the board would anyway be unrealistic: as we saw earlier, philosophical questions are typically different from those of the special sciences *precisely because* they have no established method of solution. Our questions are also difficult and often conceptually obscure: hence it is humanly impossible to foresee, or even to recognise, all of the connections that might prove fruitful in the future, and often one has to “think oneself into” a position intensively and over time before one becomes able to envisage most of its range of possibilities. So trends and fashions are indeed only to be expected, but notice here how an enduring focus on the texts of the “great, dead, philosophers”, so far from rooting us immovably in the world of those classic thinkers, can also surprisingly play a quite different positive role. Without my interest in Hume, I might never have read Price's views on perception and “sense data”. Through his book, the greatest philosopher of the eighteenth century has thus provided a connecting thread through which the insights of a *different* period – the early twentieth century – can be conveyed forward even to those who have no special interest in that period.

The case of miracles again provides a nice example of several of these points. I believe that Hume's argument for the famous “Maxim” that ends *Enquiry* 10 Part 1 is based on a presupposition which fails, but Hume's own attitude to this presupposition is very unclear, partly because its failure is highlighted by his own argument (as well as by what he goes on to say in Part 2). I do not think Hume himself fully understood the logic here, partly because he declined to approach it in the mathematical terms suggested by his contemporary opponents George Campbell and Richard Price, an approach which has since become standard with the growth of probability theory. Those who now study Hume on miracles are therefore likely to be brought into contact with these later developments, as well as the objections that build on them. In considering a response to these objections on Hume's behalf, I find myself preferring to adjust his Maxim to focus on *the probability of true or false testimony being given* rather than on *the probability of given testimony being true or false*. This is all in a fully Humean spirit, but I do not pretend that it is exactly what he meant. It has led me to think of these issues in a different way, and were I now asked to present my own case against miracles, I would seek to integrate what I have learned from his essay with material from his *Natural History of Religion*, as well as from recent literature in the psychology of religion to which I

was drawn by this investigation. Other interpreters would, no doubt, have formed different – but perhaps equally legitimate – preferences in response to similar discoveries, and one can learn greatly *both about Hume and about philosophy* through seeing his issues explored in a variety of ways, both over time and through the involvement of a variety of scholars with different emphases.

Yet another source of legitimate variation in approach derives from the changes in Hume’s position in his various works. Many scholars prefer to focus on the view of his youthful *Treatise*, attracted by its systematicity and complexity, but some of us prefer to wander more widely. For example, my own research has led me to believe that in many respects Hume’s first *Enquiry*, though more limited, is philosophically stronger than Book 1 of the *Treatise* on most of their common topics. Meanwhile, Jackie Taylor has done much to establish the second *Enquiry* as importantly different from Book 3 of the *Treatise*, and in philosophically valuable ways. Very recently, my graduate student Amyas Merivale has argued that Hume’s *Dissertation on the Passions*, though generally considered a lightweight pastiche, in important respects represents a philosophical improvement on *Treatise* Book 2. Clearly there is room both for research that addresses the *Treatise* exclusively on its own terms, as well as research that attempts to identify the settled views of the mature philosopher.

## 6. Living Humeanism

Of course there is also plenty of room for *debate*, for strong disagreement and attempted refutation. Personally, I have probably learned most from Don Garrett’s sustained and unfailingly ingenious attempts to find truth and sound logic in virtually all of the Humean positions he discusses, often reaching a convincing interpretation but sometimes less so. Even when I remain unconvinced, almost invariably I have found that my understanding *both of Hume and of the philosophical issues* has been enriched by the experience of engaging with Don’s work. In relation to Hume’s philosophy of induction, for example, I used to think that his use of the term “reason” is simply ambiguous, an orthodoxy that Don has long disputed. My quest to refute Don’s “univocal” reading has led – through careful study of the writings of Hume’s contemporaries as well as his own – to a more nuanced view, understanding his core notion of reason as signifying our faculty of *cognition*, but accordingly giving rise to various related senses of the word (rather than a crude ambiguity). This in turn has led me to rethink my own view on inductive scepticism, so that I have gained philosophically from this interaction with Don’s view. Such enrichment is made possible by our shared involvement with Hume’s interests, not only as historical scholars but also as actively committed philosophers.

All this helps to explain why historians of philosophy (or historically-minded philosophers) tend to focus so much on the established canonical figures of the past rather than spending their time scouring libraries for forgotten heroes. We want to deepen our understanding of *philosophy*, as well as of the past, and we are characteristically motivated by philosophical fascination with the issues even more than by historical curiosity. With Hume,

these two combine very well, because his thought is generally so logical, insightful and profound that engaging with it deeply can provide valuable lessons and new inspiration to each succeeding generation. Philosophers as diverse as John Mackie (attacking religion and moral objectivism), Peter Strawson (on free-will and scepticism), David Lewis (with his “Humean mosaic”), Annette Baier (interpreting reason as social and passionate), and Simon Blackburn (proposing a “quasi-realist” account of morality and much else) have found fertile seeds in Hume’s philosophy. Nor does one have to be a “Humean” to learn from him, because even when he makes mistakes – and I think he makes a fair number – these are typically illuminating, and one can learn as much philosophically here, from teasing out exactly where the error lies, as one can elsewhere, from following his limpid prose through convincing arguments that invite no objection and harbour no hidden difficulties. There can of course be a tension between the desire to be faithful to Hume’s thought, and the desire to understand the philosophical problems he discusses. But it is vital to notice that these two imperatives can *also* reinforce and assist each other. Hume is a towering genius, one of the greatest philosophers the world has known, and hence understanding what he himself thought provides one of the best ways of learning about philosophy. To learn most from him, we need to understand him *properly*, which requires meticulous scholarship and sensitive awareness of the currents of the time. Very often, I have found that the position thus revealed – divested of anachronistic misinterpretation or simplification – is far more subtle and interesting than it initially appeared, so the time-consuming scholarship yields real philosophical benefits. In the other direction, when we are faced with interpretative difficulties, one of our very best resources is our own understanding of the relevant philosophy and of the logic of his arguments. Someone who tries to read Hume but who lacks such understanding will miss many of the best clues to what is going on in his texts, typically resulting in implausible or shallow interpretation. So deep, first-hand philosophical engagement is essential for grappling with Hume’s ideas.

Much of what I have said here could be applied more generally, and I expect that my colleagues who work on the latest metaphysics find similar riches in exploring and mutually debating the writings of, say, David Lewis. But this might again prompt the question: why bother with Hume at all when there are so many more up-to-date philosophers to study? By now, though, some answers should be apparent. First, Hume is a giant of philosophy, of whom there are all too few, and we cannot afford to neglect their precious insights by devoting all our energies to recent philosophers who might shine with modish lustre, but have yet to pass the test of time. Secondly, the sheer difficulty of the enduring philosophical questions, and the ubiquity of philosophical fashion – with its tendency to promote eager communal discussion within a framework of shared assumptions – give ample reason to avoid complacently taking for granted that current approaches are the best. Innovative study of the history of philosophy keeps a rich variety of frameworks alive and under active development, often seeking out imaginative ways of combining the old with the new. It can also provide a more balanced perspective on current orthodoxies, for those who might otherwise be carried along by the hubris of the crowd to dismiss alternative approaches, conveniently forgetting the long history

of discarded enthusiasms. Secure building for the future requires learning from the past, and the history of philosophical fashion surely demonstrates very clearly the folly of putting all one's eggs into the currently popular baskets. Indeed in the long-term, it is very much in the interest even of those *now* at the vanguard, that *future* generations of philosophers should take *their* history seriously!

## 7. Serendipity and Connections

The unpredictable nature of philosophical progress also suggests an important role for *serendipity*, the way in which interesting ideas can turn up unexpectedly, and chance observations or associations can prompt fruitful enquiries (perhaps quite distinct from the intentions of the relevant texts) that would otherwise not have taken place. One famous example is Einstein's recollection of studying Hume's *Treatise* "with eagerness and admiration shortly before finding relativity theory". Einstein did not approach Hume's text as a scholar, but his understanding of its "positivism ... was of great influence" and even "suggested relativity theory". Such serendipity can occur with all sorts of reading, including of recent philosophers, but a particular virtue of going back to much earlier texts is that doing so forces us *systematically* to reinterpret our own ideas in their terms (or vice-versa), providing an especially fertile source of novel connections. As we saw earlier, this effect can be amplified all the more if our study brings us into contact with high-quality secondary literature that views those familiar texts from a range of quite different perspectives. For example, I recently undertook a detailed study of Hume's theory of relations and his Fork, trying to understand what lay behind the change in his logical terminology between his youthful *Treatise* and the later *Enquiry*. This involved some detailed scholarship – tracing Hume's theory back to Locke, for instance – together with a fair bit of logical and philosophical analysis, trying to understand fully his reasons for saying what he did, and considering what other influences might lie behind the evidence of his texts. But when I came to think through a range of potential problem cases for Hume's Fork, including first-personal experience and Kripke's "necessary a posteriori truths", this led me into a wide variety of material, both old and recent, primary and secondary, and thus brought into view combinations of ideas that otherwise probably I would never have juxtaposed. This sort of experience will be familiar to many historians of philosophy, who typically find their vision enlarged, rather than narrowly focused, by their study. Related to this, a final distinctive virtue of studying classic philosophers can be the sheer sweep and ambition of their systems. Hume encourages his reader to see connections between logic and psychology, metaphysics and the theory of motivation, speech-acts and political obligation, aesthetics and morality, religion and the passions, even free-will and history. Working on Hume is thus one of the least specialist "areas of specialisation" that one can have, because any scholar who aspires to understand him deeply must maintain at least a significant interest in all of these areas. And as should by now be very clear, engaging with his philosophy is itself a creative and imaginative process that inevitably involves both grasping his ideas and building beyond them, just as much as it would in the case of contemporaries of our own such as David Lewis. Hence maintenance of these various Humean interests implies wide *philosophical*

engagement. The uninitiated might expect historians of philosophy to form an isolated ghetto of crusty, myopic, time-bound, antiquarian scholars, but at least in the area of Hume studies, things are not like that at all.

Finally, a related point can be made at the undergraduate level, where study of the history of philosophy has the distinctive virtue of encouraging students to see the philosophical “big picture”, understanding positions on different topics as hanging together rather than independent. Descartes and Hume, for example, have radically different views on causation, free-will, God, scepticism, science, and a host of other topics including the ethics of belief. Appreciating how all these are interconnected, one can learn far more about philosophy – and about the potential implications of philosophical commitments – than one could by studying the topics in isolation. For many students, also, the act of engaging with an historical figure, a real person who was trying to sort out all these problems for himself within a single coherent world-view, is likely to make the study more vivid. When that figure is as stylish and influential as Hume, there is also personal reward to be gained in the literary enjoyment of his work, and in the achievement of solid historical knowledge about a major influence on our culture. Engaging with and understanding a specific text likewise has a reassuring solidity, making it easier for students to gauge their progress, and providing a tangible focus (or even sometimes a helpful crutch) when philosophical abstraction gets too confusing. The widespread prominence of the canonical texts also implies a huge and varied resource of secondary literature at all levels – both in print and on the Web – for support and further nourishment. All of these points are relatively familiar, and the place of Hume’s texts in philosophical *education* has long been firmly established. But I hope that what I have said here has been persuasive in making the case for his permanent importance in philosophical *research* and *scholarship* also, quite independently of that educational role. If this case is accepted, moreover, then it makes the case for *teaching* Hume yet more compelling, when even today’s philosophical *research* literature will – quite rightly – continue to orientate so of much its discussion around his enduring legacy.

<p>This is a lightly edited version of the 2011 Bentham Lecture, delivered at University College, London on 24<sup>th</sup> November, and devoted to Hume in his tercentenary year. The paragraphs on undergraduate teaching (the third and the last) were omitted from that talk.</p>
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