

David Hume

(1711-1776)

Select Bibliography

[28-29] *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (1739-40). [1739: vols. 1 & 2; 1740: vol. 3.]

[37] *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (1748).

[40] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)

[43] *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Cæsar to the Revolution in 1688* (1754-1762).

Why Philosophize?

“I am uneasy to think that I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform’d; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. I am concern’d for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. [...] I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou’d I endeavor to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I shou’d be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy.

[*Treatise*, i.4.7 (Selby-Bigge, p. 271)]

When to Stop Philosophizing

“Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.” [*Enquiry*, § 1]

“Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”
[*Treatise*, i.4.7 (S-B, 269)]

Who Was Hume?

“To conclude historically with my own character. I am, or rather was (for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself, which emboldens me the more to speak my sentiments); I was, I say, a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments. My company was not unacceptable to the young and careless, as well as to the studious and literary; and as I took a particular pleasure in the company of modest women, I had no reason to be displeased with the reception I met with from them. In a word, though most men any wise eminent, have found reason to complain of calumny, I never was touched, or even attacked by her baleful tooth: and though I wantonly exposed myself to the rage of both civil and religious factions, they seemed to be disarmed in my behalf of their wonted fury. My friends never had occasion to vindicate any one circumstance of my character and conduct: not but that the zealots, we may well suppose, would have been glad to invent and propagate any story to my disadvantage, but they could never find any which they thought would wear the face of probability. I cannot say there is no vanity in making this funeral oration of myself, but I hope it is not a misplaced one; and this is a matter of fact which is easily cleared and ascertained.”

A Newton of the Mind

“‘Tis evident that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent on the science of Man; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties. [...] In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a complete system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security.” [*Treatise*, Introduction]