New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01445.x

Comment: *Hume Tercentenary*

'The most important philosopher ever to write in English', as they say, David Hume was born on 26 April 1711 ('old style') in Edinburgh. The University has taken the lead in promoting an array of tercentenary celebrations, including an exhibition due to open in November exploring the concept of beauty in relation to Hume's works. There is more to his thought than the atheism that fuels debates in the philosophy of religion.

Famously Hume awakened Kant from his 'dogmatic slumbers', and 'caused the scales to fall' from Bentham's eyes. In mid-twentieth Oxford moral philosophers debated 'Hume's Law': no 'ought' from an 'is', no ethical principles derivable from human nature — an intriguing and tacitly quite widely accepted doctrine, with little foundation in Hume's work. Some regard him as a precursor of cognitive science, others as an exponent of ethical naturalism. David Hume Pinsent, the friend to whose memory Wittgenstein dedicated the *Tractatus*, was a collateral descendant.

Some of the celebratory lectures take place in the fourteen-storey David Hume Tower, an unattractive building completed in 1963 while the University still planned to replace the Square created in 1766 by James Brown (c. 1729–1807) and named for his elder brother George. The philosophers recently migrated from the Tower to the rear end of the newly completed and rather beautiful Informatics Forum.

Hume changed the spelling from Home, to stop mispronunciation, during his brief spell in Bristol in the employ of a prosperous merchant trading with the West Indies for sugar (and probably slaves).

Hume owed a great deal to his mother. His father died just after David's second birthday, 'leaving me, with an elder brother and a sister under the care of our Mother, a woman of singular Merit, who, though young and handsome, devoted herself to the rearing and educating of her Children', as he noted. Katherine Falconer realized that the child was 'uncommonly wake-minded' — precocious, in her lowland Scots dialect. She sent him to the University, with his elder brother, at the age of twelve, and seems not to have remonstrated when he turned away from a career in law to become 'a Scholar & Philosopher'. By the age of twenty he saw how to proceed philosophically: 'there seem'd to be open'd up to me a New Scene of Thought'.

Admittedly this precipitated a breakdown, which he thought the job in Bristol might cure. He soon moved to France, settling in La Flèche,

© 2011 The Author. New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council. Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2011, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

a sleepy village in Anjou, dominated by the Jesuit College where Descartes studied a century earlier. Hume worked in the library, and completed *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1734–1737), his great book.

The book attracted enough of a 'murmour among the zealots' to establish his reputation as a sceptic. Thus, when the Chair of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh fell vacant in 1745, his application was rejected. But Hume had a very adventurous career beyond Edinburgh. He took a position as tutor to the Marquess of Annandale, only to find the young man insane. Extricating himself from this situation, he then accepted the invitation of his cousin, Lieutenant-General James St. Clair, to be his Secretary on a military expedition against the French in Quebec. No doubt fortunately for philosophy, unfavourable weather delayed departure so long that the plan was aborted. Hume accompanied St. Clair on an extended diplomatic mission to the courts of Vienna and Turin in 1748, greatly enjoying being entitled to dress up.

An invitation to serve as Librarian to the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh brought him home and gave him the opportunity to write his *History of England* (1754–1762), which became a best seller, guaranteeing him financial independence. In 1763, however, Hume accepted an invitation from Lord Hertford, the Ambassador to France, to serve as his Private Secretary. There he spent three very happy years, again in congenial company. After a year (1767–68) in London as an Under-Secretary of State, Hume returned to Edinburgh for good in 1769.

He built a house in Edinburgh's New Town. His remaining years were spent comfortably, dining and conversing with friends, not all of whom were 'studious and literary'. His 'company', he tells us, 'was not unacceptable to the young and careless'. One such young person, Nancy Ord, half his age and the daughter of the Lord Chief Baron of the Scottish Exchequer, he seems to have contemplated marrying. He asked her advice in choosing wallpaper. Finding that he had intestinal cancer, from which he seems not to have suffered unbearably, he added a codicil to his will, including a gift to her of 'ten Guineas to buy a Ring, as a Memorial of my Friendship and Attachment to so amiable and accomplished a Person'. He died on 25 August 1776.

Perhaps his stoicism at the end justifies the huge greenish bronze statue unveiled in Edinburgh in 1995, outside the Sheriff Courthouse, of the seated Hume, obese and half naked, draped in a toga, and holding a book — though actually he loved dressing up, as the wonderful portrait by Allan Ramsay shows, done in 1766, ten years before he died.

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2011 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2011 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press