

David Hume

Greatest of British philosophers, born in Edinburgh 1711,
died there in 1776

His life, philosophy and views.



Humanist Society in the 18th century?



From Age of Enlightenment – Time Life NV

Scottish philosopher, historian, economist, and essayist, known especially for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism.

(I drew some of the material for this talk from the current EB DVD. Another notable book which greatly influenced the process of my de-conversion in 1968 is *Six Secular Philosophers* by Lewis White Beck.)

Hume took a while to find his feet as a philosopher;
he was brought up in what we'd think was an upper
middle class family;
he studied Law but found it distasteful;
he tried being a merchant but that wasn't interesting
either;
he retired to France and started to write *A Treatise of
Human Nature*. The Treatise was Hume's attempt to
formulate a full-fledged philosophical system;
This first attempt at writing philosophy was a flop – he
wrote this of his work, “It fell dead-born from the press,
without reaching such distinction as even to excite a
murmur among the zealots.”

He scabbled around for many years earning his living in various ways;

he first hit it big time not as philosopher, which we mostly remember him as, but as a historian;

that was with his *The History of England*, tracing events from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688, was a best-seller in its day.

Now I'll move onto his philosophical ideas.

Some major works

Philosophy and religion

- A Treatise of Human Nature (1739);
- Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding (1748); many later editions entitled
- An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding which included his notorious (or famous from our point of view) essay **On Miracles**;
- Four Dissertations (1757);
- *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779);
- A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend Containing Some Observations on Religion and Morality (1745).

Some major works (2)

Politics And Morals

- Essays, Moral and Political (1741–42);
- An Enquiry Concerning the principles of moral (1751).

Hume is seen as a Sceptic a radical one at that. His account of cause and effect was that it was no more than a habit of thought arising from our induction from repeated observations that when event A happens event B is seen to follow.

Kant said Hume awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers.

Coupled with his scepticism he was also an **empiricist**, perhaps even a radical empiricist.

- “Empiricism” in this context is a huge subject;
- It branched into pragmatism associated with the American philosopher William James and;
- Logical positivism which I touched on when talking about Bertrand Russell last time including links to a BHA president AJ Ayers of Language Truth and Logic fame.

In this context of talking about empiricism it is countervailed or opposed by “**rationalism**”.

It needs to be kept clear in mind that rationalism in this context has a different sense from the rationalism associated with our present day Rationalist Society

Our Words and Ideas book by David Tribe sets out the two different senses.

It is the one “ism” which is covered in two parts of the book. The sense we are talking about today is under the section on the Enlightenment.

The other sense, represented by the Rationalist Association is in the Chapter on the Age of Realism – the 20th and 21st centuries.

Hume's empiricism and sceptical philosophy is a massive subject. It makes it difficult to present in a talk like this HuVAT even assisted by using this (OO) Presentation or Power Point method.

Empiricism, scepticism and rationalism are specifics belonging to a field of philosophy known as epistemology or the theory of knowledge. Hume's philosophising was part of a general thrust during the Enlightenment asking how it is possible to obtain sure reliable knowledge.

Gradually the world generally was coming to realise that the world view of religion was not sure reliable knowledge.

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Some of the issues or problems he realised and tried to tackle still arouse passionate debate to this day.

Hume`s conclusion about theology

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume, —of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance—let us ask, *does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number* [relations of ideas]? No. *Does it contain any experimental* [i.e., empirical] *reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Hume`s application of empiricism to religion

- His Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion are his main works addressing religion;
- Against rationalist Spinoza he insistently denied that Christianity was reasonable;
- He examined religion in three areas of detail.

- They were the occurrences of miracles;
- The order and harmony of nature;
- The common consent of mankind, i.e. most people have innate religious inclinations.

See some notes about Hume's critique of the argument from miracles.

Next follows his critique of the argument from design by way of his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.

The characters in the Dialogues

Demea	Orthodox rationalist who argues for the existence of God based on mechanism and monism. It was early expression of deism.
Cleanthes	Natural theologian who infers the the high probability that God exists from evidence of design in nature.
Philo	<p>Is the sceptic, who can be seen as the mouthpiece of Hume himself but which view is not entirely supported by the text.</p> <p>It is thought Hume was too crafty to convey his view so simply – (he did not want to come across as dogmatic, even as a dogmatic sceptic, so he used dramatic and polemical methods to convey his view but also to convey the tension and room for ongoing debate).</p>

The argument from design expressed by Hume

Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to end, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed.

Hume thought very poorly of the common consent argument

In restoring a loan, or paying a debt, [a man's conception of] divinity is nowise beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many would have performed, were there no god in the universe. But if he fast a day, or give himself a sound whipping; this has a direct reference, in his opinion, to the service of God. No other motive could engage him to such austerities. By these distinguished marks of devotion, he has now acquired the divine favour; and may expect, in recompense, protection and safety in this world, and eternal happiness in the next.

Religion not only leaves the ordinary conceptions of human decency unsupported; it subverts them, by directing men's devotion and their efforts and emulation towards a standard which falls below the best human standards, for the religious standard was canonized in scripture in earlier, less-enlightened ages.

Kant thought Hume conflated two dimensions or distinctions: a priori/a posteriori with the analytic/synthetic. In the table below are some examples of where statement categories belong.

Judgements	A priori logical	A posteriori empirical
Analytic (sentences which are true by virtual of meaning of terms)	$6 \times 5 = 30$ A bachelor is an unmarried man	none (contradictory)
Synthetic (sentences which require experience of how the world works to understand)	Causal relationships (Hume put these under a posteriori and therefore uncertain. Kant argued that certain empirical relationships which require experience to understand are order imposed on experience by us).	The cat sat on the mat. The earth orbits the sun