

David

# HUME

**GREAT THINKERS**

JAMES N. ANDERSON

Foreword by W. Andrew Hoffercker

“James N. Anderson’s *David Hume* is an uncommonly successful introduction, explanation, and assessment of the work of one of the most influential authors of the last three hundred years. Anderson’s account of Hume’s project, method, and principal conclusions is clear, accessible, and philosophically perceptive. In a remarkably short space, Anderson gives a very strong overview of Hume that makes Hume’s importance easy to understand. His assessment of the success of Hume’s overall project and individual assertions is rich, biblically serious, consistently Reformed, and likely to edify readers regardless of their previous exposure to Hume’s works. Although Anderson sometimes extends his analysis further than space allows him to justify, the work on the whole is a model of Christian philosophical analysis. He summarizes Hume fairly, assesses Hume’s success relative to both Hume’s own assumptions and the truth of Scripture, and shows how Hume’s work points toward important insights about the limits of fallen natural reason.”

—**Bill Davis**, Professor of Philosophy, Covenant College;  
former member, Hume Society

“The skepticism of David Hume has frightened many who have sought to follow Christ. But James Anderson’s book shows that it is the followers of Hume who should be frightened. Anderson presents an account of Hume that is accurate and comprehensive, yet concise. It is easy to follow. And it shows clearly where Hume went wrong, and how his errors illumine the biblical alternative. Hume fell into skepticism because he failed to think God’s thoughts after him.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and  
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Orlando

“James Anderson’s book on David Hume is a masterly summary and critique of one of the most important and influential

philosophers in modern Western history. With clarity and insight, Anderson presents the overall structure of Hume's philosophical work, as well as devastating criticisms of Hume's epistemological project. Once read and grasped, this book will provide the context and proper, Christian critique for anyone wanting to pursue further study in Hume, or in Western thought since Hume. I am glad to have Anderson's book in my library."

—**K. Scott Oliphint**, Dean of Faculty, Professor of  
Apologetics and Systematic Theology, Westminster  
Theological Seminary

"As James Anderson rightly argues, the reach and influence of Hume's philosophy is almost unparalleled in the modern West, not only standing as a salient and powerful articulation of empiricism in its own right but decisively influencing other great thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Anderson's introduction to Hume's thought is concise but not curtailed, straightforward but not simplistic. To my eyes the book's greatest value is in the second half, where Anderson carefully marshals a Reformed response to Hume. Weaving together arguments from Cornelius Van Til and Alvin Plantinga, he shows how Hume's arguments are won or lost in their axioms: naturalism is Hume's starting point, not his conclusion, and he sets the bar of knowledge so high that even his own philosophical principles fail to clear it. This is a lively volume, crackling with some memorable turns of phrase: I particularly enjoyed the description of logical positivism as 'decapitation as a cure for a headache,' and the deft summary that although 'the modern conception of religion as a strictly private matter can be laid at the feet of Kant,' yet those feet 'were shod by Hume.' There is much of profit here both for students new to Hume and for scholars wanting to explore a Reformed response to his influential philosophy. It is, I suspect, harder to write a short book on Hume than a long one, and

harder to write for those new to Humean philosophy than for old hands. Anderson has accomplished this task with aplomb in this sturdy and very accessible gem of a volume.”

—**Christopher Watkin**, Senior Lecturer in French Studies,  
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

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are experts on these writers. As before, these books are short—around 100 pages. They set forth accurately the views of the thinkers under consideration, and they enter into constructive dialogue, governed by biblical and Reformed convictions. I look forward to the release of all the books being planned and to the good influence they will have on the next generation of philosophers and theologians.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

David  
HUME

GREAT THINKERS

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**HUME**

James N. Anderson



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To my parents, David and Judith



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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure, even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon  
Seoul, Korea

## FOREWORD

Every momentous shift in Western philosophy and science had its origin in founding voices that blazed new ways of thinking. They isolated and refuted weaknesses of preceding thought. They proposed radically different modes of reasoning. Identifying such individuals for the many forms of Enlightenment that crisscrossed Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries invites intense discussion. But two disciplines stand out as crucial for the optimism that marked the Enlightenment era—science and philosophy. Both began with individuals who published their groundbreaking works within twenty years of each other—Francis Bacon, an Englishman who penned *Novum Organum* in 1620, and René Descartes, a Frenchman who wrote *Meditations on First Philosophy* in 1641. As a result of their influence, England became associated with the school of empiricism and scientific experimentation and the Continent became coupled with philosophical rationalism.

How alike and yet different were these two heralds of modern thought? Both men were Renaissance-like figures whose interests spanned several intellectual disciplines. Bacon's



contributions included works in politics, law, literature, and philosophy. Most significantly, he pleaded for a new era of science, which led to his being named the “father of modern science.” His reputation was owed not to his role as a practicing scientist but to his imploring his peers to begin experimenting. Descartes’ efforts spanned philosophy, science, and mathematics. He laid the foundation for analytical geometry and calculus. But most importantly, he sounded the opening salvo for a new, modern rationalist philosophy.

Despite similarities of initiating new methods in their disciplines, Bacon and Descartes differed sharply. Profoundly dissatisfied with past philosophers’ reliance on previous authorities, Descartes refocused the philosophic quest for certainty. He cited several fields of intellectual inquiry for their past failures, including science for its forays in alchemy and astrology; and institutional religions for their wildly differing confessions, sacraments, and devotional practices. None of these fields yielded the certainty that ought to characterize the modern quest for knowledge. (An important caveat, however, is frequently overlooked by historians of philosophy. In the rush to vaunt the secular cast to modern thinking, historians often fail to acknowledge that Descartes maintained a deep devotion to his Roman Catholic faith until his death.)

Philosophy fared no better with the plethora of approaches to knowledge extending back to ancient Greece. Descartes would have belittled Alfred North Whitehead’s famous dictum, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” For a solution to the undecidedness of previous efforts, Descartes turned the human mind inward—a “subjective turn” away from sensory experience, which can only deceive. After this initial doubting, he centered his attention on ideas that are innate to the mind—ideas that are so clear and distinct that they cannot

be doubted. Greatly abbreviated, Descartes' epistemological certitude lay in arriving at the certainty of the existing self. From this subjective starting point, he proceeded to prove the existence of God, which in turn served as his bridge to the existence of the material world. The whole process could be distilled this way: *dubito, cogito, ergo sum* ("I doubt, I think, therefore I am").

While Descartes' method for a revolutionary new basis of thinking lay in epistemology, Bacon's proposal for a *Novum Organum*—a new body of knowledge—was for a fresh start in science. *Novum Organum* was not a treatise but a series of aphorisms offered in the spirit of inquiry based on experimentation. Science as then practiced utilized a deductive method in which the Aristotelian worldview and the Ptolemaic cosmos were accepted as axiomatic for scientific thinking. Unfortunately, contended Bacon, such a method does not help scientists achieve new knowledge. In sum, no one was experimenting. Aphorism 36 stated that "we must force [scientists] for a while to lay their notions aside and begin to familiarize themselves with facts." Scientists should replace centuries of a deductive method and substitute in its place an empirical method—inductive investigation. Bacon's seminal work was but a part of his larger project, an unfinished *summa*—*Instauratio Magna*—a comprehensive blueprint encompassing all the various sciences that would enable mankind to master nature, which had been lost since the fall of Adam.

Descartes' *Meditations* and Bacon's *Novum Organum* opened the floodgates for modernity in philosophy and science. If moderns followed their leads, mankind would forge new beginnings. So novel were their proposals that they were demanding that people *think again for the first time*—an obvious logical impossibility but nevertheless absolutely necessary enterprise simply because past eras had not offered the certainty and progress that modernity could deliver. Within a century, Spinoza's monism,

Leibniz's *Monadologie*, and Malebranch's occasionalism would demonstrate the various forms that rationalism would take. And in science, among other advances, Galileo's experiments would demonstrate the truth of Copernicus's hypothesis of the heliocentric universe.

The modern era's penchant for new philosophies and garnering of facts produced a mood of optimism relatively unrivaled in human history. A little more than a century later, Marquis de Condorcet would propose his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. He foresaw the abolition of inequality between the nations and growth of equality within nations. He predicted that new instruments and machines would only add to human strength. Social problems would disappear, as would disease and poverty. Carl Becker later characterized this era in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. To the Enlightenment philosophers, the vision of a heavenly city—which for Augustine would be achieved only by God's sovereign, supernatural consummation of history—would be realized by human means within history.

Into this milieu we situate David Hume, the subject of James Anderson's fine book. Over against Cartesian rationalism, John Locke launched an empiricist epistemological rejoinder. Knowledge did not originate from ideas innate to the human mind. Instead, the mind was *tabula rasa*—a blank slate. Ideas arose in the mind from sense experience. Hume's contribution to the empiricist hegemony in Britain consisted in taking the foundational premises of Locke's empiricism to their logical conclusion. In so doing, however, rather than achieving the certainty that Enlightenment thinkers sought in all disciplines by their new methods, Hume's philosophy devolved into skepticism. James Anderson's careful and equally precise examination of Hume's thought in chapters appropriately entitled "Hume's Philosophical Project," "Hume's Naturalistic Ethics," and "Hume's Religious

Skepticism” demonstrates the brilliance of Humean thought, but also its critical weaknesses. If the philosophical quest begins with our subjective impressions alone, not only can we not know causality, we cannot know God or moral obligation or even our own selves.

Reformed readers will agree that despite the skeptical shadow that Hume’s thought cast over modern thought, he made several valuable contributions. He demonstrated that rational method alone (for example, the popular cosmological argument for the existence of God) utterly fails. Hume challenges the notion that it is possible to establish a priori any necessary truths about causation. Perhaps things can come into existence on their own without any cause. On the basis of reason alone, even the use of analogies does not produce epistemological certainty. Why infer an infinite God as the cause of a finite cosmos? Anderson states Hume’s point succinctly: “He who lives by the analogical sword will also die by it.” Is not the inference of a single infinite, single spiritual being as the cause of a multitude of finite material objects out of all proportion? Likewise, Hume refuted the often-used *is/ought* fallacy in ethics.

Anderson details how Immanuel Kant, having been awakened by Hume from his “dogmatic slumber” (acceptance of the rational metaphysics of Christian Wolff), responded to Hume’s empirical skepticism with his “Copernican Revolution.” Kant effectively synthesized rationalism and empiricism by showing the strengths of each and the weaknesses of each. With rationalists, Kant agreed that the mind is not empty; it possesses categories that are necessary preconditions to organize sensory data. He disagreed with the rationalists’ assertion that knowledge begins with ideas. With empiricists, he agreed that knowledge begins with sense experience, but he denied their claim that the mind is empty until it receives sense impressions. Kant utilized a “transcendental argument” to identify the structures of the mind

that must be presupposed to have an intelligible experience of the external world.

In addition to Hume's helpful critique of purely rational theistic arguments for God's existence, Hume articulated a devastating critique of miracles. Hume's attack was originally thought definitive and is still embraced by many thinkers today. But Hume's critique had the positive outcome of challenging believers to rethink one of the most frequently used apologetic tools to defend historic Christianity. Anderson (correctly, I believe) shows how Cornelius Van Til's adaptation of Kant's transcendental argument effectively forces people to examine the all-important starting point in any intellectual discussion. Once the naturalistic and materialistic presuppositions of Hume's philosophy are identified, one should not be surprised at his skeptical conclusions. Hume himself expressed that he was confounded by his conclusions, but admitted that he was able only through various diversions to avoid remaining mired in a skeptical mood in his everyday life. Incidentally, some have noted that while C. S. Lewis's apologetic in the majority of his writings was evidentialist in nature, his argument in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* represents a remarkable change in method. Lewis's tightly argued defense of supernaturalism is one of the finest illustrations of the transcendental method. He effectively demonstrates that supernaturalism, as opposed to Hume's naturalism, not only makes our knowledge of the material world possible but makes the possibility of miracle an open question.

Anderson concludes that Hume's skepticism was believed by many to be a severe detriment to the cause of Christianity. Ironically, his skepticism served the cause of Christian apologetics. While Hume's project proved a failure, Anderson calls it "a highly instructive failure" because it "expose[d] the irrationalism of a naturalistic worldview founded on the autonomy of the human mind." Confronted with such a negative result, those

who saw through the skepticism had to begin the epistemological enterprise from exactly the opposite starting point—the transcendent, triune God of Scripture. As sovereign Creator and providential Ruler of his creation, God made humanity in his own image. And he so equipped men and women that they could know themselves, the God who created and ordered the world, and the creation within which they were placed.

The Enlightenment that began so promisingly with Descartes and Bacon in the mid-1600s proved incapable of maintaining its dominance. Just a century and a half later, the Enlightenment era of reason and science was challenged by new prophets, who proposed another radically new worldview. In 1798, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*. The volume began with “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and contained numerous other poetic pieces that worked their way into the English mind as the Romantic movement. Instead of rational and empirical epistemology as autonomous sources of knowledge and rigorous experimental method as the pathway to scientific progress, the Romantics offered still another epistemological starting point. It was just as subjective as Descartes’ and Hume’s but was distinctively different—human intuition. Rational and scientific order gave way to Romantic wonder, imagination, and feeling. Instead of placing trees in an orderly taxonomy or measuring how many board feet of lumber could be harvested from a tree, Romantics simply proposed encountering the tree in all its beauty.

Romanticism was vaunted in the field of religion on the Continent by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who, a mere year later—1799—penned *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers*, aimed at the Romantics in Berlin. The essence of religion lay neither in rational creeds nor in moral choice but in the uniquely human intuitive capacity. For his proposal that religion consisted in *Gefühl* (the feeling of absolute dependence), Schleiermacher

became known as the founder of Protestant liberalism. Anderson underscores how Schleiermacher's liberalism merely furthered the decline of orthodox Christianity that Hume and Kant had initiated.

Thus, the development of Western worldviews continued to unfold. But the contribution of David Hume to that ongoing advancement should not be overlooked. The profound influence of Hume's projects remains foremost in the consciousness of his admirers. Hume reminds believers and skeptics alike that human minds have always sought, continue today, and will seek in the future to understand reality. While exhaustive comprehension of this human quest may lie beyond human grasp, the contemporary reader may start by examining the works of the Great Thinkers series. James Anderson succeeds admirably in meeting the series' threefold goal. *David Hume* is academically informed and addresses Hume's ideas with intellectual integrity; it is epistemically committed to biblical and theological orthodoxy; and it is eminently accessible to informed readers who seek a clear, coherent, and relevant analysis and critique of a salient modern thinker.

W. Andrew Hofferker  
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# INTRODUCTION

## WHY HUME MATTERS

Edinburgh's famous Royal Mile runs from the Queen's residence at Holyrood Palace up to Edinburgh Castle. At the corner where the Royal Mile intersects with the Mound, there stands a statue of a seated man. Occasionally seen wearing a traffic cone on his head, courtesy of exuberant and inebriated students, he nevertheless sits in dignified fashion, clothed in a toga and with a book perched on his knee. Every day thousands of people pass by him, but only a small minority of them are aware of the impact that he—or rather, the historical figure he depicts—has had on the culture in which they live and breathe.

Philosophy students at the University of Edinburgh are more aware of his significance, not least because their lectures are held in a building named in his honor: the David Hume Tower. In many ways, Hume is viewed as a heroic figure, not only for the School of Philosophy, but also for the university as a whole—both the humanities and the sciences—representing, as he does, the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume's significance was confirmed by a poll conducted by the *Sunday Times* in 1999, which awarded him the title “Greatest Scot of the

Millennium,” edging out his close friend, the economist Adam Smith.

Hume’s impact on Western civilization can scarcely be overstated. Traces of his thought can be detected in almost every aspect of our culture today. It was Hume’s writings that famously roused Immanuel Kant from his “dogmatic slumber” and motivated his “Copernican revolution,” which in large measure set the epistemological agenda for the next two centuries. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that without Hume, there would have been no Kant; and without Kant, no Hegel; and without Hegel, no Marx. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the pioneer of Protestant liberalism, propounded his new understanding of Christianity as grounded in religious experience, rather than verbal divine revelation, in response to the critiques put forward by Hume and Kant. Hume’s influential objections to natural theology (arguments for the existence and attributes of God based on natural reason) and to claims of miracles (such as the apostolic testimony to the resurrection of Jesus) may have been more responsible for the subsequent decline of orthodox Christianity in the English-speaking world than anything else. One often encounters today the received wisdom that revealed religion has never recovered from the “double hammer blow” of Hume and Kant.

Hume’s empiricist epistemology provided the inspiration for the logical positivist movement in the early twentieth century, according to which metaphysical, moral, and theological claims are cognitively meaningless: they don’t even rise to the level of falsehood. Logical positivism quickly succumbed to its own internal contradictions, but its spirit lives on in the crude scientism of the New Atheists and other modern critics of supernaturalism.

Hume’s innovative moral theory was arguably the primary influence on the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John

Stuart Mill, a theory that underwrites many secular approaches to ethics today. Hume is certainly the patron saint of philosophers who seek a wholly naturalistic grounding for moral norms.

Meanwhile, in the philosophy of science, Hume's ghost continues to loom over theories of causation and the laws of nature. The so-called problem of induction, the classic formulation of which is credited to Hume, remains a central problem in the philosophy of science, for which no widely accepted solution exists. Were it not for Hume's critical analysis of inductive inference, Karl Popper would not have proposed his influential falsifiability criterion for scientific theories.

The above is but a sampling of the areas and disciplines in which Hume's impact continues to be felt. Although he addresses a wide range of disparate topics, his writings have an underlying unity and consistency insofar as they represent the outworking of an ambitious philosophical and scientific program to understand the world, especially human thought and action, in entirely naturalistic terms. In a real sense, the credibility of Christianity hangs on the cogency of Hume's critique of supernaturalism. For that reason alone, Hume's thought demands our attention and assessment.

The goal of this book is therefore twofold: (1) to provide a summary exposition of the major points of Hume's thought, and (2) to offer a critical assessment of them from a distinctively Reformed perspective. In the process, I hope to show that Hume's arguments, far from refuting the Christian worldview, indirectly support that worldview by exposing the self-defeating implications of naturalism.



## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DNR</i>	<i>Dialogues concerning Natural Religion</i>
<i>EHU</i>	<i>An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding</i>
<i>EPM</i>	<i>An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals</i>
<i>NHR</i>	<i>The Natural History of Religion</i> (as found in <i>Four Dissertations</i> )
<i>THN</i>	<i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>

The works are cited by book (where applicable), part, section, and paragraph, in that order. For example, *THN* 1.2.3.4 refers to book 1, part 2, section 3, paragraph 4 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and *DNR* 1.2 refers to part 1, paragraph 2 of *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.



# 1

## HUME'S LIFE AND WORKS

David Hume was born in Edinburgh on April 26, 1711, the second of two sons of Joseph Home. (As an aspiring author, Hume later modified the spelling of his surname to make its pronunciation more self-evident.) Hume's father died shortly after his son's second birthday, and the boy was raised single-handedly by his mother, whom he described fondly as "a woman of singular merit." His early childhood was spent at the family home in Ninewells, located in the Scottish Borders some fifty miles from Edinburgh. Hume's mother found him to be an unusually gifted child, so when his brother John left home for university studies in Edinburgh at fourteen (the usual age at that time), David accompanied him, despite being several years younger.

At the university, Hume received a well-rounded education that included competence in the classical languages, history, literature, metaphysics, ethics, logic, mathematics, and elements of the natural sciences. After leaving Edinburgh, he embarked on a career in law, as his family had encouraged him to do, but Hume had scant enthusiasm for it and found himself far more energized by reading works of classical literature and philosophy. As he



later recounted, “I found an insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning; and while they fancied that I was reading Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors I was secretly devouring.” From an early age, Hume aspired to the life of “a man of letters,” reading widely and addressing himself in manifold writings to the pressing topics of the day.

At some point during this period of personal studies at the family home in Ninewells, Hume apparently experienced a light-bulb moment, as a result of which he resolved to devote all his powers of examination to what he cryptically described as “a new Scene of Thought.” This intense intellectual project apparently took a toll on his health, both physical and mental, requiring a physician’s prescription of medication and exercise. Hume’s family was not wealthy, and he realized that he would need to find gainful employment, so he took a position in a merchant’s business in Bristol with the hope that it would improve his condition with a “more active Scene of Life.” But the venture was short-lived. In 1734, Hume decided to relocate to rural France, where he could live more economically while devoting himself wholeheartedly to his philosophical interests.

Thus it was in France that Hume, at the young age of 23, embarked upon his first and most ambitious philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The central goal of this three-volume treatise was to develop a “science of human nature.” Put simply, Hume aspired to do for human nature what he believed Isaac Newton and other “natural philosophers” had done for the realm outside of human affairs: to develop a rigorously *naturalistic* account of human thought and action, particularly our moral and aesthetic judgments, which would rely exclusively upon *empirical* investigation. One major feature of this work would be its examination of our intellectual faculties and an exploration of the capacity—and, in some important respects, the incapacity—

of human reason to deliver genuine knowledge of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Hume returned to England in 1737 to prepare the work for publication. Books 1 and 2 (“Of the Understanding” and “Of the Passions”) were published anonymously in 1739.<sup>1</sup> Book 3, “Of Morals,” which built on the foundational principles laid down in the first two volumes, appeared the following year, together with an “Abstract” that summarized his major theses and addressed some misunderstandings and objections raised by early reviewers.

In a reflection on his intellectual career, written toward the end of his life, Hume famously remarked that the *Treatise* “fell deadborn from the press.” This was an exaggeration. The work did not establish Hume’s reputation, as he had hoped, but it garnered plenty of attention, much of it highly critical, even though he had opted at the eleventh hour to remove some material that would have been viewed as a direct assault on religion. Nevertheless, the *Treatise* offered more than enough to fuel concerns that its author was an infidel propounding a dangerous skepticism that would tend to undermine public morals. As a consequence, Hume never held an academic position in his life, despite being nominated for one at Edinburgh and another at Glasgow. The critics who campaigned against his appointments prevailed over his supporters.

The year 1741 saw the publication of the first volume of Hume’s *Essays, Moral and Political*, in which he addressed himself to various philosophical and historical debates of the time. His critical musings gained him further admirers, and a second volume appeared the following year.

After a brief, unhappy spell as a private tutor, followed by

1. The anonymity was due partly to the controversial content of some portions of the *Treatise*, although it was not uncommon at that time for new authors to publish anonymously.

a more satisfying secretarial role on a European diplomatic mission, Hume published *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748). This was essentially a more streamlined reworking of book 1 of the *Treatise*, along with some material from book 2. Of particular note was the addition of Hume's provocative argument against miracles, which he had decided to excise from the *Treatise*. This first *Enquiry* was followed three years later by a "recasting" of book 3 of the *Treatise* under the title *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. "Of all my writings," Hume would later declare, the second *Enquiry* was "incomparably the best."

The relationship between the *Treatise* and the two *Enquiries*, and the extent to which Hume changed his views, are matters of ongoing debate among Hume scholars. Some of his earlier arguments were refined, others were dropped altogether, and a number of new arguments were introduced. Overall the differences are more matters of style and rhetorical strategy than matters of substance. How Hume himself viewed the *Enquiries* is open to interpretation. He referred later to the *Treatise* as a "juvenile work" that he had sent to press "too early." He invited his readers to treat the *Enquiries* as the definitive, mature statement of his views, containing answers to his earlier critics. While the aim of the *Enquiries* was to "cast the whole anew," he insisted that the "philosophical principles are the same" as in the *Treatise*. Hume averred that the main shortcomings of the latter lay in the presentation, not the substance. For this reason, scholars typically draw from both sets of works when expounding and evaluating Hume's philosophy (a policy to be followed in this book).

In the 1750s, Hume produced further collections of essays on a wide range of topics, including literature, history, ethics, and politics. His appointment as the librarian of the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh afforded him both time and opportunity to work on his magisterial six-volume *History of England*

(1754–62). Although it was far from apolitical—Hume's opinions are never hidden from the reader and are often pithily expressed—Hume prided himself on having adopted the stance of a more objective historian, relative to his predecessors, at least. On some points, Hume appeared to side with the Tory reading of events, on others with the Whigs. Hume's political inclinations were mainly conservative and royalist; the *History* presented a more sympathetic view of the Stuart monarchs and was correspondingly scathing about the Cromwellian interregnum. Whatever the virtues and vices of Hume's historical works, they enjoyed great commercial success, being reprinted several times with extensive revisions by Hume in response to critical reviews. Royalties from the series provided Hume with financial stability and modest comfort for the rest of his life.

During the same period, Hume published four major dissertations, the first of which, "The Natural History of Religion," presented a nonsupernaturalist account of the development of religion. He attempted to explain the origins of religion on the basis of his account of human nature, coupled with an evolutionary psychology in which the passions of hope and especially fear serve as driving forces. According to Hume, the earliest form of religion was a crude polytheism, which was later refined into monotheism, although the latter inevitably tends to relapse into polytheistic elements. In this work, Hume deliberately sidestepped the question of whether religious beliefs could claim any rational or empirical support. The essay was pitched as a genealogical reconstruction, rather than an epistemological critique.

Hume spent the years 1763–65 serving at the British Embassy in Paris. It was during this second sojourn in France that the Scotsman encountered the controversial writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). Despite the significant differences between their political philosophies, they formed a bond of

friendship, and later on Hume provided a safe haven in London when Rousseau's position in Switzerland became precarious. Within a year, however, the friendship degenerated, largely due to Rousseau's erratic and paranoid behavior, and it eventually collapsed into a bitter breach with recriminations on both sides.

After some further years of political service, Hume retired to Edinburgh in 1769, where he lived out his remaining years in the company of friends and spent his time mainly on revising his earlier works and composing responses to his critics. One of the reworked pieces was his now-famous *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, in which three fictional characters debate whether natural theology—in particular, the argument from design—can furnish any reliable knowledge of the divine attributes. Although the original draft had been penned many years earlier, even after revision Hume judged it too incendiary to be published in his lifetime.

By 1772, Hume's health had begun to fail, and three years later he was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. Given his notoriously irreligious views, his critics wondered whether the prospect of imminent death would elicit something of a recantation. They were to be disappointed. His close friends, such as the economist Adam Smith, testified that Hume approached his end with serenity, magnanimity, and irreverent humor, finding satisfaction in his accomplishments and confidence in the fact (as he saw it) that while there was no evidence for a heavenly afterlife, neither was there any reason to fear a hellish one. A skeptic to the last, Hume died on August 25, 1776, leaving directions that he should be buried at his own expense under a monument on Edinburgh's Calton Hill, overlooking the city he considered his home. Among his other instructions was the request that his nephew arrange for the publication of his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, which duly hit the presses in 1779 and sealed Hume's reputation as one of the most formidable critics of religion in Christendom.