THE GREAT GUIDE

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What David Hume Can Teach Us about Being Human and Living Well

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INTRODUCTION

Scotland's Hidden Gem

Standing at the top of Calton Hill, close to the center of Edinburgh, is Scotland's National Monument, built to commemorate the Scottish soldiers and sailors who died in the Napoleonic Wars. Modeled on the Parthenon in Athens, it ended up resembling its inspiration more than its designers intended.[1] While the Parthenon is half destroyed, the National Monument is only half constructed, after work was abandoned in 1829 due to lack of funds.

The monument's evocation of classical Greece in modern Scotland might at first seem incongruous. When Plato and Aristotle were laying down the foundations of Western philosophy, Scotland, like the rest of Britain, was still a preliterate society. However, by the early eighteenth century, it could proudly claim to be the successor of Athens as the philosophical capital of the world. Edinburgh was leading the European Enlightenment, rivaled only by Paris as an intellectual center. In 1757, David Hume, the greatest philosopher the city, Britain, and arguably even the world had ever known, said with some justification that the Scottish "shou'd really be the People most distinguish'd for literature in Europe."[2]

FIGURE 1. Scotland's National Monument on Calton Hill, Edinburgh.

The city produced two of the greatest thinkers of the modern era. One, the economist Adam Smith, is widely known and esteemed. The other, Hume, remains relatively obscure outside academia. Among philosophers, however, he is often celebrated as the greatest among their ranks of all-time. When thousands of academic philosophers were recently asked which non-living predecessor they most identified with, Hume came a clear first, ahead of Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein.[3] Hume has become the postmortem victim of a phenomenon he himself described: "Learning has been as great a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company."[4] Hume is as adored in academe as he is unknown in the wider world.

Many scientists—not usually great fans of philosophy—also cite Hume as an influence. In a letter to Moritz Schlick, Einstein reports that he read Hume's *Treatise* "with eagerness and admiration shortly before finding relativity theory." He goes so far as to say that "it is very well possible that without these philosophical studies I would not have arrived at the solution."[5] Charles Darwin's notebooks also show he read several of Hume's works. Even the biologist Lewis Wolpert, who says philosophers are "very clever but have nothing useful to say whatsoever," makes an exception for Hume, admitting that at one stage he "fell in love" with him.[6]

Not even his academic fans, however, sufficiently appreciate Hume as a *practical* philosopher. He is most known for his ideas about cause and effect, perception, and his criticisms of religion. People don't tend to pick up Hume because they want to know how to live. This is a great loss. Hume did spend a lot of time writing and thinking about often arcane metaphysical questions, but only because they were important for understanding human nature and our place in the world. "The most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to practical morality; and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations."[7] For instance, cause and effect was not an abstract metaphysical issue for him but something that touched every moment of our daily experience. He never allowed himself to take intellectual flights of fancy, always grounding his ideas in experience, which he called the "great guide of human life." Hume thus thought about everyday issues in the same way as he did about ultimate ones.

To see how Hume offers us a model of how to live, we need to look not only at his work but at his life. Everyone who knew Hume, with the exception of the paranoid and narcissistic

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, spoke highly of him. When he spent three years in Paris in later life he was known as "*le bon* David," his company sought out by all the *salonistes*. Baron d'Holbach described him as "a great man, whose friendship, at least, I know to value as it deserves."[8] Adam Smith described him as "approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."[9]

Hume didn't just write about how to live—he modeled the good life. He was modest in his philosophical pretensions, advocating human sympathy as much as, if not more than, human rationality. He avoided hysterical condemnations of religion and superstition as well as overly optimistic praise for the power of science and rationality. Most of all, he never allowed his pursuit of learning and knowledge to get in the way of the softening pleasures of food, drink, company, and play. Hume exemplified a way of life that is gentle, reasonable, amiable: all the things public life now so rarely is.

What Hume said and did form equal parts of a harmonious whole, a life of the mind and body that stands as an inspiration to us all. I want to approach David Hume as a synoptic whole, a person whose philosophy touches every aspect of how he lived and who he was. To do that, I need to approach his life and work together. I have followed in Hume's biographical and sometimes geographical footsteps to show why we would be wise to follow in his philosophical ones too.

When we look at his life and person, we also understand better why Hume has not "crossed over" from academic preeminence to public acclaim. In short, he lacks the usual characteristics that give an intellectual mystique and appeal. He is not a tragic, romantic figure who died young, misunderstood, and unknown or unpopular. He was a genial, cheerful man who died loved and renowned. His ideas are far too sensible to shock or

not obviously radical enough to capture our attention. His distaste for "enthusiasts"—by which he meant fanatics of any kind—made him too moderate to inspire zealotry in his admirers. These same qualities that made him a rounded, wise figure prevented him from becoming a cult one.

If ever there were a time in recent history to turn to Hume, now is surely it. The enthusiasts are on the rise, in the form of strongman political populists who assert the will of the people as though it were absolute and absolutely infallible. In more settled times, we could perhaps use a Nietzsche to shake us out of our bourgeois complacency, or entertain Platonic dreams of perfect, immortal forms. Now such philosophical excesses are harmful indulgences. Good, uncommon sense is needed more than ever.

I'm going to use a lot of Hume's own words, simply because I find them so elegantly crafted that I can't see how paraphrasing improves them. I know that many people find Hume difficult to read, largely because of his eighteenth-century style, with its long sentences and archaic vocabulary. But within these seemingly meandering and long-winded texts there are so many gems. In particular, Hume knew the importance of beginnings and endings. Take the first paragraph of *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*:

> Disputes with men, pertinaciously obstinate in their principles, are, of all others, the most irksome; except, perhaps, those with persons, entirely disingenuous, who really do not believe the opinions they defend, but engage in the controversy, from affectation, from a spirit of opposition, or from a desire of showing wit and ingenuity, superior to the rest of mankind. The same blind adherence to their own arguments is to be expected in both; the same contempt of their

> antagonists; and the same passionate vehemence, in inforcing sophistry and falsehood. And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect, that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles.[10]

If you can get beyond the use of words like "pertinaciously" (holding firmly to an opinion or a course of action), "whence," and "inforcing," you'll find a paragraph that is almost a mini-essay, capturing so much that is true of the nature of obstinacy and why it is objectionable. It also tells you that Hume intends to avoid the vice. Hume's inquiries are sincere, not attempts to justify his own preexisting beliefs. The reader should approach his work in the same spirit of openness.

I've extracted the essence of the lessons we can learn from him as Humean maxims and aphorisms. From the above passage, for instance, we can distill the principle: ***When reason has nothing to do with why people hold their beliefs, reason is powerless to change them.*** Usually these are in my words, sometimes they are in Hume's. They are gathered together in the book's appendix. On some occasions they are negative lessons: things we can learn from Hume's mistakes and failings. The self-detracting and humble Hume would surely have approved of this. He once wrote that one of the things that makes a human superior to other animals is that he "corrects his mistakes; and makes his very errors profitable."[11] After giving his verdict on the character of Sir Robert Walpole, he even noted that "the impartial Reader, if any such there be; or Posterity, if such a Trifle can reach them, will best be able to correct my Mistakes."[12]

All the maxims can be identified in the text by my use of a different font. A good one to start us on our guided journey comes directly from the pen of the man himself: ***"There are***

great Advantages, in travelling, & nothing serves more to remove Prejudices."[13] Hume traveled a great deal during his lifetime. Two of the most significant trips were both to France. They came at opposite ends of his career and had very different characters. As a young man, he went to sleepy La Flèche in the Loire valley to work in virtual solitude on his first major philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. As an older man, his oeuvre complete, he spent a little over two years in bustling Paris, feted by the intelligentsia. These bookends, both symmetric and asymmetric at the same time, frame his life and work in a way that helps us to better understand both. They show that Hume speaks to us all, at every time of life, whether solitary or sociable, well-known or obscure, successful or struggling, young or old. Hume and his philosophy are companions for life.

CHAPTER ONE

The Foundations of a Thinker

There is a God within us, says Ovid, who breathes that divine fire, by which we are animated. Poets, in all ages, have advanced this claim to inspiration. There is not, however, any thing supernatural in the case. Their fire is not kindled from heaven. It only runs along the earth; is caught from one breast to another; and burns brightest, where the materials are best prepared, and most happily disposed.

Lothian Beginnings

Knowing more about the point of departure often helps us to understand the nature and meaning of the journey as a whole. Edinburgh was the very first and last point on Hume's journey through life. He was born there on April 26, 1711, the baptismal registry showing he was the son of "Mr Joseph Home of Ninewells, advocate, and Katherine Ffalconer, his lady."[1] His family was comfortable enough to employ servants, as was usual for the middle classes of the time, but it was not rich.

John Home kept an apartment in a tenement on the north side of the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh, near the Castle. Although Hume was born there, the main family home was

Ninewells in the south of Scotland, not far from the English border, near the village of Chirnside. This is where Hume spent most of his boyhood. The area is a low-lying plain known as the Merse. When I visited it was typically *dreich*, an essential Scots word for a dull, overcast, gloomy day. Even today Chirnside is quite isolated: in the eighteenth century it must have felt extremely remote. In later life Hume would often talk of his love of solitude and his dislike for large gatherings, preferring "the company of a few select companions, with whom I can, calmly and peaceably, enjoy the feast of reason, and try the justness of every reflection, whether gay or serious, that may occur to me."[2] Given how much solitude he would have experienced in his formative years, this is perhaps unsurprising.

Despite its isolation, the little corner in which Ninewells stood would have been an idyllic place for a child to grow up in freedom. The house and grounds sat near a bend in the Whiteadder Water, the second word being redundant, since "Whiteadder" means "white water." The sometimes rapid flow of the river through this section explains the name. Much of the land near the riverbank is wooded today, and given that over recent centuries the general trend in the United Kingdom has been toward deforestation, it is probable it was like this or more so in Hume's time. This was the place Hume was referring to when he wrote of how he would take "a solitary walk by a river-side" when he was "tired with amusement and company" so as to feel his "mind all collected within itself."[3] This would have been as wonderful a setting for a young boy to play as it was for a man to gather his thoughts.

The building Hume lived in was destroyed by fire in 1840, but the name on the stone gate post at the entrance to the grounds today still reads "Ninewells House," indicating that the more recent construction inherited the old name. The land is private

FIGURE 2. The "David Hume Walk" from Ninewells, Chirnside.

but public footpaths run around it. One of these has been named the "David Hume Walk" by the Scottish Borders Council. It is one of five "Border Brains Walks" alongside trails commemorating James Hutton, James Small, Alexander Dow, and Duns Scotus. Hume's walk soon trails away from the grounds of Chirnside and for most of its length follows a disused railway line that obviously wasn't even there in his day. Mostly flat and through fields, it is hardly the most beautiful walk in Scotland, but with so little development in the area it must give a remarkably accurate sense of the land Hume grew up in: quiet and gentle but with an unassuming beauty.

The walk was only inaugurated in 2011, and up until several years ago there was almost nothing in the area to commemorate Hume. Recently, however, the village has woken up to its historic ties. A housing development inaugurated in 2006 included David Hume View, a street aptly named since it overlooks the Ninewells estate. To celebrate the tricentenary of Hume's birth in 2011, a local community group, the Chirnside Common Good Association, put up several information boards about his life and work. These no longer stand but a permanent plaque adorns the side of the community center, modeled after a famous medallion bust of Hume made by the Scottish artist James Tassie.

The village owes him at least this. In his will, Hume left £100 to rebuild the bridge over the Whiteadder. The three-arched stone structure still stands parallel to the more modern road bridge that now carries the public traffic. The old bridge is in the complex of a still functioning paper mill.

As part of the tricentenary celebrations, the Chirnsiders also put on a philosophy festival attended by delegates at the International Hume Society Conference at the University of Edinburgh. For these hundred scholars from fifteen countries, it was a very special day trip. In a local newspaper report on the visit, a journalist noted, "Many of the visitors commented on it being a fascinating eye-opener for them since they have spent years studying particular aspects of Hume's work but not necessarily the details about his life—how and where he lived."[4]

This observation reveals a lot about the limitations of Hume scholarship. Philosophy, especially in the English-speaking world, tends to treat ideas and arguments as though they were timeless and placeless. All you need to do, students are told, is attend to the validity and the soundness of the arguments. Who made them, when and where, is irrelevant. There are clichéd

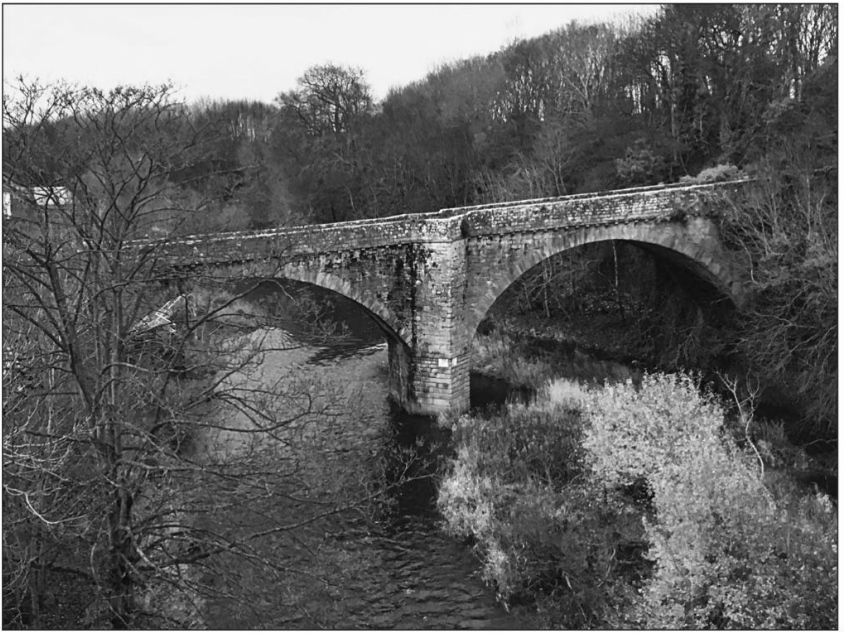

FIGURE 3. The bridge in Chirnside rebuilt with £100 from Hume's will.

slogans that are routinely used to encourage this: "Follow the argument wherever it leads" and "Play the ball, not the man." (Presumably the same applies to "the woman," but since no one is paying attention to who is presenting the argument, philosophers have not noticed how much men have dominated philosophy and so many have not even stopped to wonder why.)

This makes sense if you think that philosophy is a set of discrete intellectual problems to be solved. It makes less sense, however, if you think philosophy is a synoptic discipline, in which all the parts link together to form a (hopefully) coherent whole. And it makes no sense at all if you think that this whole comprises both life and work, ideas and practice. I hope to convince you that attending to a philosopher's life helps make

better sense of their work and that biography is a tool for the study of philosophy, not a distraction from doing it.

University Challenge

Hume's intellectual development would have started young, with private tutors. It began formally, however, when he went back to the city of his birth to study at Edinburgh University. The matriculation book showed him signing up to study under William Scot, the professor of Greek, on February 27, 1723.[5] This meant he was not yet twelve years old. This was not then an exceptionally young age to go to university, which was a very different kind of institution than what it is now. Hume was fortunate in his timing. Just one year before, three new chairs (professorships) were created, paid for by a two-pence duty (tax) on each pint of ale brewed and sold in the city and its adjacent parishes.[6] Beer has for a long time played an important role in the city. Whenever I visit, I am always struck by the malty smell from the breweries that blows across the city center. This scent has new meaning for me now, knowing the role it played in helping to educate Edinburgh's finest mind. However, the aroma may disappear in the not too distant future as the breweries move out farther from the expensive city center to its environs.

Hume's biographer E. C. Mossner called the Edinburgh of that age: "A paradoxical city of austerity and homeliness, of isolation and cosmopolitanism, of rusticity and urbanity, of the old world and the modern, a city imbedded in the past yet with aspirations for the future."[7] Sophistication and squalor, finesse and filth, existed side by side. Even the comfort of the affluent was relative. Consider how in France in late 1737, Hume wrote to the Rev. Hugh Blair when he found out the vicar had become

his tenant: "It was perfectly clean of Vermine when I left it, and I hope you will find it so. I would advise you not to put a Bed in the little Closet near the Kitchen: It wou'd be stiffling to a Servant & woud certainly encourage Bugs."[8] Bugs, mice, and rats were irritants even the middle classes found it difficult to avoid.

But those were the least of the city's sanitary problems. Residents of homes on several different floors of the tall tenement buildings of the Old Town emptied their chamber pots full of feces and urine straight onto the streets. An account by one soldier who passed through the city tells us "it stinks intolerably, for which I believe, it exceeds all parts of the world." Walking the streets after ten o'clock in the evening meant risking a chamber pot being emptied over your head. After this time, city regulations stipulated that they should be taken down to the gutters to be emptied, but few busy housemaids complied. Hence the soldier reported that a common cry in the streets was "*Hoad yare Hoand"* (hold your hand), meaning, "Do not throw till I am past."[9]

Edinburgh today is mercifully free of such inconveniences, but like many major cities there is still a sense of the tension between affluence and poverty. The Old Town is filled with tourists, cafés, restaurants, and gift shops. But you don't have to look far to see the homeless struggling to survive, begging and sleeping in shop entrances. Get away from the tourist areas into some of the suburbs, and poverty is even more evident. *Trainspotting*, Irvine Walsh's novel about drug addicts in the late 1980s, turned into a film by Danny Boyle in 1996, was set in Leith, the port area of Edinburgh. A recent study that divided Scotland into seven thousand areas showed that four of the fifty most deprived were in Edinburgh.[10] It remains as much a city of contradictions and contrast as it did in Hume's time.

FIGURE 4. View of Edinburgh from Calton Hill.

Looking out across Edinburgh today from its most central vantage point, Calton Hill, it is possible to get a sense of Hume's city. Of course the city today is more densely built up than it was in the eighteenth century. But many of the landmark buildings were pretty much as they are now, and the topography of the undulating city remains unchanged. Straight in front of you is Edinburgh Castle, occupying the highest part of the Old Town. This is the area where Hume lived early in his adult life. The line of your sight to the castle passes over the southern edge of the New Town, built during Hume's lifetime. It was here that he bought a parcel of land on which he built the home where he lived during his last years. At the base of the hill you can see Old Calton Burial Ground, where a mausoleum holds Hume's

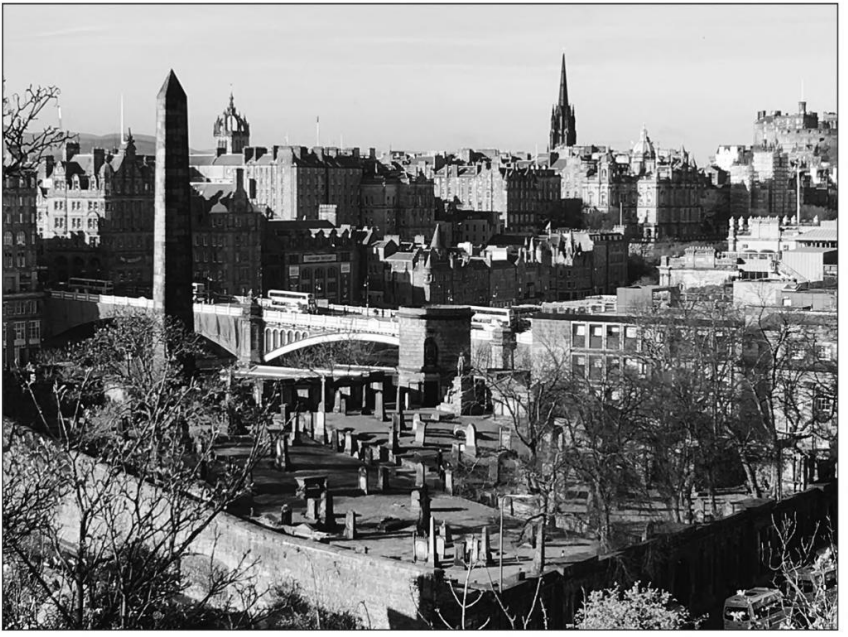

FIGURE 5. View from Calton Hill with Old Calton Burial Ground in the foreground. Hume's mausoleum can be seen blocking the view of the right-hand end of the bridge.

remains. And to the left of the castle, closer to the hill, lies Edinburgh University, where Hume began his formal studies.

Hume wasn't much impressed by the education he received at the university. "***There is nothing to be learnt from a Professor, which is not to be met with in Books,***" he wrote. "I see no reason why we shou'd either go to an University, more than to any other place, or ever trouble ourselves about the Learning Capacity of the Professor."[11] He left without taking a degree, as was common at the time. There was a simple economic explanation for this: only the Professor of Natural Philosophy was paid graduation fees so there was little incentive for anyone else to encourage their students to graduate.[12]

Hume was probably more intellectually stimulated by his membership in the Rankenian Club, the most important of the many societies of intellectuals formed in the time. The Rankenian was named after the tavern keeper in whose house they met.[13] This was Hume's first taste of the kind of society he preferred to keep: a select group of intelligent people, convivially gathering with food and drink.

Hume probably lost his religion in these times. Later in life, Boswell reported that Hume told him "he never had entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke," which he would have done in his university years.[14] Hume was particularly unpersuaded by the dominant ideals of religious virtue captured in a popular tract he would have read, *The Whole Duty of Man*. This counted "making pleasure, not health, the end of eating" and "wasting time or estate in good fellowship" as breaches of duty.[15] For Hume, such activities were exemplars of virtue, not vice. In his *Treatise*, he argued that virtues had to be either useful or agreeable, and that wasn't true of "celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues." These "serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, not encrease his power of self-enjoyment."[16] Elsewhere, he said, ***"To imagine, that the gratifying of any sense, or the indulging of any delicacy in meat, drink, or apparel, is of itself a vice, can never enter into a head, that is not disordered by the frenzies of enthusiasm."*** ("Enthusiasm" here means excessive zeal, of the kind found in religious extremists.) These indulgences are only vices when they are pursued to excess, preventing us from exercising other virtues such as liberality or charity or reducing us to poverty. "Where they entrench upon no

virtue, but leave ample subject whence to provide for friends, family, and every proper object of generosity or compassion, they are entirely innocent, and have in every age been acknowledged such by almost all moralists."[17]

Although he entirely rejected Christian morality, Hume's letters suggest that he did not give up his faith easily. Looking back in 1751 he wrote that his propensity for the skeptical, for which he became famous, was not innate but "crept in upon me against my Will." He had been looking at an old manuscript book containing private writings from before he was twenty. It revealed "page after page" chronicling the gradual progress of his thoughts on religion. "It begun with an anxious Search after Arguments, to confirm the common Opinion: Doubts stole in, dissipated, returned, were again dissipated, returned again and it was a Perpetual struggle of a restless Imagination, against Inclination, perhaps against reason."[18] He lost his religion slowly and reluctantly. As Mossner put it, Hume "*reasoned* himself out of religion."[19]

The lack of lasting intellectual impact that university had on Hume's thought is mirrored by the lack of lasting architectural impact the university has had on the city itself. Although it was founded in 1582 and can claim to be the sixth oldest university in Britain, for two hundred years it occupied a hotchpotch of different buildings around this city and had no coherent base. The university Hume attended is therefore a merely ghostly presence today. It was not until 1789 that the foundation stone was laid at the site of Old College, the university's first purpose-built home. This is the oldest part of the university that can be visited today, on South Bridge. Surrounded by some of the city center's less fashionable shops and restaurants and coated in soot from years of traffic pollution, its potential grandeur is somewhat muted by its situation. One can imagine an

maxim: ***to understand how we should live—as individuals and as a society—learn from every source that offers something to teach you.***

Crisis and Epiphany

Hume's most intensive education only began in earnest after he left the university, probably in 1726.[20] He first tried to study law, knowing it was a reliable and respectable profession. But in a letter to a physician, he wrote that it "appear'd nauseous to me" and that the only way of "pushing my Fortune in the World" was as a "Scholar & Philosopher." So in spring 1729 he abandoned law and set about six months of intensive study. He was already formulating his own, original philosophy. "When I was about eighteen years of age," he recalled not long after, "there seemed to be opened up to me a new scene of thought."[21]

"I was infinitely happy in this Course of Life for some months," he wrote, but after six months, in September 1729, he found that "all my Ardour seem'd in a moment to be extinguisht, & I could no longer raise my Mind to that pitch, which formerly gave me such excessive Pleasure." Hume had fallen into a deep depression, what he called the "disease of the learned." The cure was to study less intensively, to exercise daily, and to make time for relaxation and social intercourse. He learned a lesson he would share in the *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* years later. ***"The mind requires some relaxation, and cannot always support its bent to care and industry,"*** he wrote. "It seems, then, that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to human race, and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biasses to draw too much, so as to incapacitate them for other occupations and entertainments."[22]

From then on, he always maintained a balance between leisure, exercise, and work. In his last years, he counseled his eighteen-year-old nephew David that "every day, fair or foul, you ought to use some exercise," which is "absolutely necessary" for health, and bad health "is the greatest interrupter to study in the world." He summed up his message in an allegorical anecdote: "A man was riding, with great violence, and running his horse quite out of wind. He stopt a moment to ask when he might reach a particular place. In two hours, replied the countryman, if you will go slower; in four if you be in such a hurry." More haste, less speed is a warning for all areas of life, not just practical or urgent tasks.

His brief crisis is of much more than just autobiographical interest. The key lesson Hume learned from his depression became the cornerstone of his entire philosophical project: that philosophy must be rooted in an accurate understanding of human nature. ***Philosophy succeeds when it addresses human beings as they are and fails when it treats them only as philosophers imagine them to be.*** This is the point he leaves the reader with at the end of the *Treatise*, when he compares the world of a philosopher with the work of both an anatomist and a painter: "We must have an exact knowledge of the parts, their situation and connexion, before we can design with any elegance or correctness."[23]

His greatest lesson in how *not* to philosophize came from the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics, who believed that human beings could achieve a calmness of mind, *ataraxia*, by learning to detach themselves from worldly concerns and emotions. Their goal is to realize our rational nature as much as possible and let go of our more animal instincts.

Hume gave this a good try. He read many books by Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch and, "smit with their beautiful representations

of virtue and philosophy," undertook "the improvement of my temper and will, along with my reason and understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with reflections against death, and poverty, and shame, and pain, and all the other calamities of life."[24]

This is precisely what the Stoics advised: that we should be constantly reminding ourselves of how fragile wealth, health, and reputation are, and that death is inevitable. Epictetus, for instance, instructed his readers bluntly, "If you kiss your child, or your wife, remind yourself that you are kissing a mortal; then you will be able to bear it if either of them dies."[25] Epicurus reminds us, "Against all else it is possible to provide security, but as against death all of us mortals alike dwell in an unfortified city."[26] We should covet material wealth even less than we should life. Seneca wrote, "Money never made anyone rich: all it does is infect everyone who touches it with a lust for more of itself."[27] Musonius argued, "one man and one man only is truly wealthy—he who learns to want nothing in every circumstance."[28]

The key lesson the Stoics taught was to disregard as unimportant anything that is not within our control, which is everything apart from virtue. Epictetus summed this up well: "Apply the rule. Is this within or outside your choice? Outside it. Discard it. What have you seen? Someone mourning the death of a child. Apply the rule. Death is not within your choice. Discard it."[29]

Hume found that when he reminded himself of these harsh truths as one small part of an active life, they had some good effect. But when they become the focus of life, they "waste the spirits." While most of us are probably guilty of not thinking enough about our mortality, think about it too much and you'll simply become depressed. Similarly, we tend to overestimate

the importance of wealth and health, but if we constantly tell ourselves they are fragile and worth nothing, we cannot enjoy either if we are lucky enough to have them. Too much such reflection, thought Hume, was part of the reason why he became so ill.[30] ***It is admirable to refuse to look harsh reality in the eye, foolish and destructive never to avert our gaze from it.***

Even after he had rejected the Stoics as "too magnificent for human nature" he acknowledged that "they carry, however, a grandeur with them, which seizes the spectator, and strikes him with admiration." Socrates was not a Stoic, but Hume found him similarly admired by all for "his perpetual serenity and contentment, amidst the greatest poverty and domestic vexations; his resolute contempt of riches, and his magnanimous care of preserving liberty, while he refused all assistance from his friends and disciples, and avoided even the dependence of an obligation."[31]

Despite this residual respect, in some later writings, Hume attacks Stoicism very strongly. Most viciously, he protests that the "perpetual cant" of the Stoics "bred a disgust in mankind."[32] In his essay "The Sceptic" he offers some pithy replies to common Stoic injunctions. For example, the Stoic says, "*You should always have before your eyes death, disease, poverty, blindness, exile, calumny, and infamy, as ills which are incident to human nature. If any one of these ills falls to your lot, you will bear it the better, when you have reckoned upon it.*" The Sceptic (in effect, Hume) replies, "If we confine ourselves to a general and distant reflection on the ills of human life, that can have no effect to prepare us for them. If by close and intense meditation we render them present and intimate to us, that is the true secret for poisoning all our pleasures, and rendering us perpetually miserable." More concise still, to the Stoic insistence that "***Your sorrow is fruitless,***

and will not change the course of destiny" the blunt answer is "Very true: And for that very reason I am sorry."[33]

For Hume, the Stoics ask us to go too much against the grain of human nature. ***"Philosophers have endeavoured to render happiness entirely independent of every thing external,"*** he complained. ***"That degree of perfection is impossible to be attained."*** A more modest and realistic goal, pursued by every wise person, is to "endeavour to place his happiness on such objects chiefly as depend upon himself."[34]

This difference between making one's happiness rest *entirely* or *chiefly* on what is within one's control is very subtle but important. To make oneself entirely non-dependent on fortune is not only humanly impossible but undesirable. To do that you would have to cut yourself off from the kind of love that tears us to pieces when it comes to an end, by death or by a breakdown in a relationship. Any ambition that it is not completely under your control to fulfill would be deemed foolish, which is to kill any ambition other than the lukewarm one to "do the best you can."

Hume's more modest ambition could be summed up in the maxim: ***do not depend on others or chance more than is necessary for attaining all the satisfaction that life has to offer***. This principle acknowledges that some lack of independence is necessary to live a full life, but asks us to constantly check whether or not we have made ourselves too dependent on what is outside of our control. You cannot be a good parent, for example, without making your welfare depend on that of your children. But if you make your role as a parent your sole and defining identity, you are making yourself too vulnerable should something happen to your child. If you are an athlete, it may be necessary to have the highest ambition in order to fulfill your

is a reminder that for all his genius Hume was unable to transcend one of the most pernicious prejudices of his age. In a notorious footnote to his essay "Of National Characters" Hume wrote, "I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites." His evidence for this was that "there never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation" and that "such a uniform and constant difference could not happen in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men."[40]

Here it seems Hume was let down by a lack of experience and of imagination, uncharacteristic failings he lapsed into, blinded by the prejudices of his time. He should have known better because, as he remarked elsewhere, "in all questions, submitted to the understanding, ***prejudice is destructive of sound judgment, and perverts all operations of the intellectual faculties.***"[41] He even saw how this applied to peoples, observing that prejudice often arises from the rash formation of bogus general rules such as "an Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidity." Hume was smart enough to see that "human nature is very subject to errors of this kind; and perhaps this nation as much as any other," but did not always succeed in spotting this error in himself.[42]

Without in any way defending Hume's racist remarks, it needs pointing out that there is probably a good reason they were made in a footnote, qualified by the less than certain "I am apt to suspect." Hume made several other offensive remarks in his essay "On National Character," but this is the only one where he attributes differences to nature and biology rather than culture and geography. He seemed persuaded by the thesis we now sometimes call environmental determinism: that

weather in particular shapes national characters. "There is some reason to think," he suggests, "that all the nations, which live beyond the polar circles or between the tropics, are inferior to the rest of the species, and are incapable of all the higher attainments of the human mind. The poverty and misery of the northern inhabitants of the globe, and the indolence of the southern, from their few necessities, may, perhaps, account for this remarkable difference, without our having recourse to physical causes."[43] That last phrase makes it clear that he does not think the explanation for the inferiority is down to any inherent physical defects.

This point is reinforced by his observation that "the manners of a people change very considerably from one age to another; either by great alterations in their government, by the mixtures of new people, or by that inconstancy, to which all human affairs are subject." People from the same bloodline can have very different characteristics, for better or for worse, depending on when in the history of the nation they were born. As an example, Hume claims that "the ingenuity, industry, and activity of the ancient Greeks have nothing in common with the stupidity and indolence of the present inhabitants of those regions."[44]

All of his racist remarks have to be seen in this light. So when he says "the Jews in Europe, and the Armenians in the east, have a peculiar character; and the former are as much noted for fraud, as the latter for probity," we can be fairly sure he thought the cause of this was culture, not biology.[45]

However, thanks to that dreadful footnote, we cannot be so sure that he thought the same about the supposed fact that "you may obtain any thing of the Negroes by offering them strong drink; and may easily prevail with them to sell, not only their children, but their wives and mistresses, for a cask of brandy."[46] According to philosopher John Immerwahr, Hume's choice of

the phrase "other species of men" strongly suggests that Hume endorsed the theory of polygenesis: that different races were different species. This was often taken to imply that they were not all equally human.[47] Given his other remarks about climate and culture, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Hume did not have a coherent view on this at all. An essayist, like a newspaper columnist today, held forth on a wide range of views, not all of which they had given extensive, deep thought. Race was one such subject for Hume, and his comments betray a certain sloppiness of thinking.

For the last edition of his collected works, published posthumously, he did amend the footnote to at least lessen the suggestion of polygenesis and narrow his claim of inferiority only to black people. The revised note reads, "I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation." This is hardly a great improvement, and the fact that he revised rather than retracted the comments suggests his racism was "deliberate and considered," as Immerwahr charges.

For all his faults, it should be pointed out that Hume was no apologist for the various acts of violence and cruelty others did in the name of racial or cultural superiority. In his histories, he unambiguously condemned the Crusades "as the most signal and most durable monument of human folly, that has yet appeared in any age or nation."[48] And despite the fact that he briefly worked for a sugar merchant, he was highly critical of slavery, calling it "more cruel and oppressive than any civil subjection whatsoever." He is pleased that it had largely vanished from most of Europe, saying that "the little humanity, commonly observed in persons, accustomed, from their infancy, to exercise so great authority over their fellow-creatures, and to

trample upon human nature, were sufficient alone to disgust us with that unbounded dominion."[49]

Yet even here it seems Hume turned a blind eye to the slavery that still existed in his age. A letter recently discovered by the historian Felix Waldmann shows that Hume went along with a request to encourage his patron, Lord Hertford, to buy a plantation in Grenada that he must have known was worked by slaves. The records show there were forty-two of them.[50] Hume knew slavery was wrong but seemed to act as though it was unreasonable to expect traders and investors to shun it.

By reading Hume carefully and seeing him as a product of his time, we can make his racism somewhat more understandable but we cannot deny or excuse it. The lesson is clear: ***never slavishly follow even the greatest minds, for they too have prejudices, weaknesses, and blind spots***. In Hume's case, these blind spots were genuine failings and not merely an inevitable consequence of being an eighteenth-century European. In 1770, one of his contemporaries, James Beattie, wrote a scathing attack on Hume's philosophy. Although many of his criticisms missed the mark, his rejection of Hume's claims about the inferiority of black people was spot-on. Indeed, they employed precisely the kinds of good, empirical arguments that you would have expected from Hume. Beattie argued that "no man could have sufficient evidence, except from a personal acquaintance with all the negroes that now are, or ever were, on the face of the earth" to justify Hume's sweeping conclusion about them. Beattie also pointed out that there were many great non-white civilizations, such as those of Peru and Mexico. "The Africans and Americans are known to have many ingenious manufactures and arts among them, which even Europeans would find it no easy matter to imitate." Where societies were more "barbarous" it was not due to any inherent inferiority of their members.

"Had the Europeans been destitute of the arts of writing, and working in iron, they might have remained to this day as barbarous as the natives of Africa and America. Nor is the invention of these arts to be ascribed to our superior capacity."[51]

Hume should have been able to have seen this for himself or at the very least have accepted the arguments once they were made to him. Perhaps Hume gave them too little respect and attention because they came tucked away in more than five hundred pages of a vicious attack on the whole of Hume's system. Hume clearly had no time for Beattie, calling him "that bigotted silly Fellow."[52] Hume should have realized that ***we should never completely dismiss even those who are almost always wrong, as they are almost always sometimes right too***.

In the light of these serious shortcomings, how should we judge Hume now?[53] There are increasingly many who argue that his comments on race disqualify him from honor. In 2020, a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was torn down in Bristol, not far from where Hume worked, catalyzing calls to bring down monuments of other discredited historical figures. Hume soon joined the hit list. A petition was started to rename Edinburgh University's David Hume Tower and there were calls to remove his statue from the Royal Mile.

We can't just dismiss the unacceptable prejudices of the past as unimportant. But if we think that holding morally objectionable views disqualifies anyone from being considered a great thinker or a political leader, then there's hardly anyone from history left. A cautionary tale is that the first iteration of the petition to rename David Hume Tower proposed the name to be changed to honor Julius Nyerere, the Tanzanian anti-colonialist politician—until it was drawn to the attention of the petitioner that "Nyerere was harmful in his own ways, both through his ties to dictatorship and through his homophobia."

the fundamentals of their philosophy to see what was wrong in how they applied them.

Had Hume persisted in the sugar trade he might have become more implicated in slavery and his racism would be even more problematic. As it turned out, within a few months he "found that scene totally unsuitable to me."[55] Business was not for him. His possibly half-hearted attempt at a commercial career stands as an example of the way in which he always combined the intellectual and practical. He had a lifelong desire to earn a living, which helped keep him grounded. At the same time he never allowed his pragmatic realism to dampen his spirit of intellectual adventure. ***You can only follow your dreams if you're completely awake.***

His failure to make his new life in Bristol work was also in part due to his unwelcomed attempts to correct the grammar and style of his boss's correspondence. Miller told him that he had made £20,000 with his English and would not have it improved.[56] Hume was always a careful prose stylist, and it is fitting that what made him such a good writer helped ensure he did not end up becoming something else.

It was in Bristol that Hume changed the spelling of his name from "Home" because he realized that it was futile to expect the English to pronounce it properly and would continue to make it rhyme with "Rome," not "whom."

So Hume gave up on business and set out once again to try his fortune as the "man of letters" he had known for some years he really wanted to be. To do that, he removed himself from Britain and set out for France.