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David Hume

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Abstract

David Hume was a central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment and an active participant in European networks. He believed in the power of sociability, in the fundamental human connections. Sociability is key to understanding the process which made of him both a central and a marginal figure. This entry examines his career linking his social and philosophical practices. It looks first at Hume as a sociable philosopher, in theory and in practice, he belonged to diverse clubs and societies in Scotland and London, then at Hume's participation in the Republic of Letters, and finally at philosophy as the practice of sociability.

David Hume's original position in eighteenth-century letters is linked to a paradox: he was both a marginal character (Scottish rather than English, British rather than European), and a central philosopher (Hume wrote in France, worked in France, belonged, for a while, to the world of letters in London). The reception of his works testifies to this ambivalence: until the end of his life, he lamented the lack of success of his *Treatise* – 'never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell *dead-born from the press*, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots.'1

The role he played in the definition of the Scottish Enlightenment invites further consideration of what constituted, for Hume, a philosopher in the eighteenth century. The paradox at the centre of his career was identified by John Robertson:

> 'As Hume was to discover, […] he could never exert in London the literary authority which he had come to possess in Edinburgh. There Hume's philosophy, and his example of a man of letters, made him the moving force of what is now known as the Scottish Enlightenment. But in London, where the Enlightenment never took hold, he was just another author competing for the attention of publishers and the public, and as vulnerable as anyone else to the slings and arrows of partisan prejudice.'2

Hume as a Sociable Philosopher

Hume's career is well-documented. While he started off as a clerk to a sugar merchant, he soon went to France (in 1734), to Paris, then Reims, and La Flèche, where he wrote the *Treatise on Human Nature*, and most certainly familiarised himself with French philosophy (Malebranche, Descartes, Bayle). This period was one of retreat for Hume, and of philosophical meditation. He went back to London in 1737, where he published the *Treatise* (1739-40). In 1739, he returned to Scotland, to work on his *Essays*, which were published in 1741-42. Unable to secure a position in a Scottish university, he went abroad for a few years (working in particular for General James St Clair in Vienna and Turin), before coming back to Scotland in 1749, where he wrote *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, as well as the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. From 1751, Hume's reputation in Scotland made of him a central character in the Scottish Enlightenment. He was a Keeper of the Library of the Faculty of Advocates (1752-57), a member of the Literary Society of Glasgow founded in 1752 and of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh of which he was appointed secretary in 1752, and which was composed of the most eminent physicians and philosophers of the time. He was also a founding member of the Select Society (1754) – with Allan Ramsay, Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, Hugh Blair and James Boswell. A subsidiary body, the Edinburgh Society for Encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture, was then created in 1755.

If Hume and his fellow select men were especially concerned with the improvement of Scotland in economics, politics, manners and taste, he also belonged to several convivial clubs such as the Poker Club (1762) in Edinburgh,3 which counted among its members Ferguson, Smith, the historian Robertson or the playwright John Home. In London, he was a founding member of Boodle's (1762) together with Lord Shelburne, Lord Shaftesbury, Smith and Ferguson, and was elected a member of Brooks's in 1766. From the 1760s, Hume's reputation extended to France, which he visited, where his works were translated – in March 1764, Hume was appointed Secretary to Lord Hertford, British Ambassador in Paris, and Hume stayed in the French capital until 1766. Thereafter, he remained in Scotland until his death in 1776.

Hume was at the centre of Scottish as well as of European networks. Perhaps sociability is key to understanding the process which made of him both a central and a marginal figure. Indeed, Hume believed in the power of sociability, in the fundamental connections between human beings: 'The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition, which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions.'4 To Hume, this process was tightly connected to sympathy, as explained in 'A Treatise',5 a notion also central to Smith's and Shaftesbury's philosophical thoughts.

Not only did Hume believe in man's social drive, and in the imitation and contagion of manners and sentiments that resulted from human sociability, but the Scottish philosopher also claimed that the civilizing effects of trade and commerce provided the ideal conditions for the development of taste and the arts: 'The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become; nor is it possible, that, when enriched with science, and possessed of a fund of conversation, they should be contented to remain in solitude, or live with their fellow-citizens in that distant manner, which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations.' (Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', vol. 1, 211) To Hume, solitude is a state to be avoided and even feared : 'We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer'. (Hume, *Treatise*, 234) In that 'positive cycle of sophistication of our tastes and learning',6 the sociable interactions enhanced by urban social life were therefore highly valued by Hume in theory ? 'particular clubs and societies are everywhere formed: Both sexes meet in an easy and sociable manner; and the tempers of men, as well as their behaviour, refine apace' (Hume, *Treatise*, 234*)* – as well as in practice.

It is not surprising that Hume was himself an enthusiastic member of such institutions in enlightened Edinburgh as well as in London. Hume considered the world of clubs and societies as a microcosm of human societies or communities: being welcomed and approved by one's fellow clubmen could have the same effects as being accepted by society at large. Indeed, membership of a club, or acceptance into a select circle, was a sign of social recognition and conducive to happiness and self-esteem:

> ‘No enjoyment is sincere, without some reference to company and society; so no society can be agreeable, or even tolerable, where a man feels his presence unwelcome, and discovers all around him symptoms of disgust and aversion. But why, in the greater society or confederacy of mankind, should not the case be the same as in particular clubs and companies?’7

Hume in the Republic of Letters

While Hume’s short autobiography testifies to the lack of success of his works, it reveals how Hume courted celebrity in the Republic of Letters. He lamented the public’s absence of engagement with his works, giving almost a history of his failure as a writer. In order to achieve a certain form of recognition, he published the same texts in new editions, with new titles, in particular the *Treatise*, which he thought a victim not of its contents, but of its form. This means, though, that he was constantly refining the form, looking for means of addressing readers, experimenting with styles appropriate to the public sphere. This quest for the perfection of philosophical writing is therefore closely linked to the quest for public recognition: ‘I am glad to find, that you have been able to set about this New Edition in earnest. I have made it extremely correct; at least I believe that, if I were to live twenty Years longer, I should never be able to give it any further Improvements.’8

In looking back over his philosophical career, Hume portrayed himself as detached from the judgment of men. In spite of the failure of the *Treatise*, we find him striving to write more and publish more. Although the histories met with mixed reception (the *History of the Stuarts* sold 45 copies in the first year while the *History of the Tudors* generated a certain opposition from the public), Hume pursued his work, looking at the more ancient periods. Apparently, Hume shunned quarrels and debates, either not replying to provocations, or not mentioning them in his autobiography. He does not refer to the quarrel with Rousseau, embodied in the publication of texts and pamphlets.9 Hume’s supposed detachment from quarrels, his rejection of the judgment of others, contribute to his self-portrait, at the end of his autobiography:

> ‘I was, I say, a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments’ (*Life of David Hume*, 32-3).

Image



Legend
Allan Ramsay, ‘David Hume’, 1766, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, PG 1057.

Image



Legend
Allan Ramsay, ‘Jean-Jacques Rousseau’, 1766, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, NG 820.

But Hume’s retreat from the vicissitudes of the world did not preclude the possibility of leading a public life. He considered for instance life in the city as the true environment for a man of letters. Which he found in Paris, where he was recognized in the salons: ‘There is, however, a real satisfaction in living at Paris, from the great number of sensible, knowing, and polite company with which that city abounds above all places in the universe. I thought once of settling there for life’ (*Life of David Hume*, 27-28). It is probably in France that he commanded the greatest respect. From 1763 to 1766, he was acclaimed and introduced in the most polite and fashionable circles of the capital. In several letters to his friends at home, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson or William Robertson, he describes the effusions that his arrival in Paris generated and the delights of Paris social life:

> ‘Do you ask me about my course of life? I can only say, that I eat nothing but ambrosia, drink nothing but nectar, breathe nothing but incense, and tread on nothing but flowers! Every man I meet, and, still more, every lady, would think they were wanting in the most indispensable duty, if they did not make a long and elaborate harangue in my praise.’10

He found a special satisfaction in attending the literary salons of Mme du Deffand, Mme Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse and of the Countess of Boufflers. ‘Le bon David’ was a shining public figure both admired by Parisian ladies and appreciated by d'Alembert, Turgot, Diderot, Holbach, Helvetius or Buffon, all illustrious French thinkers with whom he became acquainted.

In this sense, a philosopher is a public man, whose character and writings are at the centre of debates, in Edinburgh or in Paris, but whose detachment enables both distance and control. There is no doubt a part of posture in such self-portrayal. A friend of Hume’s, reflecting on the fact that Hume was a celebrity of the Republic of Letters, wrote to him:

> ‘What you say of your being detested as a Scotsman & dispised [sic] as a man of letters is melancholy nonsense. It is not flattery when I assure you that you are more universally loved by all ranks of people than any man I ever knew, & I never met with any person who could pretend to any degree of taste & sense who did not look upon your work to be as entertaining & as instructive as that of almost any other author which the world has ever produced.’11

Philosophy as the Practice of Sociability

Hume used philosophy to enact a form of sociability. The four essays on happiness give an insight into such a process. They were published in the second volume of the *Essays Moral and Political*, in 1742, and are entitled: ‘the Epicurean,’ ‘the Stoic’, ‘the Platonist’, and ‘the Sceptic’. Unlike other essays which are meant to be read individually, the symmetrical titles of the essays indicate that they should be read together: ‘The intention of this and the three following essays is not so much to explain accurately the sentiments of the ancient sects of philosophy, as to deliver the sentiments of sects, that naturally form themselves in the world, and entertain different ideas of human life and of happiness. I have given each of them the name of the philosophical sect, to which it bears the greatest affinity’.12 As Hume mentioned in the first edition, these essays are not meant to be read as summaries of philosophical conceptions, but they are rather texts in which ‘a certain character is personated.’13

For the Epicurean, happiness is to be found in Nature rather than in the mind: ‘happiness implies ease, contentment, repose, and pleasure; not watchfulness, care, and fatigue’ (*Essays*, vol. 1, 120). Because they follow the lead of Nature, passions lead to happiness, rather than the empty speeches of men. True wisdom and virtue lie in pleasant conversations rather than in formal disquisitions. Enjoyment is to be found in the present moment, rather than in the

past or in the future. While the rejection of austere reasonings by the Epicurean seems to be addressed to the Stoic, the next persona insists on the fact that nature without art is nothing, and that man cannot be content with enjoying the pleasures of Nature. Happiness can only be attained through arts and sciences, through laws and society. And the quest for virtue is the ultimate reward. The next essay, devoted to the Platonist, seems likewise to be directed at the previous essay, because it lambasts empty knowledge, virtue without reward. For the persona of this essay, beauty and virtue are to be encountered in Nature, which are a gift of God. Our faculties are therefore to be used to worship our Creator. Finally, the last essay seems to take the counterpoint of all three previous essays: 'I have long entertained a suspicion, with regard to the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects, and found in myself a greater inclination to dispute, than assent to their conclusions' (135). The sceptic adopts a position which is perhaps not extremely different from Hume's, wondering whether happiness can be attained, because human life, according to him, is governed by chance rather than by reason: life cannot be reduced to rules or methods. What is left, in the end, is the fact that philosophy, according to the sceptic, or perhaps according to Hume, is one of the most enjoyable of human occupations.

How are we to consider the articulation between these different essays? For Harris, each essay refutes the previous one, finally to arrive at Hume's position. But the fourth essay cannot necessarily be considered as the conclusion of the other three. There are a number of ironical effects in the essay, in particular a lengthy footnote which seems to introduce a distance vis-à-vis the sceptic. Above all, the final position of the sceptic seems far removed from Hume's practice of philosophy, from his concern for philosophical communication, from his desire always to reach a large public. The sceptic does not abide by the principles of sociability, such as Hume himself practiced it.

It is therefore more productive to regard these four essays as a form of dialogue, or a subtle 'polyphony',14 with Hume withdrawing from the final conclusion, and letting readers espouse one or the other of the positions, perhaps in turn.15 The philosopher's role, in this instance, would be to present the debates and arguments, to suggest modes of arguing, to preclude the possibility of reaching a secure position, and finally, perhaps, to generate a dialogue between the philosopher and the public. For Hume, this practice of philosophy combines an encounter with the public with theoretical rigour. The process as is apparent in the sketch of the four essays on happiness given here, is complex and shows a way of leading the readers towards wisdom, without imposing a theoretical conclusion. Hume seems to insist on the link between philosophical retreat and engagement with the world, between the quest for knowledge and the quest for celebrity, between philosophers and readers as well. And it is the genre of the essay, which provides exactly this mode of philosophical encounter between the philosopher and his readers.

1. The Life of David Hume, esq. Written by Himself (London, 1777), p. 8-9.

2. John Robertson, 'Hume, David (1711–1776), philosopher and historian', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 23 (Sep. 2004) Accessed 19 Nov. 2022.

3. Its name is supposed to have been bestowed on it, on account of its services in stirring the intellectual energies of its members.

4. David Hume, ‘Of National Characters,’ in Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, A Critical Edition, ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp and Mark A. Box , 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2021), vol. 1, p. 164.

5. ‘No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its con-sequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.’ David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature [1734], ed. by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton in The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), vol. 1, p. 206 (Book II, Part I, Section XI ‘Of the Love of Fame’).

6. Ryu Susato, Hume’s Sceptical Enlightenment (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 112.

7. David Hume, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. L. A. Selby- Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 280-81.

8. Letter to David Strahan, 8 June 1776, letter 525, The Letters of David Hume, Vol. II, 1766-1776, ed. J.Y.T. Greig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 322.

9. Such as Exposé succinct de la contestation qui s’est élevée entre M. Hume et M. Rousseau, avec les pièces justificatives (London: printed for T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1766), translated by J.-B.-A. Suard from A Concise and Genuine Account of the Dispute Between Mr Hume and Mr Rousseau. Accessible at BnF, Gallica: ark:/12148/bpt6k57875157

10. Hume to Dr. Robertson, Dec. 1, 1763, Life and Correspondence of David Hume, ed. John Hill Burton, 2 Vols. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1846), vol. 2, chap. XIII, p. 178 ; see also Hume to Adam Smith, 26th Oct. 1763, p. 168-169 ; Hume to Professor Ferguson, 9th Nov. 1763, p. 172.

11. John Crawford to Hume, 20 January 1767. Quoted in Harris, p. 472.

12. Hume, ‘The Epicurean’, n° 1, Essays, vol. 1, p. 119.

13. Hume, Essays, Moral and Political (Edinburgh, 1742), vol. 2, p. iii-iv.

14. Laurent Jaffro, 'La métaphilosophie de Hume dans ses quatre essais sur le bonheur', in Laurent Jaffro and Pierre-Marie Morel (eds.), Matière, plaisir, bonheur. En mémoire de Jean Salem (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2023), p. 103.

15. See also Jacob Sider, ‘Hume’s Four Philosophers, Recasting the Treatise of Human Nature’, Modern Intellectual History (vol. 6, n° 1, 2009), p. 20 : ‘By replacing the authoritative voice of discursive philosophy with multiple viewpoints, the dialogue enacts within the text the process of convincing and being convinced, of rhetoric shaping a speaker’s argument and acting on a listener, and asks the reader to apply it analogically to him- or herself.’

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