

PENGUIN  CLASSICS

DAVID HUME

A TREATISE OF
HUMAN NATURE





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DAVID HUME (1711-76) devoted himself from early youth to 'philosophy and general learning'. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) 'fell dead-born from the Press', by his own account, but is now regarded as his masterwork. He recast it and added to its teaching in essays, inquiries, and dissertations on philosophical, moral, political, economic, and literary topics. His historical interests yielded the *History of England* (1754-62), while *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, published posthumously in 1779, completed what he had to say about religion. Foiled in an attempt to become a university professor, he was a tutor, judge advocate, aide-de-camp, librarian, diplomat, and senior civil servant, just before enjoying retirement amidst his friends in Edinburgh from 1769. At one time the object of religious intolerance in Scotland and largely ignored in England, Hume received the adulation of France on arriving there in 1763 as secretary to the British Ambassador. Adam Smith said: 'I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will admit.'

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OF
HUMAN NATURE

EDITED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published 1739 and 1740
Published in Pelican Books 1969
Reprinted in Penguin Classics 1984, 1985, 1987

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading
Set in Linotype Georgian

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INTRODUCTION

DAVID HUME is the greatest of British philosophers, and his greatness, it is now believed, reveals itself most strikingly in the first as well as the most sustained and systematic of his works: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Berkeley published his *New Theory of Vision* (1709) when he was twenty-four and *A Treatise of the Principles of Human Knowledge* a year later. Also, A. J. Ayer, in our own day, published *Language, Truth and Logic* (1935) when he was twenty-five. Nevertheless, the appearance of the three volumes of Hume's *Treatise* by the time he was twenty-nine still warrants a claim for the author's outstanding philosophical precocity. Not that Hume later in life exulted over his youthful ardour: 'So vast an Undertaking, plan'd before I was one and twenty, & compos'd before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. I have repented my Haste a hundred, & a hundred times.' Modern readers, however, are likely to be deeply moved and teased into thought by the elements in the *Treatise* which haunted the mature Hume: the nakedness of intellectual self-exposure, the provocative assaults on established systems, and the aggressive presentation of a revolutionary account of man's nature. With justice Sir Isaiah Berlin has written of Hume: 'No man has influenced the history of philosophy to a deeper and more disturbing degree.'

The remarkable achievement of the *Treatise* was the product of a young Scot born in Edinburgh on 26 April 1711, son of Joseph Home of Ninewells in Berwickshire, and Katherine Falconer, daughter of a distinguished advocate who became Lord President of the Court of Session, Scotland's supreme civil court. Joseph Home was also an advocate, educated at the universities of Edinburgh and Utrecht, and according to his son, who never knew him, he 'passed for a man of Parts'. He died in 1713 leaving David 'with an elder Brother and a Sister under the care of [their] Mother, a

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woman of singular Merit, who, though young and handsome, devoted herself entirely to the rearing and educating of her Children', such being the philosopher's tribute to a much-loved parent. David always remained on excellent terms with his family, though he saw fit to change the spelling of his name at the time of his first visit to England in 1734, when he found that the natives could not be persuaded that the pronunciation was *Hume* however spelled.

After a period of private tutoring, David signed the Matriculation Book at Edinburgh University on 27 February 1723; he was in his twelfth year and, following customary practice, did not bother to take a degree. For two or three years, however, he was exposed to considerable indoctrination in the New Philosophy, particularly that of Sir Isaac Newton. The subjects that he presumably studied included – besides the ancient languages – Logic and Metaphysics, Mathematics, Ethics, History, and Natural Philosophy. Though his family wished him to take up the profession of the law, 'I found', he confesses in his brief autobiography, 'an unsurmountable Aversion to every thing but the pursuits of Philosophy and general Learning: and while they fancied I was pouring over Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the Authors which I was secretly devouring.'

Early in 1729 he gave up all pretence of the law and threw himself with 'Boldness of Temper' into 'some new Medium, by which Truth might be establish'd which 'open'd up to me a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond Measure, & made me, with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it.' 'The Law,' he continues, 'which was the Business I design'd to follow, appear'd nauseous to me, & I cou'd think of no other way of pushing my Fortune in the World but that of a Scholar & Philosopher.' In the course of the eight years of intensive study which followed, he was brought to the verge of a breakdown, and he described fully his case-history in an autobiographical letter, just quoted, to a London physician, very likely Dr John Arbuthnot, the famous satirist and wit. These years of study and frustration

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were the gestation period of the *Treatise*. The time-scheme involved is suggested by three statements of Hume's, which are not to be taken too rigidly: namely, that the work was *projected* before he left college in 1725 or 1726 aged fourteen or fifteen, was *planned* before he was twenty-one in 1732, and was *composed* before he was twenty-five in 1736.

What this 'new Scene of Thought' was we cannot be sure without new evidence. Yet a survey of the available evidence justifies a reasoned conjecture. The subtitle to the *Treatise* provides an important clue: 'Being An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects'. The 'new Medium, by which Truth might be establisht', is thus the experimental method. Newton, at the close of the *Opticks* (1704), had thrown down a challenge which Hume was not alone among philosophers of the Enlightenment in accepting: 'If natural Philosophy in all its parts by pursuing the inductive method, shall at length be perfected, the bounds of moral philosophy will also be enlarged.' Now moral philosophy, as opposed to natural philosophy, comprises what in Hume's terminology are the understanding, the passions, morals, politics, and criticism: in short, the entire science of man discovered empirically and systematically. What he was fomenting was a Copernican revolution in philosophy because 'moral philosophy is in the same condition as natural, with regard to astronomy before the time of Copernicus.' He was convinced of both the fundamental significance of his ideas and the difficulty of getting them accepted: 'My Principles are . . . so remote from all the vulgar Sentiments on this Subject, that were they to take place, they wou'd produce almost a total Alteration in Philosophy: & . . . Revolutions of this kind are not easily brought about.'

Some clues to the development of Hume's thought in the pre-*Treatise* years are to be found among surviving early memoranda (1729-40) organized under three loose headings: 'Natural Philosophy', 'Philosophy', and 'General'. This third section contains many items on ethics and religion that might have been expected to appear under 'Philo-

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sophy'. Item 257, for example, is the very essence of Hume's position in ethics: 'The Moderns have not treated Morals so well as the Antients merely from their Reasoning turn which carry'd them away from Sentiment.' Notes 2 and 3 of the second section are from the Abbé Dubos, a great advocate of sentiment in ethics and aesthetics. Of forty notes in the same 'Philosophy' section, sixteen are from the sceptic Pierre Bayle and a note on the reverse of the last sheet is a sentence from Epicharmus, which in translation reads: 'Keep sober and remember to be sceptical.' Five notes are provided by *De Origine Mali* by William King, a rationalistic Archbishop of Dublin. Hume probably used the copiously annotated translation of 1731 by Edmund Law, which was printed with John Gay's introductory essay of philosophical importance as a source for associationism in psychology and utilitarianism in morals.

On the topic of Hume's religious scepticism, we have a tantalizing reference to a document which supplemented the notes in the early memoranda: 'tis not long ago [some time before 1751] that I burn'd an old Manuscript Book, wrote before I was twenty which contain'd, Page after Page, the gradual Progress of my Thoughts on that head.' The nature of this scepticism is elaborated upon: 'It begun with an anxious Search after Arguments, to confirm the common Opinion: Doubts stole in, dissipated, return'd, were again dissipated, return'd again and it was a perpetual Struggle of a restless Imagination against Inclination, perhaps against Reason.'

From the introduction to the *Treatise*, we learn that Hume placed himself in the empirical tradition of Bacon, Newton, Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler, 'who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of the public.' The 'new footing' was to base all reasoning concerning human nature entirely upon experience. Hume differed from the others only in seeking to cover all aspects of human nature except the small area that was purely a priori, also in accepting the results of the in-

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vestigation come what may. The others stopped short, at one point or another. It is a significant but frequently overlooked aspect of the *Treatise* that, at its outset, it was intended as a complete system of the moral sciences.

More names mentioned by Hume in the *Treatise* and its two sequels, the *Abstract* (1740) and *A Letter from a Gentleman* (1745), of which more shortly, are Clarke, Cudworth, Huet, Leibniz, Tillotson, and Wollaston. To cite these is not to give an exhaustive list of Hume's sources: the age was not given to scrupulous documentation.

Outlining to the London physician in 1734 the history of his period of illness and his prospects Hume stated that he was hastening to take up employment with a merchant in Bristol, having formed 'a Resolution to forget myself, & every thing that is past, to engage myself, as far as is possible, in that Course of Life, & to toss about the World, from the one Pole to the other, till I leave this Distemper behind me'. Since he was dismissed within a few months for trying to improve his master's English, this 'very feeble Trial for entering into a more active Scene of Life' was not taken too seriously, but it sufficed to complete his return to good health; thereafter, he was ready to resume his studies. He did so in France, attractive beyond measure to the Scot with a sense of history and to the aspiring man of letters.

Pausing briefly in Paris, Hume met the Chevalier Ramsay, who considered employing him as a translator but decided he was 'too full of himself, to humble his pregnant, active, protuberant Genius to drudge at translation.' He then settled down at Rheims for a year to learn the language and cultivate '*l'Art de Vivre*, the art of society and conversation', which he regarded the French as having in large measure perfected. From Rheims he went in 1735 to La Flèche, in Anjou, and in two years basically completed the composition of the *Treatise*. The attraction of La Flèche, a small country town, came partly from 'the Cheapness of it', and partly from the presence of a 'College of a hundred Jesuits, which is esteem'd the most magnificent both for Buildings & Gardens of any belonging to that Order in France or even

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in Europe.' The college had a library of 40,000 books, and it was noted as a centre of Cartesianism, understandably, for René Descartes was educated there from 1604 to 1612.

More specific information about Hume's association with the Jesuits comes to light in a letter dated 7 June 1762, which deals with the philosopher's most notorious piece of writing, the essay 'Of Miracles'. Although originally designed for inclusion in the *Treatise*, the piece first appeared in 1748 as part of *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*, later renamed and subsequently known as the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Writing to the Reverend George Campbell, who had published a *Dissertation on Miracles* (1762) against his essay, Hume explains its inception:

It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits' College of La Flèche, a town in which I passed two years of my youth, and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles; – which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer. I believe you will allow [he concludes in a jocular strain] that the freedom at least of this reasoning makes it somewhat extraordinary to have been the produce of a convent of Jesuits, tho perhaps you may think the sophistry of it savours plainly of the place of its birth.

After he had completed the manuscript of the *Treatise* and was on his way to Paris from La Flèche, Hume wrote on 26 August 1737 a letter of some importance for determining the background to his book and the expectations he had formed concerning it: 'I shall submit all my Performances

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to your Examination,' he advised a friend in England, '& to make you enter into them more easily, I desire of you, if you have Leisure, to read once over le Recherche de la Verité of Pere Malebranche, the Principles of Human Knowledge by Dr Berkeley, some of the more metaphysical Articles of Bailes Dictionary; such as those [... of] Zeno, & Spinoza. Des-Cartes Meditations wou'd also be useful but [I] don't know if you will find it easily among your Acquaintances. These Books,' he suggests, 'will make you easily comprehend the metaphysical Parts of my Reasoning and as to the Rest, they have so little Dependence on all former systems of Philosophy, that your natural Good Sense will afford you Light enough to judge of their Force & Solidity.' The 'metaphysical Parts' of his reasoning refer to Book I, 'Of the Understanding'; the 'rest', to Books II and III. It can hardly escape notice that the required list of readings divides itself into two quite different groups. The first is the scepticism of Bayle and Berkeley; the second is the rationalism of Descartes and Malebranche. From the *Treatise* itself, it is evident that he approves of the scepticism and disapproves of the rationalism.

If Hume found 'perfect Tranquillity in France' suitable for composition, difficulties of many kinds assailed him in London on his return. 'I have been here near 3 months alwise within a Week of agreeing with Printers,' he admitted in December 1737, '& I ... did not forget the Work itself during that Time, where I began to feel some Passages weaker for the Style & Diction than I cou'd have wisht. The Nearness & Greatness of the Event rouz'd up my Attention, & made me more difficult to please.' In addition to concern over matters of style, his letter revealed, he was having second thoughts about some of the contents of the *Treatise*, 'some Reasonings concerning Miracles, which I once thought of publishing with the rest, but which I am afraid will give too much Offence even as the World is dispos'd at present.' It appears that he wished to submit his manuscript to Dr Joseph Butler, author of a famous series of sermons on human nature (1726) and the *Analogy of Religion* (1736),

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the one living theologian for whom Hume had intellectual respect:

I wou'd be glad to be introduc'd to him. I am at present castrating my Work, that is, cutting off its noble Parts, that is, endeavouring it shall give as little Offence as possible; before which I cou'd not pretend to put it into the D[octo]rs hands. This is a Piece of Cowardice, for which I blame myself; tho I believe none of my Friends will blame me. But I was resolv'd not to be an Enthusiast, in Philosophy, while I was blaming other Enthusiasms.

In the event, Hume did not meet Butler, but he did not replace the 'noble Parts' until he published the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*, realizing full well that the essay 'Of Miracles' belonged with the one entitled 'Of a Particular Providence and a Future State', as illustrative of the 'experimental Method of Reasoning' in the realm of religion. By 1748, he was sure enough of himself to announce to an intimate friend: 'I won't justify the prudence of this step, any other way than by expressing my indifference about all the consequences that may follow.'

As for the publication of the *Treatise*, three considerations delayed its appearance. Hume desired to be absolutely independent and to seek no help from a patron or a list of personally solicited subscribers. Next, he wished to publish anonymously. Finally, he bargained for rights to a first edition only and would not contract for future additions to the *Treatise*. On 26 September 1738, he signed an agreement with John Noon, at the White Hart, near Mercer's Chapel in Cheapside. Noon was a flourishing publisher, with a respectable number of books on his list, most of them works on religion, general learning, and philosophy. Hume assigned to Noon all rights for a first edition of 1,000 copies of the *Treatise of Human Nature* in two volumes octavo. In return, Hume was to get £50 payable in six months and twelve bound copies. Also, it was agreed that if Hume wished to bring out a second edition, he would buy up the unsold copies or pay a penalty of £50. By 1740 Hume believed

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he had concluded 'somewhat of a hasty Bargain' with Noon, and he looked elsewhere for a publisher of the third volume of the *Treatise*.

Nothing excites an Author's Attention so much as the receiving the Proofs from the Press, as the Sheets are gradually thrown off: thus Hume towards the end of his life, and it would also be true of the last months of 1738. In the closing week of January 1739, John Noon published in boards: *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. 'Book I, Of the Understanding, Book II, Of the Passions. Ten Shillings.' Book III, 'Of Morals', was being revised and did not reach print until November 1740, when it was published by Thomas Longman.

With the first two volumes published, Hume arranged to sail to Berwick but was storm-bound in London during February. The delay afforded him an opportunity to present copies of his book to various people, among them Dr Butler and Pierre Desmaizeaux, London correspondent of the *Bibliothèque britannique* and the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, French-language periodicals published in the Netherlands. On reaching his home in Scotland in March, Hume distributed more copies, and one of these found its way to Francis Hutcheson, then Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University and, by reputation, his country's leading philosopher.

There is no known reaction of Butler's to the *Treatise*, but Hutcheson sent an encouraging message: 'I perused the first volume, & a great part, indeed almost all the second. And was everywhere surprised with a great acuteness of thought and reasoning in a mind wholly disengaged from the prejudices of the Learned as well as those of the Vulgar.' Hutcheson signified dissent from Hume's tenets 'as yet', but promised a more careful reading of the book in the coming vacation. He also expressed his willingness to meet the author. Desmaizeaux provided another crumb of comfort in a friendly blurb appearing in the April, May, and June issue for 1739 of the *Bibliothèque raisonnée*: 'A gentleman,

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named Mr *Hume*, has published a *Treatise of Human Nature*. . . Those who demand the new will find satisfaction here. The author reasons on his own grounds; he goes to the bottom of things and traces out new routes. He is very original.' Elsewhere, Hume got a bad press. The *Neuen Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* of 28 May 1737, published at Leipzig (and therefore probably unknown to Hume, though the nature and tone of its kind of comment became depressingly familiar), described him as a 'new free-thinker' whose 'evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the subtitle of [his] work, taken from Tacitus: *Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; & quae sentias, dicere licet*'. The long-awaited review of the *Treatise* in the English periodical, the *History of the Works of the Learned*, which appeared in the November and December issues was, in its first part, a piece of abuse similar to that in the *Neuen Zeitungen*, though grossly extended. Finally, the *Bibliothèque britannique* for the last quarter of 1739 wrote off the *Treatise* as a 'system of logic, or rather of metaphysics, as original as can be, in which the author . . . advances the most unheard-of paradoxes.' Thus an eighteenth-century tradition was set of confining comment on the *Treatise* to a wilful misinterpretation, mainly of Book I, 'Of the Understanding', and of abandoning any attempt at reasoned rebuttal in favour of vulgar raillery.

In the long interval before the *History of the Works of the Learned* printed its notice of the *Treatise*, Hume made a third attempt and composed an abstract intending to submit it to that same periodical. In the wake of the 'somewhat abusive' notice, as he called it, he decided to have the abstract published as an anonymous pamphlet. This was announced on 11 March 1740 in the *Daily Advertiser* as *An Abstract of a late Philosophical Performance, entitled A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the chief Argument and Design of that Book, which has met with such Opposition, and has been represented in so terrifying a Light, is further illustrated and explain'd*. No copy of a pamphlet with this highly-charged title has been discovered