



The Oxford Handbook of Hume

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FRONT MATTER

Introduction

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*The wise in every age conclude,
What Pyrrho taught and Hume renewed,
That dogmatists are fools.*

– Thomas Blacklock

IN April 1776 David Hume, who had been in declining health for some time, added a short codicil to his last will and testament. The codicil gave instructions concerning a monument that was to be built where he was to be buried on Edinburgh’s Calton Hill.¹ Hume died, aged sixty-five, the following August. According to Hume’s instructions his monument should have “an Inscription containing only my Name with the Year of my Birth and Death, leaving it to Posterity to add the Rest.” The fact that Hume could assume that posterity would take an interest in him indicates that by the end of his life he had already acquired a reputation among his own contemporaries as one of the most significant thinkers of his age. Hume was well aware, however, that the fate of an author’s reputation is both fragile and volatile and depends, in the end, on those who come after and what they are or are not able to make of the work that has been left to them. From our own perspective, further down the track of posterity, it is evident that Hume has secured an enduring reputation as one of the greatest thinkers of all time and, in particular, as having a strong claim to be the greatest of the English-speaking philosophers. It is the burden of this *Handbook* and the various contributions that it contains to explain the basis of Hume’s achievement and how posterity has understood it and responded to it over the years that have followed his death, up to the present time.

With regard to Hume’s reputation, reception, and legacy, ironies abound. One of the most obvious of these ironies is that Hume, who was unusually frank about the extent to which he was ruled by his passion for “literary fame” (MOL, xl), was, nevertheless, from his youth until his final years, constantly frustrated by and disappointed in the reception that his work had received. Hume’s ambitions as well as his intellectual standards were very high, but in consequence of this he always remained vulnerable to the assessments of

his audience—which were not uniformly favorable or even interested. In his brief account of his own life, which was published after his death, Hume makes very clear that his high expectations were routinely disappointed in one way or another. With respect to the audience for his works Hume’s attitude much of the time is that it is a case of casting pearls before swine (see, for example, his sardonic remarks at the end of the opening paragraph of the third book of his *Treatise*: T, 3.1.1.1). ↵

It is ironic, from our own contemporary perspective, that Hume’s reputation while he was alive depended very largely on the success of works that are no longer considered to belong to his greatest contributions. The works that proved most successful within his own lifetime—the most popular and best selling—were his *Essays*, which came out in numerous editions beginning in 1741, and his *History of England*, which appeared in six volumes between 1754 and 1761. After a long period of relative neglect, there is a revived interest in these works—but they remain secondary in terms of Hume’s contemporary standing and fame. Without any doubt, it is Hume’s major philosophical works, especially his *Treatise*, that now serve as the basis of his standing as one of the greatest thinkers of all time. It is no small irony, therefore, that even in his final days Hume would look back at the reception of his *Treatise* and pronounce that it “fell dead-born from the press” (MOL, xxxiv). The failure of this work was such that in late 1775, when Hume was near the end of his life, he prepared an “Advertisement” that was to be placed on all future editions of his *Essays and Treatises*, declaring that his later works alone were to be “regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles” (EU, 83). Although Hume’s assessment of the reception that the *Treatise* received may be exaggerated, it is also true that this work was never reissued in his lifetime and further editions did not appear until well into the nineteenth century. Whatever responses it did secure in print were, for the most part, dismissive, if not plainly derogatory. The works that followed generally fared better than the *Treatise*, although they too often received a mixed reception that disappointed and troubled their author. Much of the *Treatise* was “cast anew” in the form of the two *Enquiries*, the first concerning human understanding (1748) and the second concerning morals (1751). It is these three works, the *Treatise* and the two *Enquiries*, that provide much of the core of Hume’s philosophical achievement and they were all completed and in print by the time he was 40 years of age. There are two other particularly important later works that also need to be mentioned, both of which have been widely regarded as containing Hume’s principal statements of his views on religion. In 1757 Hume published *Four Dissertations*, the most significant and controversial of which was “The Natural History of Religion.” At this time Hume decided not to publish two other pieces, which were his essays on suicide and immortality, both of which were published posthumously. During this period (i.e., the 1750s) Hume had mostly completed his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which also had to wait for posthumous publication in 1779. It is these works, taken together, that constitute the essential core of Hume’s philosophy and along with his *Essays* and *History* provide the material from which the various contributions to this *Handbook* will draw.

The organization and structure of this *Handbook* reflect, to a considerable extent, Hume’s own divisions and distinctions within and among his various works. The range of Hume’s contribution and achievement is evident from a casual glance over the contents. Topics covered include metaphysics and epistemology, mind and emotion, morals and politics, aesthetics, economics, history, and religion. It is no exaggeration to say that almost every major field within contemporary philosophy has felt the force of Hume’s thought in one way or another. In many, if not all, of these fields Hume’s contributions continue to exercise influence, providing real options or suggesting avenues for further ↵ investigation and research. After an account of Hume’s life and works, the first group of contributions examines and explores some of the major themes and interpretations currently on offer concerning his philosophy. This is followed by a group devoted to metaphysics and epistemology, covering many of the most celebrated and well-known topics of Hume’s philosophy. These include the theory of ideas, causation and necessity, induction and probable reasoning, the external world, and the self and personal identity. Following this, the next group of contributions takes up a set of issues that is broadly concerned with Hume’s views on morals, politics, and society and how these issues may be understood in terms of the operations of human nature. Topics covered here include the

role of reason and emotion in moral motivation and evaluation, the question of free will, the nature and extent of sympathy and benevolence, and questions concerning society, politics, and the foundations of government. These are followed by contributions on Hume's aesthetics, history, and economics and, then, another group concerned with problems of religion. The last two groupings are divided between a set of contributions discussing Hume's philosophy in relation to several other significant thinkers, who in one way or another help to shed light on important aspects of Hume's thought. This includes Isaac Newton, whose towering achievements in science and mathematics profoundly influenced Hume's contemporaries, and two of Hume's great Scottish contemporaries, his friend Adam Smith and his most distinguished critic Thomas Reid. The collection concludes with a pair of contributions, one that considers Hume's philosophy in light of a later thinker, Nietzsche, and the other, in relation to recent developments in cognitive science and contemporary philosophy. The overall aim of this format is to ensure, as far as possible, that readers are provided with both general and specific analyses of Hume's most significant contributions as found throughout his writings.

When it comes to selecting contributors, like most other editors of volumes of this kind, I have had to choose among many able scholars and philosophers, any number of whom have already made valuable and worthwhile contributions to the study of Hume. Having said this, three qualities carried particular weight with me: accuracy (truth), interest, and influence. Ideally, of course, the contributions in this collection would possess all three of these qualities. Unfortunately it is equally clear that this cannot be the case, since apart from anything else, many of the contributors disagree with each other in their various interpretations and assessments of Hume's work. (This includes my own relations with any number of the contributions contained in this volume.) My aim has not been to select contributions that I, as editor, can endorse as in some way correct or reliable. This would exclude several contributions that I believe still belong in this collection. What I do hope is that all the contributions satisfy at least one, preferably two, and, perhaps, on occasion, all three of the qualities that I have mentioned. It is fair to say, I believe, that in a collection of this kind the aim is not only to obtain as accurate an account and assessment of Hume's work as we can but also to provide, as far as possible, an accurate and comprehensive picture of the state of contemporary *thinking about Hume*. It is here, most obviously, that the views of a contributor may be judged important and worthy of inclusion primarily because of their influence and impact, as much as any considerations relating to accuracy or intrinsic interest (either of which critics may still entertain doubts about).

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Note

1. This was something of a late concession on Hume's part. Just a few years earlier, late in his life, Hume complained to his close friend Gilbert Elliot of Minto that he had "been accustom'd to meet with nothing but Insults & Indignities from [his] native country: But if it continue so, *ingrate patria, ne ossa quidem habebis*." The quotation is from Scipio's tomb and translates: "ungrateful fatherland, you will not even have my bones." See also Hume's later remarks, continuing this exchange with Elliot, in which he makes clear that he does not consider himself an Englishman [contrary to Elliot's insinuation, LET, II, 469n], as he is plainly a Scotsman [LET, II, 470]. He then continues: "I am a Citizen of the World; but if I were to adopt any Country, it would be that in which I live at present [i.e. France]..." Suffice it to say that Hume's general disappointment with the reception of his work, which is described further below, was keenly felt in relation to his own country [i.e., Scotland]—an attitude that was not entirely without foundation.