

# 21

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

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David Hume (1711–76) is one of the most important among philosophers because he developed to its logical conclusion the empirical philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, and by making it self-consistent made it incredible. (Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. INTERPRETATION, LEGACY AND COLLIGATORY CONCEPTS

It is a familiar feature of historical studies of various kinds that an understanding of a given activity or event requires that it be placed in some wider scheme or framework that will enable us to say something intelligible about its nature and significance. Generally speaking, this requires us to look beyond the intentions and thoughts of the agents involved, so that we can appreciate and recognize their acts and activities in relation to both what went before and what came after. It is a legitimate and indeed crucial responsibility of the historian to be able to identify and describe the larger movements, processes and developments that hold agents and events together and represent and relate them in some coherent fashion. W.H. Walsh has coined the term

‘colligation’ to cover the activity by which historians arrange and gather different events together ‘under appropriate conceptions’.<sup>2</sup> The activity of colligation is also plainly essential to the history of philosophy and it presents us with some similar challenges and difficulties arising from our efforts to make sense of the larger sweep and developments that shape the course of the history of philosophy. In this chapter I am concerned with these issues as they relate, more specifically, to describing and evaluating the philosophical legacy of David Hume.<sup>3</sup>

The general notion of a philosopher’s legacy is, of course, intimately bound-up with the way in which the writings and contributions of that philosopher have been read and interpreted – both by his own contemporaries and by those who have followed. Clearly, however, interpretation and legacy are not the same thing. A philosopher’s legacy reaches well into the future and is inevitably shaped, not only by various factors and features that the author has no control or influence over, but also by critical responses and creative contributions of others which could not be anticipated and which may not even be intelligible or meaningful to the author or thinker concerned. Philosophers, like other historical

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

agents, may have their own aims and ambitions about how their work is received and what impact it may have. Nevertheless, every thinker who is party to the on-going debate is aware that his or her ideas and arguments will be considered and assessed, not just with a view to what has happened prior to presentation, but also with a view to what will happen long after he or she is no longer around to answer for those ideas and arguments. Their contributions are, in this sense, open-ended and will inevitably be transformed and amended in the subsequent flow of philosophical discussion and debate. In the light of these considerations, the historian of philosophy must always allow for the possibility that a 'gap' may open up between the philosopher's original intentions and objectives and that philosopher's actual legacy, understood in terms of the impact and reception of his ideas over time. Related to this point, there is no guarantee that an accurate or full interpretation of the author's original intent will properly or adequately explain the overall impact of his or her contribution on the subsequent unfolding of the philosophical conversation. The potential of this gap is, indeed, crucial if philosophical ideas are to prove fertile and creative for later generations of thinkers.

While an important and crucial gap between interpretation and legacy must be recognized and accepted as a given of the history of philosophy, there remains an intimate and complex relation between them. In the first place, the actual influence and impact that a philosophical thinker and his ideas will have – understood in terms of the kind of critical reception and creative development that they are subject to and receive – is itself, as we have noted, conditioned by how his contemporaries and those who follow *interpret* the arguments and works in question. The interests, prejudices and perspectives of

this audience will, naturally, affect the manner of the interpretation provided – what is emphasized, what is found significant and worthwhile, and so on – and this will shape the trajectory and impact of the philosophical contributions under consideration. However much a philosopher's legacy takes on a life of its own, after publication, interpretation continues fundamentally to constrain and direct the perceived worth and value of his work – either for better or for worse. To this extent, the ongoing debates concerning interpretation themselves become an *integral component* of a philosopher's legacy. There are, plainly, issues and concerns to be noted in this regard. For example, a good, accurate interpretation may prove to be a philosophical dead-end or limited in its future creative possibilities. Similarly, an incomplete and inadequate interpretation, one that we may judge partial and piece-meal, may nevertheless turn out to be highly fruitful, even though it may plainly distort or misrepresent the original intentions of the thinker who is the source of these (later) developments. It cannot be said, therefore, that there is any simple or neat correspondence between accurate and reliable interpretation and productive and fruitful critical philosophy following in its wake. Part of the task of the historian of philosophy is to keep a keen eye open for these points of divergence between interpretation and legacy.

A further important complication to be noted concerning the interpretation/legacy relationship is that they have a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. That is to say, it is a mistake to treat interpretation as essentially a static condition of the subject matter (e.g. a fixed text with an established, rigid meaning) and the legacy or critical value of the work as involving a process of building upon this in a manner that prevents or precludes challenging or questioning the (established or

recognized) interpretation. On the contrary, as a work or text is examined and challenged over time, later audiences and readers may return to the question of interpretation and ask, again, if an adequate and accurate reading has been provided. A negative answer to this question will invite new readings and new interpretations, which will, in turn, provide new opportunities and perspectives for criticisms and evaluation. A dynamic and reciprocal process of this kind, between interpretation and critical response, allows for the possibility and potential of retrieval of original intent (i.e. an alternative reading of the author's aims and ambitions) that will reorient and redirect the trajectory of the philosopher's legacy – changing the impact and significance of his or her contribution in the eyes of contemporary and future audiences.

The importance of these observations is that *precision* and *accuracy* of interpretation are themselves a part of the seamless process of criticizing and evaluating a thinker's contribution or text for its (living) *relevance* and *interest*. It is a mistake to erect a sharp dichotomy between 'scholars' concerned with getting the interpretation right and critical philosophers who are concerned with the value and worth of the arguments and ideas as presented. Good scholarship and good philosophy are more intimately fused together than this picture of things allows for. With all this in mind, let us turn to the question of understanding Hume's legacy in the history of philosophy.

## 2. HUME AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

The familiar and established way of presenting Hume in almost all standard histories of

philosophy is as the third and last member of the triumvirate of great British empiricists: Locke, Berkeley and Hume. This picture of Hume has indeed shaped his legacy in the history of philosophy over the two centuries and more that have followed his death in 1776. The view that Hume should be understood primarily in terms of his prominent place in the tradition of 'British empiricism' owes its secure status in part to the dominant classical sceptical interpretation of Hume's fundamental philosophical intentions and also, in part, to a wider view of the history of philosophy which gives Immanuel Kant's project in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) prominence as the crowning and culminating achievement of early modern philosophy, in relation to which all subsequent philosophical work needs to position itself and be measured. These two perspectives on Hume's philosophy and its place in the history of philosophy are themselves closely related, insofar as Kant's own reading of Hume's philosophy is itself largely informed by the classical sceptical interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

As it is generally described, the sceptical reading of Hume's philosophy dates back to its early reception provided by Hume's own Scottish contemporaries, most notably Thomas Reid and James Beattie. The 'Reid-Beattie' account of Hume's philosophy locates his fundamental philosophical contributions as following directly in the tracks that had been laid down by Locke and Berkeley, constituted by the 'theory of ideas' around which their own systems of philosophy had been constructed.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective Hume's teachings are regarded as essentially 'destructive' in character. Hume is taken to be an extreme, systematic sceptic whose principal aim is to show that our most basic common sense beliefs (i.e. concerning causality and induction, the material world, self,

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

free will, etc.) lack any foundation in reason. Interpreted in this way, Hume's project is read as serving to show that when the theory of ideas is embraced as the starting point of our philosophical investigations, as suggested by his empiricist predecessors (i.e. Locke and Berkeley), then radical and extreme sceptical consequences will directly follow.

This view of Hume's philosophy is succinctly summed up by James Seth in his history of *English Philosophers and Schools of Philosophy* (first published in 1912).<sup>6</sup> Seth suggests that it was Hume's achievement to follow relentlessly 'the logical consequences of the empirical point of view' to their inevitable sceptical conclusion.<sup>7</sup> According to Seth, Hume's relationship with Locke and Berkeley can be explained in these terms:

It would be unjust to both Locke and Berkeley to say that they stopped short of these [sceptical] conclusions from theological or other prejudices. The truth is that empiricism was only a part of their philosophy, the other part being . . . of a rationalistic type; so that we cannot describe the sceptical philosophy of Hume as the complete logical development of the Lockean and Berkeleyan philosophy, but only as the logical completion of the empirical element in the philosophy of his predecessors. That which had for them been a part becomes for Hume the whole: he is an empiricist pure and simple, and he shows us with singular insight the ultimate meaning and consequences of pure empiricism.<sup>8</sup>

Hume was, Seth claims, 'fully conscious of the novel and revolutionary character of his views, as substituting scepticism, the result of a thorough-going empiricism, for the mixture of empiricism and rationalism which he found in Locke and Berkeley . . .'.<sup>9</sup> Seth's

sceptical reading of Hume's empiricist principles more or less codifies what was, until well into the twentieth century, the orthodox view of Hume's basic intentions and ambitions.<sup>10</sup>

The classical empiricist-sceptical interpretation has certain prominent features which have shaped the reception of Hume's philosophy up until the present time. Hume's major text, on this view, is his first and most substantial work, his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). While his *Enquiries* and later writings on religion (e.g. his posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*) are essential for an understanding of his complete philosophy, and its modifications and development over time, the real core of Hume's philosophical achievement and insight is still taken to reside with the central arguments and aims of the *Treatise*. From this general perspective, the primary interest of the *Treatise* rests with the epistemological and metaphysical topics raised in Book One, 'Of the Understanding'. Although Hume's arguments on these topics were further refined and modified in the first *Enquiry*, his most powerful and original contributions, containing his ambitious sceptical assault on the foundations of human understanding, are presented in their most potent form in the *Treatise*. While he, no doubt, had interesting and worthwhile things to say on other matters relating to morals, politics and religion, the sceptical reading gives pride of place to the question of the scope and limits of human understanding.<sup>11</sup>

According to this general account, Hume's philosophical significance in the history of philosophy rests squarely with the fundamental sceptical challenge that he has posed and that all subsequent generations of philosophers must address and respond to. This challenge takes the form of asking to what extent human understanding and human

knowledge can be vindicated against the (extreme sceptical) conclusions that Hume has advanced on the basis of his empiricist principles. One line of reply has been to repudiate and reject Hume's empiricist assumptions, as we find in the philosophical views of Reid and, above all, Kant. Another alternative is to accept and embrace his empiricist commitments and to reconstruct the whole edifice of human knowledge in the light of Hume's sceptical constraints and the limits they impose on our metaphysical investigations and ambitions. This is the route that was taken, in various forms, by later generations of 'British empiricists', such as John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer.<sup>12</sup> The primary lesson to be learned from Hume's philosophy, from the perspective of his empiricist followers in this tradition, is that all a priori metaphysical system-building and speculations are worthless. All genuine knowledge, as it concerns our understanding of the nature of reality, must take the form of either empirical science or mathematical and logical investigations. Hume's significance, so interpreted, is that he reorients philosophy to play the only role it is truly capable of, which is to provide a clear logical and psychological framework and foundation for the empirical study of nature by means of the natural sciences. When philosophy attempts to step outside these boundaries the inevitable result is 'sophistry and illusion' (EHU, 12.34 / 165).<sup>13</sup>

Interpreted in terms of his empiricist-sceptical programme, Hume's legacy has been to direct the philosophical energies of the British tradition (along with its American and continental adherents) in the direction of an empiricist understanding of our scientific practices and procedures. The central problems of philosophy, so understood, are constituted by the relevant set of problems

generated by this core programme: induction and causation, knowledge and belief, perception and the external world, the nature of mind and self, and questions of meaning and language.<sup>14</sup> Understood in these terms, the task of empiricist philosophy is to identify and describe the basic building blocks of human knowledge and explain them in a manner that is consistent with the empiricist commitments. The basic elements for this project are provided by Hume's philosophy, beginning with his account of impressions and ideas (or 'sense data' in the idiom of a later generation of empiricist thinkers). One way in which later generations of empiricist thinkers – particularly in the twentieth century – amended and altered the focus of Hume's empiricist programme, was in the emphasis they gave to problems of language and logic. (This trend is especially apparent in the work of Russell and Ayer.) Hume's philosophy, in contrast with earlier thinkers in the empiricist tradition (i.e. Locke and Berkeley, but most notably Hobbes), pays rather scant attention to problems of language and meaning and manifests a stronger interest in the psychological processes of human understanding than in the logical analysis of its forms and structure.<sup>15</sup> However, although this is a clear point of contrast between Hume and the major representatives of twentieth-century British empiricism, Hume's contributions continued to play a crucial role as a source of many of the key components and distinguishing features of their systems. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the way in which 'Hume's fork' – his distinction between 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact' (EHU 4.1 / 25; cf. THN 3.1.1.9 / 458) – serves as the basis of the verification principle of logical positivism. According to the logical positivists, the meaning (or significance) of any statement

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

depends on how (and whether) it can be verified. This principle requires that a proposition must be either analytic (i.e. trivially true or a tautology) or empirically or observationally verifiable.<sup>16</sup> In general, the project of eliminating 'metaphysics' by employing an empiricist standard of meaning is one that is certainly traceable to certain prominent features of Hume's philosophy and it is plainly consistent with his own attitude of hostility and scepticism in regard to the ambitions and claims of theology and metaphysical rationalism in its various forms.<sup>17</sup>

Although the empiricist-sceptical interpretation of Hume's philosophy held sway well into the twentieth century, and as such was the predominant force in shaping Hume's philosophical legacy throughout this period, this way of reading Hume's philosophical intentions was challenged and brought into question by Norman Kemp Smith's enormously influential study *The Philosophy of David Hume*.<sup>18</sup> According to Kemp Smith, what is central to Hume's philosophical system 'is not Locke's or Berkeley's "ideal" theory and the negative consequences which flow from it, . . . but the doctrine that the determining influence in human, as in other forms of animal life, is feeling, not reason'.<sup>19</sup> According to this reading, the 'main thesis' of Hume's philosophy, as presented in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, is his claim 'that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures'.<sup>20</sup> On this basis, Kemp Smith argues that Hume's philosophy 'can be more adequately described as naturalistic than as sceptical, and that its main governing principle is the thorough subordination of reason to the feelings and instincts'.<sup>21</sup> Understood in these terms, Hume's basic philosophical strategy is essentially an extension of his views on morals and aesthetics. With respect

to this (fundamental) aspect of Hume's philosophical system the key influence, Kemp Smith maintains, was Francis Hutcheson.<sup>22</sup> Hume's insight, it is claimed, was to have recognized that Hutcheson's account of the role of feeling in the sphere of morals could be applied to 'several of the chief problems to which Locke and Berkeley had drawn attention, but to which they had not been able to give a satisfactory answer'.<sup>23</sup> One particularly significant feature of Kemp Smith's naturalistic interpretation, so described, is that it restores a balance between Hume's concern with metaphysics and epistemology, on one side, and morals, on the other – avoiding the one-sided emphasis on the former, which is a pronounced feature of the classical empiricist-sceptical interpretation.

Although Kemp Smith's naturalistic reading places heavy emphasis on the influence of Hutcheson and the role of feeling as opposed to reason in human life, Kemp Smith is himself clear that there is more to Hume's 'constructive' or 'positive' programme than this form of naturalism. More specifically, in addition to the influence of Hutcheson, Hume was also inspired by the example of Newton and his teachings concerning the proper methods of scientific-inquiry.<sup>24</sup> It was, in particular, Hume's ambition to develop a scientific account of the operations of the human mind modelled after the pattern of Newtonian physics.<sup>25</sup> This way of looking at Hume's project of a 'science of man' and his ambition to become 'the Newton of the moral sciences' is now itself a familiar and standard theme of most general histories of philosophy.<sup>26</sup> This scientific side of Hume's naturalism (i.e. his application of the 'experimental method' to 'moral subjects') has, in fact, become the more dominant feature of most naturalistic accounts of Hume's philosophy.<sup>27</sup> There is, however, a fundamental

difficulty presented by any account that aims to accommodate Hume's (putative) ambition to become 'the Newton of the moral sciences'. How can this ambition be reconciled, not only with his (strong) sceptical principles, but with a form of 'naturalism' that maintains 'that reason, as traditionally understood, has no role in human life'?<sup>28</sup> Claims of this kind are difficult to square with an understanding of Hume's philosophy as a contribution to the 'science of man'.

The basic concern here is not simply that Hume's aims and objectives are plural, complex and multi-faceted. The real concern is that his most basic commitments – his sceptical principles and his scientific ambitions – are in direct conflict with each other, rendering his entire philosophical system broken-backed. This was an issue that was clearly understood by Thomas Reid, who is generally recognized as the most perceptive and penetrating of Hume's early critics. Speaking of Hume's *Treatise* Reid says:

It seems to be a peculiar strain of humour in this author, to set out in his introduction by promising, with a grave face, no less than a complete system of the sciences, upon a foundation entirely new – to wit, that of human nature – when the intention of the whole work is to show, that there is neither human nature nor science in the world.<sup>29</sup>

These observations concerning the apparently fractured and conflicting nature of Hume's basic intentions in his major philosophical writings are indicative of the general problematic that has occupied Hume scholars for more than a century. The difficulty has been to provide a coherent, consistent account of Hume's philosophy in a manner that *fully* acknowledges the existence of *both*

his sceptical and naturalistic commitments. While it is tempting to emphasize one side or the other of this divide, or simply to set aside or overlook their opposition, a more satisfying approach must tackle this difficulty more directly.

These (ongoing) fundamental problems of interpretation are not without relevance for our understanding of Hume's legacy. In particular, the problem we are presented with is that these difficulties of interpretation, and the lack of consensus and agreement concerning the character of his philosophical aims and achievements, encourage the thought that his philosophical legacy, erected as it is on the foundation of the (problematic) scepticism/naturalism dichotomy, may itself rely upon a faulty or incomplete understanding of his philosophy. That is to say, while there can be no doubt that his philosophy has established itself as a main pillar in the larger edifice of 'British empiricism', the difficulties and doubts of interpretation that we continue to encounter suggest that this entire edifice, in so far as it is supposed to help us understand Hume's own philosophical contribution, is itself unstable and liable to collapse under critical scrutiny. Another way of putting this general point is to say that the dominant collogatory concept in terms of which Hume's legacy has reached us (i.e. in the early twenty-first century) is that of the idea of 'British empiricism'. It is under this general rubric that Hume is portrayed as having played the pivotal role of developing the arguments and ideas of his great predecessors (Locke and Berkeley) and laying the foundations for subsequent developments in the same tradition, by thinkers who were operating with the same basic set of empiricist commitments and constraints found in Hume's system (i.e. Mill, Russell, Ayer, et al.). The fact that interpretations of Hume's philosophy constructed

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

around this core colligatory concept render Hume's philosophy hopelessly fractured and incoherent suggests that this concept and the interpretation(s) associated with it need to be radically revised, if not abandoned altogether.

### 3. HUME, IRRELIGION AND THE MYTH OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

Before we consider what alternative interpretations may be made available to us, were we to abandon the colligatory framework of 'British empiricism' and the scepticism/naturalism dichotomy associated with it, we should first consider our methodological situation. There is no 'going back' on Hume's established legacy or impact as understood over the previous century or more, considered as a pivotal figure in the British empiricist tradition. It is a (historical) given that this has indeed been the dominant perspective in which his philosophy has acquired influence and secured a prominent place in the history of philosophy. Nevertheless, as we noted, these facts relating to Hume's established and existing legacy do not themselves serve to guarantee the adequacy or reliability of the interpretations on which this legacy has been built. The internal, persisting problems of interpretation force us to reconsider these issues and remain open to the possibility of 'retrieving' a better and more adequate account of how Hume's fundamental philosophical aims and ambitions can best be represented and articulated. On the assumption that a project of retrieval and revision along these lines is realized, we will inevitably open up the possibility that Hume's significance (i.e. in light of the *revised* interpretation) will take his *future* legacy in a wholly new

direction – propelling it into a quite new trajectory. Whether that future trajectory proves philosophically fruitful or not, judged from the perspective of later generations of critical philosophical activity, is an assessment we are not *now* in a position to make. With this observation in place, let us consider an alternative perspective on Hume's philosophy that largely abandons the colligatory concept of 'British empiricism' and the general historical framework associated with it.

In a recent study I have argued that the key to a proper understanding of Hume's philosophy as a whole rests with a more plausible interpretation of his project in *A Treatise of Human Nature*.<sup>30</sup> Granted that the *Treatise* serves as the platform from which Hume's overall philosophical achievement has been erected, it is especially important that we arrive at some acceptable solution to the 'riddle' of the *Treatise* – the (apparent) opposition between his sceptical and naturalist commitments. How might this be achieved? The crucial move required to resolve this interpretive impasse is to challenge the deeply entrenched assumption that his *Treatise* has little or nothing of a direct or substantial kind to do with problems of religion. It has been a long established assumption – indeed, a dogma – that his substantial contributions on the subject of religion are all to be found in his later writings, most notably in his posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. According to this account of things, although Hume originally intended to include irreligious material in the *Treatise*, these passages were removed so as to avoid causing the orthodox any 'offence'.<sup>31</sup> Contrary to this view, the irreligious interpretation maintains that it is problems of religion, broadly conceived, that hold the contents of the *Treatise* together as a unified work. More specifically, the



structure and flow of Hume's thought in the *Treatise* is shaped, on one side, by his attack on Christian metaphysics and morals and, on the other, by his efforts to construct in its place a secular, scientific account of morality. The constructive or positive side of his thought – his 'science of man' – begins with a detailed examination of human thought and motivation based on a naturalistic and necessitarian understanding of human beings. The model for this project – after which it was both planned and structured – was the work of Thomas Hobbes, the most infamous 'atheist' thinker of the seventeenth century. The destructive or critical side of the philosophy of the *Treatise* is simply the other side of the same anti-Christian coin. In order to build the edifice of a secular morality, Hume had to clear the ground and provide a systematic sceptical attack on those theological doctrines and principles that constitute an obstacle to this project. The varied and seemingly disparate sceptical arguments that are advanced in the *Treatise* are, in fact, very largely held together by his overarching aim to discredit and refute Christian metaphysics and morals. Prominent among the most obvious and significant of Hume's sceptical targets in the *Treatise* was Samuel Clarke, an influential Christian rationalist who aimed to refute demonstrably the 'atheistic' philosophy of Hobbes.

Understood in these terms, the irreligious interpretation provides a fundamentally different account of the nature and character of Hume's philosophical project in the *Treatise* and the way it is rooted in its relevant historical context. The irreligious interpretation not only makes it possible to understand the specific arguments and positions that Hume takes up on various *particular* issues and topics (i.e. causation, induction, external world, etc.), it also enables us to explain how his

more radical sceptical arguments are supposed to cohere with his ambitions to contribute to the 'science of man'. Beyond this, the irreligious interpretation enables us to account for not only the unity and coherence of his thought in the *Treatise*, it also provides a clear and consistent account of *the unity of Hume's philosophical thought as a whole*. From this perspective, we no longer have a serious discontinuity between his earlier and later works as they concern the subject of religion. On the contrary, the irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise* suggests there is a close and intimate link between this work and his elaboration of these irreligious themes and arguments in his later writings.

Granted that irreligious aims and objectives serve as the key to understanding the core motivation and unity lying behind Hume's philosophical work, what is the significance of this for our assessment of his legacy? For reasons that have already been mentioned, it is evident that Hume's legacy has been built upon the foundation of readings that rely on very different assumptions about both his context and his primary concerns. Although there has been some disagreement about these matters for the established interpretations (i.e. lying on either side of the scepticism/naturalism divide), there has nevertheless been a general acceptance of the framework of locating Hume's thought in the tradition and context of 'British empiricism'. The irreligious interpretation strongly suggests that readings of this kind, however influential (and philosophically fruitful) they have been, are wholly suspect and misleading. As we have noted, according to the classical empiricist-sceptical interpretation, Hume's basic achievement throughout his philosophical work is to have drawn out the full implications and logical consequences of empiricist principles as they relate to the

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

scope and limits of human understanding. On this account, Hume is following closely in the footsteps, and furthering the arguments, of his British empiricist predecessors Locke and Berkeley – primarily in opposition to the great triumvirate of continental rationalism (Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz). The irreligious interpretation makes clear that this picture of things cannot be a correct or accurate account of how Hume (or his own contemporaries) understood the significance of his work.

From the perspective of the irreligious interpretation, the primary context in which Hume's philosophical works and concerns must be understood is in terms of the wider opposition between 'religious philosophers' and 'speculative atheists' (EHU 12.1 / 149). When the philosophical lines are drawn this way, Hume belongs squarely in a tradition of 'atheistic' thought that is represented most obviously and prominently by Hobbes and Spinoza, who were closely linked and associated in Hume's early eighteenth-century context (for example, as we find in the work of Samuel Clarke, George Berkeley, et al.).<sup>32</sup> Although Hobbes is at times included among the tradition of 'British empiricists', he is frequently dropped from this grouping on account of his rationalist methodological commitments (which are deemed at odds with empiricist methodologies). Spinoza is plainly a thinker on the 'wrong side of the divide' when judged in terms of the empiricist/rationalist contrast. Similarly, when we consider Hume's philosophical ambitions from the perspective of the irreligious framework, it is also evident that he stands in direct and deep *opposition* to both Locke and Berkeley, both of whom employed their 'empiricist' philosophies with the aim of *defending* (Christian) religion and *refuting* the 'sceptical and atheistic' philosophies of the kind

that Hobbes and Spinoza had advanced and argued for. Samuel Clarke, an enormously important and influential figure in Hume's context, is a complete anomaly when considered in terms of the (continental) rationalist versus (British) empiricist schema. In contrast with this, the irreligious interpretation places him comfortably and squarely on the side of 'religious philosophers' and also notes the considerable points of resemblance and affinities between Clarke's demonstrative proof of the Christian religion and key components of Locke's system (e.g. with respect to the cosmological argument). The upshot of all this is that the irreligious interpretation of Hume's philosophical intentions firmly rejects the entire colligatory structure built around the idea of 'British empiricism' as a suitable basis for understanding and describing his basic aims and objectives throughout his philosophical writings. Any approach of this kind is, according to the irreligious interpretation, a historical fabrication that distorts and misrepresents Hume's core philosophical concerns, as both he and his own contemporaries would have understood them.<sup>33</sup>

These general observations regarding the significance of the irreligious interpretation as it concerns Hume's status as a main pillar of the 'British empiricist tradition' are plainly relevant to our assessment and understanding of his philosophical legacy. Indeed, on the face of it, the irreligious interpretation may be taken to discredit thoroughly the basis of Hume's legacy, showing that it relies on interpretative assumptions that cannot be sustained or supported after critical scrutiny. We must, however, be careful about the sort of claims that are made regarding his philosophical legacy in the light of any revisionist project of the kind that the irreligious interpretation provides. More specifically, as we have already noted, the relationship between

interpretation and legacy is not so straightforward that we may simply conclude that we should *repudiate* Hume's (established) legacy on the ground that it has been found to rely on a faulty or inadequate set of interpretive assumptions. In the first place, faulty or not, the legacy of Hume's thought constructed around the idea of 'British empiricism', and the scepticism/naturalism divide associated with it, has its own (independent) *genuine history* – which itself requires detailed description and analysis when considering its various modes and manifestations over the past two centuries. There is no 'going back' or 'retreating' from this established legacy, as it has evidently played a central role in directing the thoughts and creative energies of several generations of philosophers who have taken Hume to be a source of inspiration for their own work.

Clearly, then, we have every reason to resist the suggestion that we should simply dismiss or abandon this legacy. Even if we judge, as we do according to the irreligious interpretation, that all efforts to straightjacket Hume's philosophical work along the narrow tracks of the 'British empiricist' framework and its associated worries about the epistemological challenge of scepticism seriously distort and misrepresent his philosophy, we can hardly fail to acknowledge that the work done on this basis has itself proved to be of considerable value and interest. The irony here may be that misinterpretation and distortion of Hume's core concerns and historical situation have served us well – bringing us, among other notable contributions, nothing less than Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. No responsible historian of philosophy will want to deny either that this is indeed a genuine aspect of Hume's philosophical legacy, nor should anyone want to deny that, considered in terms of the ideas and arguments

generated, this is a legacy that is worthy of respect and that ought to command our (philosophical) appreciation and attention. Be this as it may, however, we may, at the same time, hold that the classical sceptical interpretation which has spawned this legacy is itself flawed and deeply unsatisfactory as judged by the standards of historical and interpretative accuracy.

If it is a mistake to suppose that Hume's (established) legacy is worthless because it rests with the suspect materials supplied by the idea of British empiricism, it is no less a mistake to suppose that we have no reason to question or challenge the received empiricist-sceptical interpretation because it has proved philosophically fruitful and fertile in the light of later developments. Two considerations are especially important here. First, accuracy of interpretation is itself a worthy and valid aim of the historian of philosophy, considered in terms of his or her role and activity as a *historian*. It matters, for the purposes of our own self-interpretation and the narrative coherence of the history of philosophy itself, that we are able to offer a plausible and consistent account of a thinker's work in a manner that satisfies our need to comprehend the ideas concerned and the context in which his thought emerged and evolved.<sup>34</sup> Second, and perhaps more importantly, if we abandon the project of accuracy and adequacy of interpretation we give up on the possibility that the alternative, revised interpretation may itself prove *philosophically* fertile and laden with its own distinct potential for *future* generations. If we remain rooted or locked into an established interpretation solely on the ground that it has *already* (i.e. in the past) proved itself philosophically fertile, then we fail to allow for the possibility that its failings, prejudices and narrowness of focus may prove limiting

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

and deadening in the light of (unknown) future developments or that the alternative readings might themselves offer significant critical and imaginative benefits.

With respect to the latter consideration, let me explain how the project of interpretative retrieval, as I have described it, may prove valuable from the point of view of understanding the *future potential* of Hume's philosophical legacy. When his *Treatise* and his later writings are read in terms of the traditional schema of the idea of 'British empiricism', his contributions are generally presented as fragmented and disconnected – a series of disjointed, sceptical conundrums relating to the implications of empiricist principles. As has been explained, this approach has, despite these failings, proved enormously fruitful in terms of generating significant and substantial contributions in response to this reading of Hume (especially in the areas of metaphysics and epistemology as they concern our understanding of scientific practice). Nevertheless, from the perspective of the irreligious interpretation, this general approach to Hume's philosophy involves significant losses and costs – and these are not simply or solely a matter of the partial and distorted understanding of Hume's own aims and ambitions (i.e. understood from a perspective that places value on our *historical* concerns and interests). On the contrary, what is lost is an appreciation of Hume's *Treatise* considered as a *complete system* of irreligion or 'atheism' and, as such, as a possible contribution to *our own ongoing philosophical concerns and interests*. When Hume's work is read within the structure suggested by the irreligious interpretation, it *provides us* with an ambitious and coherent world-view. So considered, the value and significance of this work, and the key components falling within it, rest with its proposals

for dealing with some of the more pressing and disturbing issues that we are *currently* facing – namely, our general difficulties in responding to the claims, dogmas and practices of religion (especially in their dominant monotheistic forms). These are issues that are, for us, matters of immediate and deep concern. The irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise*, along with the wider irreligious understanding of Hume's fundamental intentions throughout his philosophy, reaches out to a very different audience with a different set of priorities and interests. This audience is not restricted to circles in academic (professional) philosophy with their relatively arcane worries about the sceptical implications of empiricist principles as applied to our common beliefs and practices. The relevant audience for the irreligious reading of Hume's thought – a reading that requires that we abandon, or at least substantially amend, the perspective of Hume encouraged by the label of 'British empiricism' – extends well beyond these confines into the general educated public, embracing all those who are concerned with the relevance of Hume's philosophical system in as far as it speaks to them as 'global citizens'.

It is important to acknowledge, and indeed emphasize, that this alternative way of reading Hume's intentions and concerns is one that is, in some degree, already embedded in his established legacy, despite the way in which the empiricist-sceptical framework has obscured these core concerns and features of his thought. That is to say, according to the traditional reading, Hume is understood to have turned his sceptical and naturalistic attention to matters of religion, in his *later* writings. These contributions have, in turn, become an important part of Hume's legacy among subsequent generations of 'British empiricists' who have presented themselves

as sharing and defending Hume's anti-religious attitudes and outlook (e.g. Russell and Ayer).<sup>35</sup> Viewed in this way, the established or classical interpretations of his philosophy have aimed to accommodate his irreligious concerns as an important and significant aspect or dimension of his wider 'anti-metaphysical' outlook and stance. The problem with this approach, from the perspective of the irreligious interpretation, is that accounts of this kind not only fail to organize and arrange properly the structure and development of Hume's views concerning religion (i.e. by presenting them as peripheral and derivative in relation to his more fundamental aims and ambitions), they also distort and neglect key features and arguments in his system. The irreligious interpretation takes its task, therefore, to be one of retrieving or restoring the *integrity* of Hume's thought with a view to repositioning it in the context of our own *current* (and future) circumstances, in the expectation that this will open up new avenues and alternative possibilities for a *creative, critical engagement* with the ideas and works concerned.

#### 4. MYTH AND REALITY IN HUME'S LEGACY

The description we have offered of Hume's legacy as it relates to issues of interpretation makes clear that there is an intimate but complex (dynamic) relationship between interpretation and philosophical legacy. No interpretation, whether it be well founded or not, can by itself 'fix' the trajectory of a philosopher's legacy and reputation. This depends, as we have noted, on many factors and variables that are external to and independent of the interpretation provided.

Nevertheless, for obvious reasons, the specific way in which a thinker and his major works secure a reputation and influence over later generations of philosophers and readers, and what they do with the arguments and ideas conveyed to them, will depend crucially on the dominant and established modes and patterns of interpretation. It is in this sense that the (ongoing) activity of interpretation is integral to the developing and evolving legacy of the thinker. The historian of philosophy plays the essential role of *integrating* and *co-ordinating* the activities of interpretation, criticism and creative development as manifest in the reception that a thinker receives from later generations. It is a part of the responsibility of the historian of philosophy to make all those involved in this process and these activities self-conscious about the way in which a philosopher's legacy is itself embedded and dependent upon given modes of interpretation and thus subject to all the limitations and prejudices that this interpretation may bring with it. Related to this, it is the task of the historian of philosophy to keep challenging and questioning the adequacy of the (established) interpretations with a view not only to maintaining the integrity of our historical understanding, but also to preserving and expanding possible avenues of criticism and illumination that might otherwise be closed off (i.e. in the absence of any activity of 'retrieval' or 'revision'). There is, as we noted, no guarantee that these activities will themselves bear philosophical fruit in the light of future developments. However, part of the *art* of creative, critical scholarship is to find avenues of interpretation that encourage confidence that there exists some (philosophical) potential and value in the alternative readings when they are considered from the perspective of our current and future interests and concerns.

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

In general, this understanding of the relationship between interpretation and legacy suggests that we should be sceptical or leery of any account of philosophical methodology as it relates to the nature and role of the history of philosophy that tends to over-compartmentalize or too sharply separate the activities of ('scholarly') interpretation and doing ('creative') critical philosophy.<sup>36</sup> There is certainly a common picture – encouraged by certain styles of analytic philosophy that are not entirely comfortable historical modes of thought and reflection – that presents the task of interpretation as essentially backward-looking and temperamentally detached from living, critical philosophical activity and attitudes. The relationship between activities of interpretation and that of engaged philosophical reflection and evaluation is, however, much more intimate and fluid than any such model implies. Different styles of investigation in the area of the history of philosophy will, of course, give different weight and prominence to the activities and relationships involved (e.g. some interpretive approaches may place heavier emphasis on contextual matters, others on illuminating texts and arguments with reference to later or more contemporary work, and so on). The crucial point remains, nevertheless, that *good* scholarship must always have its eye on the potential a given interpretation has for current concerns and issues and, in the same way, *good* critical philosophy must always have an eye on historical self-understanding of a kind that leaves itself open to looking for new possibilities and avenues of investigation that may be opened up by (creative, critical) scholarship.<sup>37</sup> On either side of these two dimensions of philosophical activity the task may be done in a dull or illuminating manner. What matters, for our purposes, is to recognize the *seamlessness* of the processes

and activities involved and recognize that their relationship is both reciprocal and dynamic (i.e. interpretation will shape and inform critical reception, and critical reception will encourage new and alternative patterns of interpretation). Interpretation lacking all reference to critical significance and interest is (philosophically) wooden and dead; critical response without any reference to interpretive alternatives and accuracy will limit creative possibilities and distort historical understanding. An integration of these activities is essential if either is to flourish.

How, then, does all this relate to our earlier observations concerning Hume's philosophical legacy? I have argued that Hume's legacy over the past two centuries has been structured primarily around the colligatory concept provided by the idea of 'British empiricism'. It is this way of categorizing Hume's philosophy, in terms of his place as the third member of the great triumvirate of British empiricists, which has shaped the way in which Hume's key problems and contributions have been received and criticized. This perspective on his philosophy has without doubt been hugely influential, not only in encouraging later thinkers broadly to self-identify their own contributions as belonging to this legacy, so interpreted, but also in generating critical responses from outside this tradition (e.g. from various schools of anti-empiricist, or anti-positivist thought that stand in opposition to the 'Humean philosophy', read in this manner). Historians of philosophy, and Hume scholars in particular, cannot properly account for the *significance* of Hume's thought over the past two centuries unless they acknowledge the reality and power of this legacy as constructed around this reading of Hume. At the same time, for reasons that have been outlined, it is evident that the idea of British empiricism, around

which this legacy has developed and established itself, is highly suspect and distorts and misrepresents Hume's thought. There exists, in other words, a wide gap between (accurate) interpretation and (actual) legacy as it relates to his philosophical contributions and achievements. The right response to this situation, I have argued, is neither to capitulate to faulty interpretation nor to deny or retreat from a recognition of the reality of Hume's established reputation understood in terms of the idea of 'British empiricism'. What we need, I maintain, is to find a balanced response which both challenges the accuracy and adequacy of this dominant colligatory concept and, at the same time, gives due weight to the reception that Hume's philosophy has in fact received, considered in these terms. The aim of revisionary or alternative interpretations is, therefore, not so much to deny Hume's legacy as already established but rather to provide new possibilities or directions for this legacy on the basis of more accurate and reliable readings of his arguments and texts.<sup>38</sup>

The worth and value of any given interpretation, I have argued, cannot be judged *solely* in terms of either its accuracy and adequacy, on one side, or in terms of its powers to generate fruitful philosophical insights and illumination for later generations, on the other side. The reason for this, as we have noted, is that even careful and accurate interpretation may prove philosophically sterile – there is no guarantee this will not prove the case until the interpretation is subject to the test of time. Similarly, suspect and inadequate interpretations may still have their merits in the way they go on to influence and stimulate later generations. In assessing and evaluating interpretations, therefore, a certain tolerance and latitude must be allowed if the full significance of a thinker's contribution

is to be properly appreciated. The activities of (critical) scholarship, as it concerns itself with issues of interpretation, are themselves an integral part of the general dynamics of Hume's legacy. It has been my concern in this chapter to suggest that from the perspective of *interpretation*, it is not possible to justify or defend the use of the dominant colligatory concept of the idea of 'British empiricism' as a basis for understanding and explaining the essential features of Hume's philosophy. At the same time, from the perspective of providing a plausible account of his *legacy* throughout the past two centuries it is indeed exactly this understanding of his philosophy that has proved central to the reception and influence that his philosophical ideas have generated. While there is no paradox here, it is, for the reasons I have outlined, important to avoid succumbing to the temptation to emphasize or insist upon one side of this relationship at the expense of the other.<sup>39</sup>

Paul Russell

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1947), p. 685.
- <sup>2</sup> W.H. Walsh, 'Colligatory Concepts in History', repr. in P. Gardiner (ed.), *The Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 127–44. See also W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, 2nd edn (London: Hutchinson, 1958), pp. 25–6.
- <sup>3</sup> Hume was, of course, more than just a philosopher, as he made major contributions in several other fields, most notably in the field of history. His reputation among his own contemporaries was, in fact, established primarily on the basis of his hugely successful *History of England* rather than on his philosophy (which never received the attention and acclaim that Hume had hoped for). Over time, however, this situation has reversed itself and it is Hume's

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

contributions as a philosopher for which he is now best known.

- <sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics that Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Science*, ed. Gunter Zoller, trans. P.G. Lucas and G. Zoller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Preface (esp. pp. 66–7). According to Kant, Hume's 'attack' on metaphysics 'started in the main from a single but important concept in metaphysics, namely that of the connection of cause and effect . . .' (pp. 64–5). For a recent statement to the effect that Hume's importance in the history of philosophy rests primarily with the influence his views on causation had on Kant, see Anthony Kenny, 'Descartes to Kant', in A. Kenny (ed.), *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 172.
- <sup>5</sup> An influential account of the 'Reid-Beattie interpretation of Hume's teaching' is presented in Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, with a new introduction by D. Garrett (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 3–8. See also Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764), repr. in Reid's *Philosophical Works*, ed. W. Hamilton, 2 vols (Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 95, 104, 204–11. According to Reid, the real source of the 'theory of ideas' is Descartes – which is why Reid refers to the doctrine with which he is concerned as 'the Cartesian system'. Despite this, later generations have narrowed their attention on to Locke and Berkeley, considered as Hume's immediate predecessors. The most extreme version of this version of the sceptical reading, as it relates to Hume's predecessors, is presented by T.H. Grose and T.H. Green, who edited Hume's philosophical work in the middle of the nineteenth century. Grose claimed that Hume's *Treatise* 'from beginning to end is the work of a solitary Scotchman, who devoted himself to the critical study of Locke and Berkeley' (T.H. Grose, 'History of the Editions', in David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. with an introduction by T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1875), vol. 1, pp. 39–40. A similar account is presented in Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols, 3rd edn (London: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962 [1902]), vol. 1, pp. 36–7.

- <sup>6</sup> James Seth, *English Philosophers and Schools of Philosophy* (London: Dent & Sons, 1925). Hume was, of course, self-consciously *Scottish* (and he could, at times, be a bit prickly about the English). Unfortunately, his Scottish identity has not always served him or his reputation well: 'It would be easy to interpret Hume's life as the expression of an inferiority complex, as a writer and a Scotsman. He was always complaining of a lack of recognition, of prejudices, of his failure to create a stir; he was always extremely touchy about everything Scottish . . .' (John H. Randall, *The Career of Philosophy: From the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), vol. 1, p. 631.)
- <sup>7</sup> Seth, *English Philosophers*, p. 150. Seth also notes that his observations in this regard are in line with those of Wilhelm Windelband, the influential nineteenth-century German historian of philosophy.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- <sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, chap. 7 (see, in particular, his remarks at p. 685, as quoted at the beginning of this essay). This general account of Hume's philosophy continues to have influence and is still widely endorsed in standard histories of the subject. See, e.g., Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 120: 'Hume's fame rests on his scepticism. He saw, or thought he saw, that the outlook of empiricism circumscribed the possibilities of human knowledge to the extent that his predecessors had not recognized . . .'.
- <sup>11</sup> We may, of course, distinguish several distinct aspects of Hume's empiricism. Two features of his empiricism are particularly significant. The first is that Hume insists all thought and belief has its origins or source in experience (i.e. impressions of sense and reflection). The second is that he aims to make philosophy scientific by way of introducing and applying the 'experimental method', rather than relying on a priori investigations. Both these aspects of his empiricism are intimately linked to his 'naturalism', which is discussed further below. For an account of this distinction between the



two main components of Hume's empiricism see Anthony Quinton, *Hume* (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 10–11). For a more fine-grained approach to the various components of Hume's empiricism see Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 29–38.

- <sup>12</sup> For a general account of some of these later developments see Stephen Priest, *The British Empiricists*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), chaps 6–8. It should also be noted, however, that later 'British empiricists' such as Russell and Ayer diverge in some significant ways from their predecessors in respect of their 'empiricist' commitments. See, for example, John Passmore's observations about the rationalist roots of Russell's (early) philosophy: *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 214–16; and the related observations concerning Russell's ontology in Robert G. Meyers, *Understanding Empiricism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), pp. 6–7.
- <sup>13</sup> In relation to this matter, the issue that separates Kant from the empirical school is not the rejection of 'speculative metaphysics', since Kant shared this, but rather to what extent fundamental principles of (pure) reason serve to (a priori) *structure* experience, as opposed to being *derived* from it (e.g. as per Hume's account of causation). There is an important sense in which Kant must be judged – and indeed viewed himself – as a *follower of* Hume, and not just a critic.
- <sup>14</sup> Representative texts manifesting the priority and salience of this set of issues can be found in, for example, John S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 8th edn (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1898; first pub. 1843); Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912); A.J. Ayer, *The Problems of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956).
- <sup>15</sup> Hobbes's place in the British empiricist tradition is itself 'problematic' and he is frequently dropped from the list of its representatives (primarily on the ground that his understanding of science, based on the geometric method, is insufficiently empirical in character). This is indicative of more general worries about

the supposed identity and boundaries of the empiricist tradition.

- <sup>16</sup> On this see, for example, Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge, 1961), chap. 3 (esp. p. 53, where Flew refers to 'Hume's fork' to describe this basic division between two kinds of proposition). For a more general account of the relevance of Hume's philosophy to the 'positivist' programme see Leszek Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy: From Hume to the Vienna Circle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), esp. chap. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> A.J. Ayer makes the following remarks about the relationship between Hume and the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle: 'Although they [the Vienna Circle] didn't themselves know, or care, much about the history of philosophy, what they said was very like what was said by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, in the eighteenth century. So to that extent they weren't all that novel, or that revolutionary. What was revolutionary was, in a sense, their fervour, their seeing this as putting philosophy on a new road. They thought: "At last we've discovered what philosophy is going to be! It's going to be the handmaiden of science."' (quoted in Bryan Magee, *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 97).
- <sup>18</sup> Although Kemp Smith's *The Philosophy of David Hume* did not appear until 1941, he published two influential articles on 'The Naturalism of Hume' in *Mind* in 1905. These articles are reprinted in Kemp Smith, *The Credibility of Divine Existence*, ed. A.J. Porteous, R.D. MacLennan and G.E. Davie (London: MacMillan, 1967).
- <sup>19</sup> Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 11.
- <sup>20</sup> THN 1.4.1.8 / 183; Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 546.
- <sup>21</sup> Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 84.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- <sup>26</sup> John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 3rd edn (London: Duckworth, 1980), pp. 3–4; and E.C. Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 2nd edn

## HUME'S LEGACY AND THE IDEA OF BRITISH EMPIRICISM

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 73–5. See also, for example, Frederick Copleston, *Modern Philosophy – The British Philosophers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 66 [vol. 5, pt II of Copleston's *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols]; D.W. Hamlyn, *A History of Western Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 188–9.

<sup>27</sup> Two especially important and influential contributions along these lines are Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), chap. 3; and also Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, e.g. pp. 10, 94–5, 161, 240–1. For related themes concerning Hume's anticipations of 'cognitive science' and 'evolutionary psychology' see Jerry A. Fodor, *Hume Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003); Simon Blackburn, *How to Read Hume* (London: Granta, 2008); and also Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien, *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2006), chap. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Stroud, *Hume*, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Reid, *Works*, I, 102a. Not all commentators are convinced that there is a conflict or incompatibility here. Roger Scruton, for example, suggests that there are 'two ways of reading Hume'. Either 'as a sceptic who defends, from empiricist premises, the view that the standard claims to knowledge are untenable', or 'as the proponent of a 'natural philosophy' of man, who begins from empirical observations about the human mind and concludes that the mind has been wrongly construed by the metaphysicians'. Scruton goes on to claim that these 'two readings are not incompatible' but that the second 'has been emphasized in recent commentaries, partly because it parallels recent developments in philosophy' (Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 115–16). In the earlier edition of this work Scruton focused, more narrowly, on Hume's reputation as a sceptic (see note 10 above).

<sup>30</sup> Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> A standard account along these lines is presented in John Laird, *Hume's Philosophy*

*of Human Nature* (London: Methuen, 1932), pp. 282–3. In support of the view that the *Treatise* contains little of a significant nature concerned with problems of religion, Laird cites a famous 1737 letter from Hume to Henry Home (Lord Kames) concerning the 'castration' of his *Treatise* (LDH 1.23–5, 6). See also Mossner, *Life of Hume*, pp. 111–13.

<sup>32</sup> This tradition can itself be traced back to irreligious thinkers among the ancients, such as Lucretius. It stretches ahead to thinkers such as D'Holbach and Nietzsche. Plainly the irreligious interpretation not only reconfigures Hume's philosophy (i.e. in terms of its overall structure and central themes and motifs), it also repositions his place in the history of philosophy and, in so doing, rearranges our dominant perspectives on early modern philosophy more generally.

<sup>33</sup> Similar observation may be made regarding Kemp Smith's claim about the influence of Hutcheson and Newton as they relate to Hume's basic philosophical ambitions. While both these thinkers may well, like Locke and Berkeley, have played some constructive role in shaping aspects of Hume's philosophy, they stand directly on the *other side* of the main divide between 'religious philosophers' and 'speculative atheists'. Hutcheson was deeply opposed to the (anti-Christian) philosophical system of Hobbes and was not alone in recognizing significant elements of this in Hume's system. Among Hume's sternest and most severe early critics were various followers and admirers of the philosophy of Samuel Clarke – who was himself a close collaborator and champion of Newton's philosophy and its associated theology. Clearly, then, the irreligious interpretation serves to discredit any account of Hume's philosophy that aims to explain his core aims and ambitions in terms of the (constructive) influence of Hutcheson and Newton. Accounts along these lines fail to identify and emphasize properly Hume's specific irreligious aims and objectives.

<sup>34</sup> As already noted, Hume was a historian, as well as a philosopher, and so would appreciate these constraints. Contemporary philosophy is heavily dominated by the values and methods of science – if not scientism – in such a manner that the intrinsic value and importance of

historical imagination and understanding is not obvious to many of its (most influential) practitioners.

<sup>35</sup> Considered from this perspective Hume becomes a key figure in 'the Enlightenment tradition', where this is understood as a coligatory concept that has a life of its own in relation to Hume's legacy. To the extent that it is understood and described in terms of the (concept of the) 'Enlightenment' there is no obvious mismatch or lack of fit between his legacy and the irreligious interpretation, given that the irreligious interpretation places his irreligious aims and ambitions squarely in the context of the 'Radical Enlightenment'. For more details on this aspect of the irreligious interpretation see Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, esp. chaps 3 and 18.

<sup>36</sup> For an illuminating discussion of some of these methodological difficulties see Bernard Williams, 'Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy', in his *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 257–66. Speaking of the history of philosophy, Williams concludes his essay as follows: 'What we must do is to use the philosophical materials that we now have to hand, together with historical

understanding, in order to find in, or make from, the philosophy of the past a philosophical structure that will be strange enough to help us to question our present situation and the received picture of that tradition, including those materials themselves.'

<sup>37</sup> There is, of course, a constant difficulty in finding a balance between being sensitive to the historical differences between our own situation and concerns and those of the past and, on the other side, finding some relevance and interest in the ideas and arguments made available through the study of historical texts and thinkers. The important point is that sensitivity to historical difference should not prevent us from finding contemporary (living) relevance in the works in question.

<sup>38</sup> Of course, the revised interpretations will also allow us to look *critically* at the legacy itself, with a view to evaluating its own claims to accuracy and adequacy of interpretation.

<sup>39</sup> A talk based on this chapter was given at a Hume Workshop, hosted at Simon Fraser University, August 2010. I am grateful to members of the audience and to my fellow presenters (Dario Perinetti, Lisa Shapiro and Jackie Taylor) for their helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Scott Edgar for additional comments and suggestions.