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Finding inspiration in Hume

PETER MILLICAN EXPLAINS WHY WE CAN
LEARN FROM PHILOSOPHY'S PAST

forum/inspiration

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Why, as we pass his 300th birthday, do we still study David Hume's philosophy? He wrote copiously on many things, including economics, politics, psychology, religion and, especially, history. Yet few historians – either students or academics – now read his monumental *History of England*, and even fewer economists pay any attention to Hume (or even to Adam Smith, who built on his close friend's theories to become the greatest founding father of the subject). Psychology, again, is a mature experimental science, with little concern for speculations from centuries ago. So why do philosophers continue to study Hume so intently? Are they just dinosaurs whose lack of progress condemns them to rehashing forever

the same old stuff? And as for specialist historians of philosophy, wouldn't their time be better spent on more neglected authors? Haven't Hume's works been adequately worked over dozens (if not hundreds) of times, making any further "novel interpretations" a pointless exercise in philosophical imagination? If Hume could write clearly, then surely by now we must know what he said? And if he couldn't, then why is he accorded such respect?



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These sceptical doubts about the history of philosophy must occur to many observers of the academic scene, and they deserve to be taken seriously. By way of response, note first that philosophy almost by definition focuses on difficult questions, whose methods of solution – let alone the answers suggested – are typically debatable and conceptually unclear. Thus at the time he wrote them, Hume's explorations in psychology and economics came under the heading of "moral philosophy", the philosophy of the human world. He was breaking new ground, developing concepts and methods that would be built on by later generations of thinkers. But once these later thinkers had established new disciplines on those foundations, most future work in psychology and economics ceased to count as part of "philosophy". Thus the questions that we continue to call "philosophical" are typically those that have not yet been solved, and whose very method of solution is open to live debate.

It is important to recognise, then, that progress by philosophers does not necessarily register as progress in philosophy. And in fact many of the great developments that created the modern world were driven by philosophers, most obviously in the political and religious arena (Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, etc.), but also in the physical sciences (through Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz and other "natural philosophers"). Even among this impressive company, Hume can claim as high a place as any, his position enduringly secure both as "philosopher" and as seminal pioneer of the "science of man", which since his time has grown hugely in many of the directions that he was the first to advocate and explore. All well and good, you might say – we can agree that Hume himself was no dinosaur – but why does

this give us any reason to study him now, other than from historical interest? Surely psychologists who want to understand the human mind have no need to study Hume's works, or to fight again the battles that he helped to win for them. They will instead follow the spirit of his philosophy, relying on the empirical investigation that he himself so ardently insisted was the only route to knowledge of the world (or of ourselves).

In many areas of psychology, all this is true enough, but there are other areas – particularly in the vicinity of the new multi-disciplinary field known as cognitive science – where things are far less straightforward, and where thinking through Hume's problems, in his way, can open our minds to new ideas that could prove genuinely fruitful. Thus Jerry Fodor has recently found inspiration in Hume's theory of ideas and faculties, writing a book called *Hume Variations* that argues: "Hume is remarkably perceptive about the components and structure that a theory of mind requires. Careful study of the *Treatise* helps us to see what's amiss with much twentieth-century philosophy of mind, and get on the right track."

But how can it be that going back to a philosopher of the eighteenth century can be useful for inspiring new thoughts (even within a field that didn't exist in his day)? This is the key point that needs to be explained in order to understand why the history of philosophy remains valuable to contemporary philosophers to an extent that is unparalleled within the historical study of other disciplines.

We have already noted that philosophy is focused on controversial and conceptually difficult areas, and it follows that those questions remaining within its scope (and not exported to the special sciences it spawns) commonly provoke



strong advocacy and debate, while lacking the sort of empirical anchoring that would dampen the influence of prevailing currents of thought. So philosophy is highly subject to trends and fashions, and when a fashion is in full swing, it is all too easy to forget earlier ideas that are out of tune with it, even if those ideas were previously accepted as established truth. But fashion can bring benefits as well as costs. The confidence and group interactions that come from being part of a bandwagon can push things forwards with an energy that would otherwise be difficult to harness, and progress tends to be much faster if, for a time at least, inhibiting quibbles and sceptical worries are quietly ignored.

One relatively crude example of a philosophical fashion, probably fostered by the widespread influence of economic thinking today, is the tendency to see humans as overwhelmingly governed in their behaviour by rational calculation of self-interest. On this cynical view, a woman who volunteers to nurse a victim of an earthquake, say, is doing it only as a means to make herself feel better. Hume (like Adam Smith) rightly considers this picture of human nature ridiculous, appealing to the earlier arguments of Joseph Butler to highlight its fundamental flaw: "It has been prov'd [by Butler] that even the Passions, commonly esteem'd selfish, carry the Mind beyond Self, directly to the Object; that tho' the Satisfaction of these Passions gives us Enjoyment, yet the Prospect of this Enjoyment is not the Cause of the Passion, but on the contrary the Passion is antecedent to the Enjoyment, and without the former, the latter could never possibly exist."

Those who account for human behaviour exclusively in terms of a desire for personal

pleasure are putting the cart before the horse. It might be that the nurse gets pleasure from the recovery of her patient, but if so, that is clearly because she first desires his recovery. The fulfilled desire is what generates the pleasure, and to suppose the reverse is to adopt a manifestly ridiculous model of human motivation: of a self-interested nurse who, although she has not the slightest concern for the patient himself,

Progress by philosophers isn't necessarily progress in philosophy

somehow inexplicably gains pleasure from his recovery, anticipates doing so, and plans accordingly. This picture of humans as constantly calculating rather than directly desiring outcomes is also implausibly rationalistic, as Hume observes with a characteristic move of his own: "Animals are found susceptible of kindness, both to their own species and to ours; nor is there, in this case, the least suspicion of disguise or artifice. Shall we account for all their sentiments too, from refined deductions of self-interest? Or if we admit a disinterested benevolence in the inferior species, by what rule of analogy can we refuse it in the superior?"

Plenty of people, both before Darwin and since, have espoused theories of human nature that would take us out of the natural world into some theoretical wonderland. Hume continues to provide a valuable (and beautifully written) corrective, and we need not be surprised to learn that Darwin was reading Hume on "The Reason of Animals" (in the first *Enquiry*) at the >>>

time when he devised his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Thus the writings of classic philosophers can usefully remind us of worthwhile views and arguments that might otherwise be lost in the flow of fashion. In the specific case we have just considered, perhaps, the same could be achieved without reference to Butler and Hume, by simply cataloguing – in textbooks or encyclopaedia articles – their key observations and arguments that show crude “psychological egoism” to be a hopeless theory of human motivation. But quite apart from the aesthetic and cultural loss involved in this unhistorical approach, it will fail with philosophical trends that are relatively subtle and less specific, and which involve the application of common ideas, themes, and techniques to a wide range of complex and conceptually tricky issues. Here the value of older currents of thought can be fully maintained only if they are kept alive through active engagement, rather than merely recorded as positions frozen in time. And it is in this spirit that Fodor (as we saw earlier) comes to Hume, finding in him a champion for conceptual atomism against the dominant pragmatism and holism of Wittgenstein, Quine and others.

This need for active engagement is crucial to explaining why the history of philosophy is so distant from being an antiquarian study of past thinking. As time moves on, both our philosophical language and our conceptual frameworks evolve, since they are highly abstract and not closely tethered to the relatively solid ground of ordinary life. So to understand Hume’s thinking, it becomes necessary to “translate” what he says into

categories increasingly different from his own. Making sense of his talk of mental faculties (e.g. “reason” and “the imagination”), for instance, requires careful interpretation, because he shares Locke’s scepticism about faculty language, and yet several of his most central arguments (e.g. on induction, the external world, and the basis of morality) are couched in those terms. In struggling to understand what he means, we have to think things through in our own minds, informed as these may be by knowledge of recent philosophy and cognitive science. So even if we aspire only to follow Hume’s own engagement with the problems – let alone to build further on his thoughts – we have little choice but to attempt such “translation”.

It follows from this that interpretations of Hume will, quite legitimately, vary over time, and not only because scholars learn more about Hume himself. Even when our understanding of Hume has indeed moved forward, high quality older work (such as H H Price’s 1940 book on





Hume's theory of the external world) can retain a distinctive value precisely because it views him through spectacles tinted with the fashions of the time, giving later readers an appreciation of unfamiliar aspects of his thought. Inevitably, interpreters will focus on elements of Hume's philosophy – including themes and subtle textures within it – that harmonise or are made vivid by their own particular context. Thus when atomism has been in fashion, scholars have recognised more easily (and been accordingly inspired by) the aspects of the *Treatise* that chime with that; when naturalism became all the rage, a different set of connections began to be appreciated that might previously have been entirely overlooked. This again shows how the coming and going of trends in philosophy, although incompatible with the steady, forward progress commonly expected in the sciences, can also bring complementary advantages.

To expect such steady progress across the board would anyway be unrealistic: given the nature of philosophical questions, it is humanly impossible to foresee, or even to recognise, all of the connections that might prove fruitful in the future, and often one has to “think oneself into” a position intensively and over time before one becomes able to envisage most of its range of possibilities. So trends and fashions are indeed to be expected, but notice here how an enduring focus on the texts of the “great, dead, philosophers”, so far from rooting us immovably in the world of those classic thinkers, can play a quite different positive role. Without my interest in Hume, I might never have read Price's views on perception and “sense data”. Through his book, the greatest philosopher of the eighteenth century has thus provided a connecting thread

through which the insights of a different period – the early twentieth century – can be conveyed forward even to those who have no special interest in that period. Thus one can learn greatly both about Hume and about philosophy through seeing his issues explored in a variety of ways, both over time and through the involvement of a variety of scholars with different emphases (and, of course, disagreements). This also facilitates

Darwin was reading Hume when he devised his theory of evolution

serendipity, the way in which interesting ideas can turn up unexpectedly, and chance observations or associations can prompt fruitful enquiries (perhaps quite distinct from the intentions of the relevant texts). One famous example is Einstein's recollection of studying Hume's *Treatise* “with eagerness and admiration shortly before finding relativity theory”. Einstein did not approach Hume's text as a scholar, but his understanding of its “positivism ... was of great influence” and even “suggested relativity theory”. Such serendipity can occur with all sorts of reading, but a particular virtue of going back to classical texts is that doing so forces us systematically to reinterpret our own ideas in their terms (or vice versa), providing an especially fertile source of novel connections

What makes all this so fruitful is the enduring richness of Hume's thought, which is generally so logical, insightful and wide-ranging that engaging with it deeply can provide valuable lessons and new inspiration to each succeeding generation. >>>

Philosophers as diverse as John Mackie (attacking religion and moral objectivism), Peter Strawson (on free will and scepticism), David Lewis (with his “Humean mosaic”), Annette Baier (interpreting reason as social and passionate), and Simon Blackburn (proposing a “quasi-realist” account of morality and much else) have found fertile seeds in Hume’s philosophy. Nor does one have to be a “Humean” to learn from him, because even when he makes mistakes – and he makes a fair number – these are typically illuminating, and one can learn as much philosophically here, from teasing out exactly where the error lies, as one can elsewhere, from following his limpid prose through convincing arguments that invite no objection and harbour no hidden difficulties. Thinkers of Hume’s quality are rare, and this is why historically minded philosophers tend to focus so much on the established canonical figures of the past rather than spending their time scouring libraries for forgotten heroes.

The first-hand philosophical engagement that is essential to grappling with Hume’s ideas also explains why there will always remain room for multiple “interpretations”, arising from our attempts to think his thoughts in slightly different ways, against different backgrounds, and with different emphases. Moreover when his text appears ambiguous or indeterminate, or leaves logical gaps, or merely provokes objections, scholars will have different preferences for how these issues are best to be resolved (e.g. over what line of thought provides the most faithful development of the Humean position). But this variety should not be seen as an invitation to relativism, or a sceptical denial that there is any interpretative progress to be had. Hume scholarship, especially over the past thirty years, has

moved forwards immensely from the simplistic caricature and distortion that marred so much earlier work, in which his friends (e.g. the logical positivists) enthusiastically recognised their own views in his canonical texts, while his foes (e.g. Christians) sought to ridicule his unpalatable principles. A tradition of sympathetic but careful and objective scholarship has now built up, facilitated by the availability of searchable electronic texts, and I fully expect that, over time, our understanding of Hume will focus and deepen, with many older interpretations being decisively refuted while the live options are progressively refined. In some cases, we will be able to establish solid conclusions about what Hume thought; in others, we will at least achieve a clearer appreciation of the range of positions that are compatible with his texts. As we gain this deeper understanding, I am sure that new insights will emerge, to benefit our own future philosophising as well as our appreciation of the past.

To sum up, active engagement in the history of philosophy keeps a rich variety of frameworks alive and under development, often seeking out imaginative ways of combining the old with the new. It can also provide a more balanced perspective on current orthodoxies, for those who might otherwise be carried along by the hubris of the crowd to dismiss alternative approaches, conveniently forgetting the long history of discarded enthusiasms. Secure building for the future requires learning from the past, and the history of philosophical fashion demonstrates very clearly the folly of putting all one’s eggs into the currently popular baskets. Indeed, in the long term, it is very much in the interest of those now at the vanguard, that future generations of philosophers should take their history seriously!