



David Hume: 18th Century Philosopher

Hume: An introduction

Nigel Warburton

David Hume, the towering figure of the Eighteenth Century Scottish Enlightenment is, without doubt, the greatest philosopher to have written in English. He is my favourite philosopher and the favourite of many other professional philosophers too. Renowned in his day as a historian and essayist as well as a philosopher, his work has made a profound impact on how subsequent thinkers have addressed questions about the mind, morality, evidence for our beliefs, and religion. Here is the philosopher A C Grayling.

A C Grayling

Well firstly he is a very clear thinker. He is an analytical thinker, which fits in very well with our more recent tradition in philosophy. And he is a very original thinker. You think about what he had to say it's startlingly new. That's why in his own day he wasn't much recognised for a while anyway but he's become a major figure in our tradition. We can't do without him.

Nigel Warburton

If we really want to get to grips with anything from the past we need to have a sense of the context in which they were writing.

Simon Blackburn is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge.

Professor Simon Blackburn

Hume was born in the Scottish Borders, south of Edinburgh, in 1711 and he died in 1776 so he's a sort of mid Eighteenth Century character. He lived his life more or less in Scotland.

Nigel Warburton

Hume's Edinburgh was a magnet for many important thinkers and the effects of their discussions and writing were far reaching.

Professor Peter Jones

By the time of Hume say in the 1730's 40's and 50's, the influences of the Churches were less repressive. And there was a good deal of liberal discussion, even among the clergy.

Nigel Warburton

This is Professor Peter Jones formerly of Edinburgh University.

Professor Peter Jones

Nevertheless, it was pretty difficult to ask certain ranges of questions. And one of the reasons why David Hume was branded a sceptic by absolutely everybody was that in the questions that Hume asked and in the answers that he gave to them there was no reference to God.

Nigel Warburton

Hume was a sceptic and probably an atheist for most of his life and so he had to disguise his views to avoid persecution.

Here's Peter Millican of Oxford University.

Peter Millican

Prior to Hume people thought of the world as designed by a divine intelligence and saw our intelligence, our minds, as given by God so as to enable us to understand the intricacy of his creation. What Hume does is he takes out the divine creator says actually we've got no reason to suppose that the world was created by a perfect being. And he also perhaps inevitably displaces us so that we are no longer to think of our reason as being some faint

copy of a divine faculty and instead to see it as an augmented and very powerful instance of an animal faculty.

Professor Simon Blackburn

He doesn't think that there is a God given faculty called reason which processes experience into thoughts. He thinks it just happens naturally. For example if a baby puts it's hand near the fire it will pretty rapidly learn not to and it will be afraid of doing the same thing again. But so would an animal. Animals learn from experience, babies learn from experience. It's the same kind of mechanism and Hume is the first to stress that identity or similarity. So I think he's the first naturalist in philosophy.

Nigel Warburton

The way you've described him it's actually a radical approach to question some of the received views that were dominant in society. Did that get him into hot water ever?

Professor Simon Blackburn

Oh it did indeed yes. His anti theological or anti religious views got him into quite a lot of trouble. He failed to get the Chair in Edinburgh because of that. He met opposition. He was very nearly impeached by the Synod of the Church of Scotland but his friends sprang to his defence and that was averted. He was very humorous about that. He said they think of giving me over to the Devil, which they believe they have the power to do. He was completely sceptical and a great infidel he was called sometimes.

Nigel Warburton

Hume was called the great infidel because in an age of believers he questioned the reasons people gave for their certainty that God existed. Was he though deeply sceptical about everything?

Here's Peter Millican

Peter Millican

Many people think of Hume as an irrationalist because as we've seen he is sceptical about the pretensions of reasons. But in fact Hume is very pro science anti superstition. And it's quite a delicate balance. We've seen that he reduces as it were scientific reasoning to an animal instinct, the instinct for expecting the future to resemble the past. But then he wants to advocate that and say that's how we ought to reason about the world because actually that's the only basis we have for learning anything about the world.

Professor Simon Blackburn

He's not necessarily sceptical about for example whether the sun will rise tomorrow and I think it's a mistake to see him as sort of agonising about that kind of proposition. What he's sceptical about is the power of reason to tell you that the sun will rise tomorrow. He thinks your confidence in the uniformity of nature is one of those animal propensities. And it might let you down. You can't argue that it won't. But you can go on living your life as if it won't and that's what we are in fact bound to do.

Nigel Warburton

With Hume, modern philosophy took wings. He was a model of parity and integrity, both as a writer and thinker. Simon Blackburn sums up his importance beautifully.

Professor Simon Blackburn

The reason why people love him I think is his writings do breathe a great benign kind of humanity. He has a kindly aspect to him unlike say Kant who always seems rather prickly and sharp edged. Hume is rounded. He was literally round by the time of his death anyhow and that somehow comes across. I think one of the phrases he uses is "the calm sunshine of the mind". And I've always thought that applied to Hume entirely – the calm sunshine of his mind breathes out in a lot of his works.