



Foreword to “Glimpses of David Hume”

Here collected are anecdotes and miscellanea about David Hume. Most of the 25 items presented here may also be found in James Fieser’s marvelous 10-volume compilation *Early Responses to Hume* (Thoemmes Press, 2nd revised edition 2005), volumes 9 and 10 containing material about Hume’s life and reputation. We are grateful for Professor Fieser’s useful and agreeable work.

Only three of the items are not contained in the Fieser volumes. Two of them are from Hume himself. The item numbered XXIII is Hume’s disavowal of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which, I think, sometimes receives less consideration than it deserves (though I do not mean to suggest that taking the disavowal seriously would imply not taking the *Treatise* seriously and regarding it reverentially). The other Hume passage constitutes the final item, a portion of Hume’s personal drama in the Conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*. A textual case has been made that it is intimately paralleled by Adam Smith’s parable of the poor man’s son (Matson and Doran 2017).

In reproducing material, we have sometimes inserted information in brackets to provide context. Most notably, into the excerpt from Hume’s Conclusion we have inserted four bracketed comments, to show how we think that that vital passage should be understood. When, in introducing an item, we have given some words to frame it, words immediately following the Roman numeral that enumerates the item, those words of ours are not in brackets. We also caught and corrected a few minor errors.

A reference list including all the original sources appears at the end of this document, whereas the citations to sources of the 25 items follow immediately below here.

Readers who enjoy these glimpses of David Hume may also enjoy the glimpses of his best friend Adam Smith, contained in our selection from Ian Simpson Ross (2016).

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September 2017

Sourcing of the 25 items:

- I. Burton 1846, 452; Fieser 2005b, 288
- II. Burton 1846, 451; Fieser 2005b, 288
- III. Chambers 1832, 95–96; Fieser 2005b, 275
- IV. Diderot 1938, 77; Mossner, trans., 2001, 483; Fieser 2005b, 301
- V. Stewart 1802, 213; Fieser 2005b, 296
- VI. Mackenzie 1822, 24–25; Fieser 2005b, 261–262
- VII. Burton 1846, 456; Fieser 2005b, 289
- VIII. Mackenzie 1822, 22–23; Fieser 2005b, 261
- IX. Chambers 1832, 32; Fieser 2005b, 275
- X. Chambers 1832, 73; Fieser 2005b, 276
- XI. Burton 1846, 450; Fieser 2005b, 287
- XII. Chambers 1832, 184; Fieser 2005b, 276–277
- XIII. Boswell 1970/1776, 12–13; Fieser 2005a, 289
- XIV. Heathcote 1767; Fieser 2005a, 159–160
- XV. Boswell 1874, 263; Fieser 2005b, 147
- XVI. Burdy 1792, 100; Fieser 2005b, 302–303
- XVII. Mackenzie 1927, 171; Fieser 2005b, 266–267
- XVIII. *English Review* 1787; Fieser 2005b, 303
- XIX. Lady Anne Lindsay, quoted in Hunter 1960, 135 n.15; Fieser 2005b, 186
- XX. Mackenzie 1822, 21–22; Fieser 2005b, 260
- XXI. Mackenzie 1927, 169; Fieser 2005b, 265
- XXII. Stewart 1802, 76; Fieser 2005b, 296
- XXIII. Hume 1777
- XXIV. Beauchamp 2000, xvi
- XXV. Hume 1978, 268–271

Glimpses of David Hume

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

I.

He seems...to have been occasionally absent in his habits; but there is no such collection of practical illustrations of this failing, as we possess in the case of Smith and others. I only remember having heard of one trifling instance, of which I had an account from an eyewitness. Hume had been dining with Dr. [John] Jardine, and there had been much conversation about “internal light.” In descending the stair leading from the Doctor’s “flat,” when he left the party, Hume failed to observe that after so many flights which reached the street door, there was, according to a not uncommon practice, another flight of stairs leading to the cellars. He continued his descent, accordingly, till the very end, where some time afterwards he was found in extreme darkness and perplexity, wondering how it was that he could find no outlet. The circumstance bore rather curiously on some opinions he had been maintaining, and Jardine said, shaking his head, “Oh David! Where is your internal light?”

II.

The tone of his thoughts sometimes rose to enthusiasm. Thus the son of his valued friend [Adam] Ferguson, remembers his father saying, that, one clear and beautiful night, when they were walking home together, Hume suddenly stopped, looked up to the starry sky, and said, more after the manner of “Hervey’s Meditations” than the “Treatise of Human Nature,” “Oh, Adam, can any one contemplate the wonders of that firmament, and not believe that there is a God!”

III.

This distinguished philosopher was one day passing along a narrow footpath which formerly winded through a boggy piece of ground at the back of Edinburgh

Castle, when he had the misfortune to tumble in, and stick fast in the mud. Observing a woman approaching, he civilly requested her to lend him a helping hand out of his disagreeable situation; but she, casting one hurried glance at his abbreviated figure, passed on, without regarding his request. He then shouted lustily after her; and she was at last prevailed upon by his cries to approach. "Are na ye Hume the Deist?" inquired she, in a tone which implied that an answer in the affirmative would decide her against lending him her assistance. "Well, well," said Mr Hume, "no matter: you know, good woman, Christian charity commands you to do good, even to your enemies." "Christian charity here, Christian charity there," replied the woman, "I'll do naething for ye till ye turn a Christian yoursell: ye maun first repeat baith the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, or faith I'll let ye groffle there as I faund ye." The sceptic was actually obliged to accede to the woman's terms, ere she would give him her help. He himself used to tell the story with great relish.

IV.

The first time that M. Hume found himself at the table of the Baron [D'Holbach], he was seated beside him. I don't know for what purpose the English philosopher took it into his head to remark to the Baron that he did not believe in atheists, that he had never seen any. The Baron said to him: "Count how many we are here." We are eighteen. The Baron added: "It isn't too bad a showing to be able to point out to you fifteen at once: the three others haven't made up their minds."

V.

Among the most distinguished speakers in the Select Society were Sir Gilbert Elliott, Mr. Wedderburn, Mr. Andrew Pringle, Lord Kames, Mr. Walter Stewart, Lord Elibank, and Dr. Robertson. The Honourable Charles Townshend spoke once. David Hume and Adam Smith never opened their lips.

VI.

About this time (1755) was produced a periodical publication, which attracted less notice at the time than it has since excited, when its principal authors had attained such celebrity as to make the world anxious to know the smallest of their productions,—I mean the Original *Edinburgh Review*, of which only two numbers were published; the article by Adam Smith, a Criticism on Johnson's Dictionary, was very conspicuous.

David Hume was not among the number of the writers of the Review,

though we should have thought he would have been the first person whose cooperation they would have sought. But I think I have heard that they were afraid both of his extreme good nature, and his extreme artlessness; that, from the one, their criticisms would have been weakened, or suppressed, and, from the other, their secret discovered. The merits of the work strongly attracted his attention, and he expressed his surprise, to some of the gentlemen concerned in it, with whom he was daily in the habit of meeting, at the excellence of a performance written, as he presumed, from his ignorance on the subject, by some persons out of their own literary circle. It was agreed to communicate the secret to him at a dinner, which was shortly after given by one of their number. At that dinner he repeated his wonder on the subject of the *Edinburgh Review*. One of the company said he knew the authors, and would tell them to Mr Hume upon his giving an oath of secrecy. "How is the oath to be taken," said David, with his usual pleasantry, "of a man accused of so much scepticism as I am? You would not trust my Bible Oath; but I swear by the *το καλον* and the *το προεπον* [the beautiful and the becoming] never to reveal your secret." He was then told the names of the authors and the plan of the work, but it was not continued long enough to allow of his contributing any articles.

VII.

The Poker Club...seems to have had no other direct and Specific object but the consumption of claret. The duty laid on that national wine, by "the English statesman," so pathetically commemorated by John Home, was a heavy blow and great discouragement to the club; but it rallied, and returned to its old esteemed beverage; and, indeed, it is a somewhat curious circumstance, that the national taste, created by the early intercourse with France and the consequent cheapness of French wines, still lingers in Scotland, where claret is much more generally consumed than in England. The club met in Fortune's tavern every Friday. It was the practice, at each meeting, to name two to be, what were called, "attendant members;" an arrangement, probably, designed to form a nucleus round those whose attendance was uncertain, but who might drop in occasionally in the course of the evening, could form themselves; and to prevent any general desertion of the club, or, what might be, perhaps, more calamitous, the accident of any individual finding himself, for the night, its sole and solitary representative. We find Hume duly taking his turn in these attendances, and keeping the minutes according to rotation. On the 20th January, 1775, there is this emphatic entry, in his handwriting, "As Mr. Nairne was one of the attendant members, and neglected his duty, the club sent him the bill."

VIII.

Such was the free and cordial communication of sentiments, the natural play of fancy and good humour, which prevailed among the circle of [Scottish] men whom I have described. It was very different from that display of learning—that prize-fighting of wit, which distinguished a literary circle of our sister country, of which we have some authentic and curious records. There all ease of intercourse was changed for the pride of victory; and the victors, like some savage combatants, gave no quarter to the vanquished. This may, perhaps, be accounted for more from the situation than the dispositions of the principal members of that society. The literary circle of London was a sort of sect, a *caste* separate from the ordinary professions and habits of common life. They were traders in talent and learning, and brought, like other traders, samples of their goods into company, with a jealousy of competition which prevented their enjoying, as much as otherwise they might, any excellence in their competitors.

IX.

Hume, Smith, and other literati of the last century, used to frequent a tavern in a low street in Edinburgh called the Potterrow; where, if their accommodations were not of the first order, they had at least no cause to complain of the scantiness of their victuals. One day, as the landlady was bringing in a *third* supply of some particularly good dish, she thus addressed them: — “They ca’ ye the *literanti*, I believe; od, if they were to ca’ ye the *eateranti*, they would be nearer the mark.”

X.

David Hume and Lady Wallace once passed the Firth from Kinghorn to Leith together, when a violent storm rendered the passengers apprehensive of a salt-water death; and her ladyship’s terrors induced her to seek consolation from her friend, who, with infinite *sang froid*, assured her he thought there was great probability of their becoming food for fishes. “And pray, my dear friend,” said Lady Wallace, “which do you think they will eat first?” “Those that are gluttons,” replied Hume, “will undoubtedly fall foul of me, but the epicures will attack your ladyship.”

XI.

One occasionally meets with venerable persons who remember having been dandled on Hume's knee, and the number of these reminiscences indicates that he was fond of children. . . . In one instance, a vivid recollection was preserved of the difficulty, from his fatness, of getting sufficient room on his knee, and the necessity of keeping fast hold of the corner of his laced waistcoat.

XII.

A certain person, to shew his detestation of Hume's infidel opinions, always left any company where he happened to be, if Hume joined it. The latter, observing this, took occasion one day to reprehend it as follows:—"Friend," said he, "I am surprised to find you display such a pointed aversion to me; I would wish to be upon good terms with you here, as, upon your own system, it seems very probable we shall be doomed to the same place hereafter. You hope I shall be damned for want of faith, and I fear you will have the same fate for want of charity."

XIII.

I [James Boswell] asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius observes. "Well," said I, "Mr. Hume, I hope to triumph over you when I meet you in a future state; and remember you are not to pretend that you was joking with all this infidelity." "No, no," said he. "But I shall have been so long there before you come that it will be nothing new." In this style of good humour and levity did I conduct the conversation. Perhaps it was wrong on so awful a subject. But as nobody was present, I thought it could have no bad effect. I however felt a degree of horror, mixed with a sort of wild, strange, hurrying recollection of my excellent mother's pious instructions, of Dr. Johnson's noble lessons, and of my religious sentiments and affections during the course of my life. I was like a man in sudden danger eagerly seeking his defensive arms; and I could not but be assailed by momentary doubts while I had actually before me a man of such strong abilities and extensive inquiry dying in the persuasion of being annihilated. But I maintained my faith. I told him that I believed the Christian religion as I believed history. Said he: "You do not believe it as you believe the Revolution." "Yes," said I; "but the difference is that I am not so much interested in the truth of the Revolution; otherwise I should have anxious doubts concerning it. A man who is in love has doubts of the affection of his mistress, without cause."

XIV.

He [Jean-Jacques Rousseau] was never perhaps in a situation before, where he was so little liable to be molested; where he was so unnoticed, so altogether left to his own will and humor. For the good people of England, after the first stare was over, had (as their way is) entirely done with him. Far from continuing to admire, they had ceased to mention him; and, if they had not totally forgot, they cared no more about him, than if he had been in Swisserland. His misery increased: your letter appeared: it became extreme. He fell into a paroxysm: he raged: and, in short, as sometimes happeneth among wild beasts, he fell upon his Keeper. To speak without a figure, he quarreled with his greatest friend and benefactor *Mr. Hume*, by all accounts the most quiet, the most humane, the most amiable of men; and who in the present case seems only faulty, in having condescended to humor a man, whom it is not possible to oblige: and nothing doubtless but the exceeding humanity of *Mr. Hume*, and his prejudices for *Mr. Rousseau*, could hinder one of his vast penetration from discerning somewhat earlier, than he seems to have done, that *Rousseau* was a savage, whom no offices of kindness could civilize and tame.

XV.

David Hume used to say that he did not find it an irksome task to him to go through a great many dull books when writing history. "I then read," said he, "not for pleasure, but in order to find out facts." He compared it to a sportsman seeking hares, who does not mind what sort of ground it is that he goes over farther than as he may find hares in it.

XVI.

Upon Mr. Skelton's arrival in London, he brought his manuscript to Andrew Millar the Bookseller, to know if he would purchase it, and have it printed at his own expense. The Bookseller desired him, as is usual, to leave it with him for a day or two, until he would get a certain gentleman of great abilities to examine it, who could judge, if the sale would quit the cost of printing. These gentlemen who examine manuscripts, in the Bookseller's cant, are called *triers*. "Can you guess (he [i.e., Skelton] said to me) who this gentleman was, that tried my *Deism Revealed*?" "No, I cannot." "Hume the infidel." He came it seems to Andrew Millar's, took the manuscript to a room adjoining the shop, examined it here and there for about an hour, and then said to Andrew, *print*.

XVII.

He [David Hume] wanted a book out of the Advocates Library, of which the learned antiquarian [Walter] Goodall, author of the first Vindication of Queen Mary [of Scotland], was then acting Librarian. He was sitting in his elbow-chair so fast asleep, that neither David nor a friend who accompanied him could wake Goodall by any of the usual means. At last David said, "I think I have a method of waking him," and bawled into his ear, "Queen Mary was a strumpet and a murtherer." – "It's a damned lie," said Goodall, starting out of his sleep, and David obtained the book he sought.

XVIII.

The celebrated Mr. Hume used to call Dr. Franklin "the first fruits of America." The American revolution has given elasticity and energy to the minds of the inhabitants, has called forth talents and abilities of every kind, and produced a more copious harvest than the solitary "first fruits" observed by Mr. Hume seemed to indicate.

XIX.

of Hume at age 16

You know the Truthfulness of his Honest Nature...as a Boy he was a fat, stupid, lumbering Clown, but full of sensibility and Justice,—one day at my house, when he was about 16 a most unpleasant odour offended the Company before dinner... "O the Dog...the Dog," cried out everyone "put out the Dog; 'tis that vile Beast Pod, kick him down stairs pray...pray."—

Hume stood abashed, his heart smote him... "Oh do not hurt the Beast" he said... "It is not Pod, it is Me!" ...

How very few people would take the evil odour of a stinking Conduct from a guiltless Pod to wear it on their own rightful Shoulders.

XX.

Once, I have been told, he was in a small degree ruffled by a witticism of Mr John Home's, who, though always pleasant, and often lively, seldom produced what might be termed or repeated as wit. The clerk of an eminent banker in Edinburgh, a young man of irreproachable conduct, and much in the confidence of his master, eloped with a considerable sum with which he had been entrusted.

The circumstance was mentioned at a dinner where the two Humes, the historian and the poet, and several of their usual friendly circle, were present. David Hume spoke of it as a kind of moral problem, and wondered what could induce a man of such character and habits as this clerk was said to possess, thus to incur, for an inconsiderable sum, the guilt and the infamy of such a transaction. "I can easily account for it," said his friend John Home, "from the nature of his studies, and the kinds of books which he was in the habit of reading." "What were they?" said the philosopher. "Boston's Fourfold State" rejoined the poet, "and Hume's Essays." David was more hurt by the joke than was usual with him, probably from the singular conjunction of the two works, which formed, according to his friend's account, the library of the unfortunate young man.

XXI.

David Hume was not at all the Jacobite or Tory which he was sometimes accused of being, and as his History was supposed to evince. He had an indolent gentleness in his nature which was averse to enthusiasm and perhaps unfriendly to bold ideas and bold expression. He loved the moderate, the temperate in everything, and from that disposition as well as his propensity to disbelief he had an aversion to the fanatics and *Cromwellian* partisans of the Commonwealth. From this inclination to mildness and moderation he was perhaps not so much an admirer of Shakespeare as he ought to have been, and rather cautioned his friend John Home against an over-admiration of that great dramatist, and desired him to read constantly Corneille and Racine.

XXII.

Dr. [William] Robertson used frequently to say, that in Mr. Hume's gaiety there was something which approached to *infantine*; and that he had found the same thing so often exemplified in the circle of his other friends, that he was almost disposed to consider it as characteristic of genius.

XXIII.

In 1775 Hume wrote a brief Advertisement, which, after his death in 1776, was placed at the start of the 1777 volume containing the two enquiries, the dissertation on the passions, and the natural history of religion. Here is the Advertisement in full.

Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature*: A work

which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers, who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work, which the Author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigotted zeal thinks itself authorised to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles.

XXIV.

The full set of Hume's reasons for the disavowal of *THN* may not be recoverable, but it is probable that his 'repenting' of his early work was unfeigned...

XXV.

from the Conclusion of Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature

The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. But notwithstanding that my natural propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this indolent belief in the general maxims of the world, I still feel such remains of my former disposition, that I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy. For those are my sentiments in that splenetic humour, which governs me at present. I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles. But does it follow, that [we suggest that the preceding five words be read as: But, following such impulse to submission, I then find that] I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries [for example, Hume's subsequent writings on morals, culture, politics, and history], at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty. Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest? No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies [again, for example, Hume's subsequent writings on morals, culture, politics, and history] shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led a wandering into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met with [that is, the material in Book I preceding the Conclusion].

These are the sentiments of my spleen and indolence; and indeed I must confess, that philosophy has nothing to oppose to them, and expects a victory more from the returns of a serious good-humour'd disposition, than from the force of reason and conviction. In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise. Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us.

At the time, therefore, that I am tir'd with amusement and company, and have indulg'd a *reverie* in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a river-side, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally *inclin'd* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my

reading and conversation. I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falshood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. I am concern'd for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy.

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[Go to September 2017 issue](#)



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