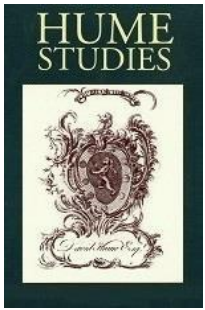

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My purpose in *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* was to write the first comprehensive account of Hume's career as an author, beginning with what we know about his education at Edinburgh, and ending with "My Own Life," the brief autobiography that Hume wrote shortly before he died. Where Ernest Mossner, in his classic *The Life of David Hume,* was explicitly concerned with the man rather than with the ideas, I was concerned with the ideas, and the arguments, rather than with the man. Hume's biography was of interest to me insofar as, but no further than, it shed light on Hume's intellectual development. In many respects, Mossner's achievement as a biographer remains deeply impressive, and anyone wanting to gain a full impression of Hume as an individual certainly needs to read his book, as well as mine. But in one crucial respect, I believe, Mossner was deeply mistaken. Mossner was determined to present Hume as an outsider, continually subject to snubs and humiliations, and almost universally misread and misunderstood. I was concerned, by contrast, to present Hume's authorial career as a triumphant success. As I explain in my response to my critics below, I fixed on the persona of the man of letters as the key to understanding Hume's writings taken as a whole, and I gave an account of Hume's life as man of letters that was intended to bring out his central place in the literary worlds of mid eighteenth-century Scotland, England, and Europe. Thus, I emphasised his friendly intellectual engagements with his contemporaries, and I argued that, in the case of Hume, "Enlightenment" was the creation of a kind of discursive space in which fundamental disagreement about speculative and practical matters could be both polite and constructive.

Closely related to this way of presenting Hume's relationship with the intellectual world in which he lived and worked was a particular approach to the question of Hume and religion. Hume's religious skepticism was, I fully accepted, both unique and a supremely important part of his legacy, but it did not set Hume dramatically against the spirit of his age in the way

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that Mossner and many others have claimed. It was no barrier, for instance, to close friendships with several ministers of the Church of Scotland, nor to productive argument with men outwith Scotland such as Richard Price and Josiah Tucker. I attempted to set Hume's religious thought, in the first instance, in a complicated Scottish context in which traditionalist Calvinist orthodoxy was being challenged by a self-consciously "moderate" faction in the Church. This conflict had consequences for many aspects of Scottish cultural and intellectual life, and it impacted sharply on Hume on more than one occasion, for instance when he applied for academic positions in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and when he was trying to establish himself in Edinburgh in the 1750s. Hume was, in an important sense, an ally of the moderates, but it was also true that he shared the skepticism of the orthodox about the possibility of the kind of compromises the moderates wanted to make between religion and modern philosophy. I suggested that one way to read the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*—begun, of course, thirty years before its publication in 1779—was as a response to this intellectual predicament. I was doubtful, then, that it makes sense to think of Hume as hostile to something called, simply, "religion." Religion was not, for him, a monolith. It was a complex and variegated phenomenon, that had played and continued to play many different roles in the emotional, moral, and political lives of human beings. It was also—as Hume revealed in the *Natural History of Religion*—a phenomenon with deep roots in human nature, and so was something that a skeptic about human rationality was bound to accept as almost certainly a permanent feature of any conceivable human society.

Part of the point of understanding Hume's career as that of a man of letters, and of seeing that career as having been a success, was to move beyond the idea that Hume's failure to secure an academic appointment was in some sense the defining disappointment of his life. Much writing about Hume is done by academic philosophers, and it is natural for them to suppose that Hume wanted to have the same kind of career as they have. In my book I argue that there is no reason to think that that supposition is true. For one thing, Hume gives no sign in his letters that he was particularly disappointed at not becoming a professor of moral philosophy. For another, when one considers what being a professor of moral philosophy actually entailed at a Scottish university in the eighteenth century, this is not surprising. Students were, as Hume himself had been, boys in their early teens, and a large part of the job was a kind of moral pedagogy that it is difficult to imagine Hume having much of a relish for. Even a man as fundamentally serious as Adam Smith left academia as soon as he possibly could. Hume's skepticism is relevant here too, because it was, among other things, skepticism about the practical efficacy of philosophy. It was skepticism about the ability of philosophy to do much, if anything, to alter and improve an individual's fundamental dispositions and enjoyments. It was skepticism about the ancient conception of philosophy as a kind of medicine for the mind. It was, in other words, skepticism about the very possibility of moral philosophy as most of Hume's contemporaries conceived of it.

The lack of success of the *Treatise*, taken together perhaps with Hume's failure to get a university job, did not, on the view I developed in the book, constitute a crisis that prompted Hume to move from "philosophy" to something else. It did not cause him to give up on seri-

ous intellectual pursuits and pursue fame and wealth instead. Hume's career as man of letters was, instead, the application of a philosophical style of reasoning—skeptical, disengaged, impartial, interested in the identification of general laws lying below the apparent chaos of human behaviour—to an extraordinarily wide range of subjects. Hume regularly referred to the entirety of the contents of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, which included all of his essays on politics and political economy, as his "philosophy." He regarded the history of England as an opportunity for the exercise of the same "philosophical spirit" as had been put to work in his other writings. Hume was a man with many interests. Nothing seemed to be, in principle, alien to philosophy in his capacious understanding of the word. For reasons I mention below, I was unable to convince myself that there was anything systematic about the way Hume moved from one subject matter to another. My book was an attempt to consider each of his intellectual endeavours on its own terms, and to offer some suggestions about what, exactly, Hume might have been trying to do as he wrote in this way about human nature, about morals and manners, about British party politics, about political economy, about English history, and about religion.