

# David hume: philosophy analysis



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David Hume was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in spring 1711. Hume originally studied law but then changed his mind and decided to focus only on philosophy and learning. He also had no interest in professors, saying “there is nothing to be learnt from a Professor, which is not to be met with in Books.” He traveled to France at age 23, and it was there that he wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which is considered to be one of the most important books in Western philosophy. At the time of its publishing, though, it came under criticism for being “unintelligible.” It was then that he started writing *The History of Great Britain*. Shortly after, he wrote *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which was more successful than the *Treatise*. He was convicted of heresy but because he was thought to be an atheist, he was considered to be “outside the Church’s jurisdiction,” so he got acquitted. Arguably, this is better than being hung.

When Hume was a young boy attending the University of Edinburgh he devoured books written by Voet, Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil. David Hume was heavily influenced by both John Locke and George Berkeley. He was also influenced by French-speaking Pierre Bayle and many prominent figures on the English intellectual landscape such as Issac Newton, Samuel Clark, Francis Hutcheson, who served as his teacher, and Joseph Butler who provided him feedback on his first work. Hume belongs to the philosophical school of British Empiricism. Hume writes his Empiricism with a combination of both positive and negative aims. These aims are strongly cornered on the belief that simple ideas are combined to form complex ideas. The counter philosophical school during this time period were the Continental Rationalists. The British Empiricists put great value in experience whereas

the Continental Rationalists worked to break down the views held during the Medieval Ages.

Hume spent much of his time writing about religion, but it is difficult to discern his own religious views from the ones he writes about. He was living in a time where being an atheist could bring about harsh consequences in society. Hume never came out and declared himself an atheist and his writings showed nothing but ambiguity on the subject. In many of his writings he attacks many of the basic assumptions of religion and Christian beliefs, yet in other works he claims that, “[t]he whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author.” It has been said by scholars that perhaps Hume was irreligious as opposed to atheist. Hume “ did not believe in the God of standard theism... but he did not rule out all concepts of deity.”

The first half of the eighteenth century in Scotland was fraught with civil discontent, which was expressed in the form of the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite uprisings. When Charles Stuart, the Young Pretender, was chased out of Scotland after trying to conquer Britain, the Scottish were placed under an even tighter British rein and denied by proscription their traditional garb in 1747.

In regards to John Locke, Hume’s philosophy does not explicitly have God as its foundation. This is evident in the chapter Of Refinement in the Arts, in which Hume argues for the value, both to society and the individual, of proper pursuit of luxury and refinement. His theory is not clearly tied to any belief in a deity, but neither does it reject deity. He instead argues from the

perspective of whether or not innocent luxury is beneficial, not taking God into account.

This difference between Locke and Hume relates to their views on reason and empirical observation. Both philosophers were empiricists, arguing that we arrive at knowledge through sensation. Yet Locke also believes in a law of reason and that certain things can be understood through the exercise of reason. Hume, however, is generally considered anti-rational. He argues that reason consists simply in the prescription of actions based on our passions which are in turn derived from our morals. Thus, reason can prescribe how we should act, what means we should employ, but it cannot prescribe the ends we pursue through those actions. This is fundamentally different from Locke, whose theory of society and government is grounded in the objective laws of nature and God.

Again, this fundamental difference is reflected in *Of Refinement in the Arts*. Whereas Locke argues for a law of reason that prescribes the correct actions of a society and government, Hume argues that the best laws cannot be arrived at except through reason that has been refined by exercise. In other words, knowledge of the art of government does not come from an objective, external law of nature or reason, or from God, but from subjective human experience. Thus, for Locke, the best government is derived from the law of reason and has as its purpose the protection of everyone's natural right to life, liberty, and property. Liberty, to Locke, is a natural right that government exists to protect. For Hume, a government that protects liberty is established from a society that is properly cultivated and refined, so that the people have acquired wealth and therefore has the power and the

incentive to protect themselves from tyranny through good laws. Liberty and laws that protect it, to Hume, are secured by motivated people, not established by God or by the law of reason.

Another difference can be perceived in their views of education. Locke argues that the point of education is to allow one to understand the laws of nature or of society, and therefore to exercise liberty under those laws; Hume sees education as a major influence in allowing one to pursue those things that bring pleasure and enjoyment.

Hume's philosophy of the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment, as the major theme in *Of Refinement in the Arts*, bears some similarities to Locke's philosophy, but also some important differences. Both philosophies are individualistic but are derived from fundamentally different bases. Locke argues that individuals, by nature, have a right to life, liberty, and property, the protection of which is the purpose of government. Hume argues that individuals should pursue innocent luxury, not as a God-given right, but as something that is beneficial both to individuals and to society.