

**David Hume
(1711-1776)**

The year is 1756. David Hume, the subject of our second literary toast, is on trial for his writings. Although he was more famous in his day as a historian and political essayist, it is his philosophical writings that endure and it is these that have attracted censure from the church.

From today's vantage point, we recognise Hume as the last of the great triumvirate of "British empiricists". His influence is evident in the writings of his close friend Adam Smith and Hume is recognised as a key bridge to Immanuel Kant. Charles Darwin, (it is incidentally 200 years years since his birth) counted Hume as a central influence. Today, philosophers recognize Hume as a precursor of cognitive science, as well as one of the most thoroughgoing exponents of philosophical naturalism.

Yet, this was not at all evident though much of his lifetime. For example, of his four major philosophical works, his first - A Treatise on Human Nature - was published anonymously and his last - Dialogues concerning Natural Religion – was deliberately published posthumously. Why was he so cautious?

To answer this question we have to explore not just his own trial - but another that took place only sixty years earlier: the trial of Thomas Aikenhead. On a cold evening in 1696, Thomas Aikenhead, then aged 19, was passing the Tron Church in Edinburgh with three fellow students. As he walked, Aikenhead shivered from the cold wind, turned and remarked to the others 'I wish right now I were in

that place Ezra called hell, to warm myself there'. It is not know if any of the other lads laughed at the joke but it turned out to be no laughing matter.

Aikenhead had been reading a wide range of radical literature that cast doubt on Christian orthodoxy and had talked about his reading with friends. One of them informed on him and Thomas was arrested and remitted to the Tolbooth Prison to be tried for his life for the crime of blasphemy. Two ministers and two Privy Councillors pleaded on his behalf, but to no avail. On 7th January, after another petition, the Privy Council ruled that they would not grant a reprieve unless the church interceded for him. The Church of Scotland's General Assembly, sitting in Edinburgh at the time, urged "vigorous execution" to curb "the abounding of impiety and profanity in this land". Thus Aikenhead's sentence was confirmed and on a cold January morning the tearful and repentant young man was hung by the neck until dead.

Fast forward sixty years and conservative clergy have brought forward a motion to excommunicate David Hume. The conservative side argued that Hume posed a genuine threat to religion, and it was the Church's duty to take action against him. The moderate side argued that, as a non-believer, censuring him would have no impact. In a vote of 17 to 50, the decision was made not to pursue the matter further. The tide of opinion was turning and Hume had played no small part in this change.

But, what was that change. In the medieval mind, before the enlightenment, three vital spheres had not been differentiated. What

is true (the scientific sphere), what is right (the ethical sphere) and what is beautiful (the aesthetic sphere) were seen as one. Thus, when Galileo put forward the idea that the earth was not the centre of the Universe but circulated round the sun (what we would now see as a true statement from the scientific sphere) he was perceived in the minds of the catholic church hierarchy as endangering not just what they thought was true but also what was right (God's revealed moral order) and beautiful (the harmony of the universe).

The glory of the enlightenment and the major contribution that David Hume made was that he allowed observations to be made and conclusions to be drawn in each sphere – the scientific, moral and aesthetic – without threatening the others.

Make no mistake; Hume's ideas were disconcerting. He brought forward arguments of great sophistication to show not only that we cannot demonstrate the existence of a world external to ourselves but also that we cannot validate the existence of causal connections in any realm; that there is no such thing as inductive logic; that we cannot even be sure of our own existence as continuous selves; and certainly not the existence of God. He genuinely succeeds, I think, in showing that almost everything we believe in or take for granted is not in fact known and can never be known. He shows that strict proof simply plays no part in human life outside of mathematics. Hume was, therefore, advancing a critique of our human limitations. He was – it has to be said – cheerful about this. He did not conceive of himself as holding a depressing view of life. On the contrary, his attitude to life was both down to earth and appreciative.

Born into comfortable but not overly rich circumstances, Hume went to Edinburgh University in his early teens. Soon after completing his studies he began writing his comprehensive statement of the views he believed would contribute to philosophy no less than Newton's had to science. But the public reception for his *Treatise of Human Nature* was less than cordial, and Hume abandoned his hopes of a philosophical career in order to support his family as a librarian, historian, diplomat, and political essayist. Hume's *Essays Moral and Political* (published in 1742) found some success, and the multi-volume *History of England* (written between 1754 and 1762 and comprising more than a million words) finally secured the modest livelihood for which he had hoped. Although his contemporary reputation rested on these writings, he spent most of his life trying to produce more effective statements of his philosophical views. He did not live to see the firm establishment of his reputation as a philosopher and in 1776, at age 65, he died from an internal disorder that had plagued him for many months.

My own view is that Hume's attraction arises out of his contradictions.

- His philosophy is sceptical, yet his life demonstrates openness and trust.
- His written English is widely acknowledged as precise and elegant yet he spoke his whole life in a broad Scottish accent.
- He is the most serious of writers, yet he never took himself too seriously.

In a letter to a friend, Hume describes a misadventure as he traversed the boardwalk over the bog between the old and new towns of Edinburgh (what is now Princess Street gardens). He slipped and fell into the bog and was in fear of drowning. By this age a portly gentleman he struggled and could not get himself out. A local fishwife heard his struggles and, running, offered him help. But, just as she was about to pull him out, she recognised him as ‘that atheist David Hume’. She stopped and said she would only save him if he recited the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed. This he did and she kept her end of the bargain. In his letter, Hume concludes by observing that the Edinburgh fishwife was a better theologian than the entire body of learned cleric he had ever met.

What then of Hume’s legacy? The medieval religious worldview that looked to revelation and tradition as the twin sources of authority came under scrutiny and then attack through the enlightenment period. Keppler, Galileo and Newton described a cosmology and natural philosophy that removed man from the centre of a universe that was no longer maintained and controlled on a moment-by-moment basis by God but by the laws of physics. The continental rationalist philosophers wanted to interpose logic and reason where revelation was seen to be failing. Hume demonstrated the limitations of human rationalism and argued that empiricism – careful observation and experimentation – should be our teacher.

Charles Darwin was among many that took up that challenge and his ideas – published 150 years ago this year as ‘The Origin of Species’ – not only removed man from the centre of the created universe but established human beings as just one node on the complex and ever

shifting web of life, not the end product of an ordained process but the product of chance and time.

Thus, the differentiation of science, ethics and aesthetics made the modern age possible. But, if David Hume were alive today, his empiricism and his scepticism may lead him to the conclusion that it has all been taken too far. The radical application of scientific materialism has robbed many of a deeper sense of purpose and meaning. The scientific sphere has grown to the point that it too often eclipses the ethical or moral and the aesthetic spheres.

In my own world of health, we marvel at the fruits of the enlightenment – treatments developed and tested through randomised trials and the efficient application of technology. Yet, many feel that we have gone too far and become unbalanced. We now have factories for processing disease instead of houses of healing. The ethical and aesthetic perspectives are too often eclipsed by what is measurable, what is cost effective or simply what the government has set as a target. The approach that grew out of the enlightenment; summarised as - ‘understand, predict and control’ worked wonderfully well for the control of cholera by supplying clean water or the eradication of smallpox with vaccination. Yet, that paradigm is inadequate when we are confronted by the intertwining complexity of the modern epidemics of obesity, depression or addiction.

In a wider context, the billiard ball analogy of the universe so beloved of enlightenment thinkers worked well for an initial set of problems and gave rise to the industrial era. However, it fails us when it comes to understanding and coping with the complex adaptive systems and

the multiple feedback loops that threaten Gaia through global warming, loss of biodiversity and species depletion.

My instinct is that David Hume would want to integrate what is true, what is right and what is beautiful – to find some room for the poet as well as the scientist.

So, as we rise to drink a toast to one of the true heroes of the enlightenment – a Scot who helped to invent the modern world – we link his name with a hope – a hope for a second enlightenment to deal with today's challenges.

Gentlemen, I give you David Hume.