

Hume, David (1711-1776)

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Hume, David (1711-1776), Scottish empiricist or skeptic, a touchstone of philosophical thought for the Transcendentalists, was born in Edinburgh. After leaving the university there at 15, he pursued individual study in philosophy, history, and politics. His first philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), was not well received. He revised this work under the title *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and it, along with *Principles of Morals and Political Discourses*, made a great reputation for him on the continent. Despite these successes, he was turned down for professorships at Edinburgh and Glasgow. He travelled to France as the secretary to the British ambassador in 1763, where he met one of his staunchest supporters, **Rousseau**. In 1767 he was appointed Under-Secretary of State. In 1769 he returned to Edinburgh, where he died of cancer in 1776. Besides his philosophical works, he is also known for work in history, most especially his *History of Great Britain*.

Hume's desire was to build a science of human understanding. Standing on the shoulders of **Leibniz**, **Descartes**, and **Spinoza**, he both borrowed from and dismantled Locke and Berkeley in his work. His method of analysis allowed him to place all the contents of the mind into two categories: "impressions," which are non-reducible phenomena, and "ideas," which are generated by impressions. His radical skepticism caused him to doubt the persistence of impressions of things outside the mind, and indeed causality itself. Because all proofs for the existence of God can be reduced to arguments from causal analogies, he denied this also. Many of Hume's early critics considered only this pessimistic stance, and therefore regarded Hume as a threat to civil society. **Emerson** himself suggested, in a letter to **Aunt Mary** in 1823, that he was disturbed

by the atheistic implications of Hume's writings, calling him the "Scottish Goliath," and decrying the absence of a "stripling who can cut off his most metaphysical head."

Hume's ethical stance takes a more optimistic turn. He bases his ethics on sentiment, specifically the feeling of sympathy, or fellow-feeling. He avoids a subjectivist turn here by claiming that sympathy binds humanity together, for it is a "principle in human nature beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general."

Hume's influence on the Transcendentalists underwent a shift as the movement progressed and different thinkers moved to the foreground. Both **Alexander Everett** and **Isaac Ray** spurned his views. Later, **Orestes Brownson** was to turn aside from Hume's skepticism. (However, Brownson also rejected the writings of **Hegel** and **Kant**, two important influences on the movement.) Hume's argument that reason cannot tell us how to live, and his recognition that we must then follow our natural inclinations (among which he includes mathematical and empirical reasoning) in a "common life" bears a striking resemblance to **Thoreau's** work in *Walden* and Emerson's critiques of the emerging American industrialization. Emerson's thoughts on self-consciousness point to Hume's epistemological concern that we can never objectify the self because we will always end up with some particular perception of the self. Finally, Hume's reliance upon a common feeling of sympathy as a basis for all actions may be a minor source for Emerson's thoughts on the community of humanity in the **Over-Soul**.

The standard source for Hume is *The Philosophical Works*, first printed in London in 1886, reprinted by *Scientia Verlag* in 1964. Judiciously chosen selections and acute commentaries on his work can be found in Terence Penelhum's *David Hume: An Introduction To His Philosophical System* (1991) and Antony Flew's edition of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1988). References to Hume throughout the Transcendentalist corpus are noted in Miller.