People and Places: 
David Hume (1711–1776)

Randy Moore

David Hume (born David Home, he changed his name when in his twenties) was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on April 26, 1711. Hume entered the University of Edinburgh when he was eleven or twelve years old, but left in 1725, not having earned a degree. A prolonged lack of direction in his life ensued, lasting well into the 1730s. Resolved to support himself, Hume began working in 1734 as a clerk with a sugar merchant in Bristol, a foray into business that was short-lived, and which began many years of temporary employment. Hume never married.

Despite these seemingly lackluster beginnings, in 1739, Hume published anonymously, in two volumes, a masterpiece of philosophical discourse: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. (A third volume followed in 1740). In this work, Hume built upon the empiricism of John Locke to outline a perspective where understanding flows only from direct experience. Thus, according to Hume, understanding of human nature and how it affects our perceptions and conclusions (along with a casting aside of superstition and metaphysics) is central to the goal of philosophy.

For Hume, understanding is a product of our senses alone, and these understandings create beliefs, not objective knowledge. These beliefs in how the world works, in turn, lead to habits. Knowledge, therefore, is non-rational because we are not justified in expecting the future to be like the past. And yet, we are forced to act as if this were so as in when we act out of habit. Hume urged science to employ “mitigated skepticism” that is “sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding,” especially when interpreting cause-and-effect relationships (Graham 2004).

The ideas in the *Treatise* ultimately proved enormously influential, but upon its publication, it was not at all successful. A shortened and somewhat altered version of the book, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), also failed to excite interest. However, given the poor sales of the *Treatise*, Hume had to find a way to support himself. After unsuccessfully pursuing university positions (despite help by his friend Adam Smith), Hume was forced to take a position tutoring the Marquess of Annandale in 1745.

Hume’s prospects improved remarkably when he was asked to serve as secretary to General James St Clair, who was undertaking an expedition through Europe. This led to a two-year position at the British embassy in Paris beginning in 1763. During this time, Hume continued writing, especially on politics and history (*Political Discourses* [1752], *The History of England* [1754–1761]). The French intelligentsia took note of him, firmly establishing
him as a noteworthy writer and thinker. For the remainder of his life, Hume supported himself as an author.

Hume was not an atheist, claiming that the level of evidence (or faith) needed for such a position equals that required of a believer. In this sense, he was similar to Thomas Henry-Huxley, the originator of the term agnostic (and the author of a book about Hume). Hume felt organized religions that claimed special knowledge of the universe were promulgating superstitions, as questions about the existence of a deity are unanswerable based on information gathered by our senses.

In his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume tackled the “argument from design” for the existence of a creator. In the form of a conversation, the protagonists Philo (anti-design advocate; usually considered to be Hume himself) and Cleanthes (pro-design advocate) discuss inferring the existence of a deity by observing an apparently complex and designed world. Filtered through the limitations of eighteenth-century scientific understanding, Hume rejected the design-based argument by invoking the existence of evil, by noting that human creations are subject to later improvements, and by questioning the assumption of the existence of complexity. Hume's analysis has formed the basis for subsequent refutations of the design argument, including those countering claims of the modern “intelligent design” movement.

While in France, Hume befriended fellow philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's books were controversial, and as he was fleeing persecution in France, Hume accompanied him to England. However, Rousseau's paranoia overcame him, and he incorrectly and publicly accused Hume of treachery. Public opinion mostly sided with Rousseau, and Hume's reputation suffered. Hume retired to Edinburgh, continued to write, and died on January 4, 1776. He is buried in a large Roman mausoleum in Edinburgh's Old Calton Burial Ground, and a public statue of him (Figure 1) was erected in Edinburgh in 1996.

**REFERENCES**


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Randy Moore is the HT Morse–Alumni Distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Minnesota. His most recent book (with coauthor Sehoya Cotner) is *Understanding Galápagos: What You'll See and What It Means* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013).

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Figure 1. Statue honoring David Hume in Edinburgh. Photograph: Randy Moore.

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