

Please note that this is an earlier version of an article now published in *Times Higher Education* (8 October 2015): 42-3.

<<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-hume-an-intellectual-biography-james-harris-cambridge-university-press>>

Hume: An Intellectual Biography

By James A. Harris

Cambridge University Press

609+pp, £35.00

ISBN 9780521837255

Published 30 September 2015

If Scottish philosopher David Hume were ever depicted as a comic-book superhero, he would undoubtedly be drawn as the Arch-Sceptic, a dark and brooding figure with a permanent curl upon his lip and an ever-ready retort for those mortal enemies of good philosophy, intellectual sloth and religious dogma. In his hey-day in eighteenth-century Britain, Hume was regarded as the scourge of Christian bigots everywhere, a crusading atheist who could not rest until he had witnessed the demise of all religion. His contemporary critics fought back with accusations that he was an unnatural “monster”, a man who had robbed the unhappy masses of their chief consolation, and someone whose work represented “the vile effusion of a hard and stupid heart”. In the nineteenth century, scholars perpetuated such views by attributing to Hume an extravagant and universal scepticism, one that left his readers in a state of permanent mistrust and doubt about their own faculties. And so, well into the twentieth century, Hume suffered the fate of many a complex superhero: despite his best intentions, he came to be misrepresented and misunderstood.

James A. Harris's superb new intellectual biography aims to correct some of the misrepresentations and misunderstandings, and to shed a positive light on the real Hume and all his writings. The book admirably succeeds in deflating the heroic myth. Not only would the real Hume never have fitted into superhero tights anyway (he was rather "corpulent", as Harris politely puts it), he also suffered from a debilitating—and distinctly unheroic—lack of self-confidence. For the first part of his life, following a devastating nervous breakdown in his late teens, Hume lived with his mother and siblings on and off over the years, and avoided taking up any kind of paid employment well into his 30s. He never seemed inclined to follow the ordinary path of life, to become established in a profession, or to get married and start a family. He famously missed out on two distinguished academic appointments—the chairs of moral philosophy at Edinburgh and Glasgow—because he was regarded as too unpredictable and too unorthodox in his opinions. Nobody wanted to put him in a position of authority over impressionable young men. With an air of indifference (sounding suspiciously like sour grapes), he claimed that he never really wanted the jobs anyway. Then, at the age of 34, he finally landed a position as a private tutor, only to resign a few months later when his pupil went completely insane. Hume himself was prone to fits of melancholy and often complained that his works were poorly received or unjustly ignored. He was convinced that his first work, the classic *Treatise of Human Nature*, "fell dead-born from the press", despite evidence that it was a moderate success.

In sum, the young David Hume was overweight, he was depressive, he was a little bit paranoid, he lived with his mum, and he was unable to get either a job or a girl. He was hardly the stuff of superhero legends.

But it is difficult not to like—and to admire—the mature David Hume of Harris's biography. From early adulthood, we are told, Hume devoted himself to becoming a "man of letters": to shaping a career in polite literature rather than abstract

philosophical speculation. Through sheer strength of character, despite various setbacks and obstacles, he overcame the “distemper” of his youth and steadfastly pursued his life’s ruling passion. By 1776, Hume had fulfilled all his dreams. He could approach death cheerfully, he told Adam Smith, knowing that he had “done everything that he had ever intended to do”. He was living proof that if you wanted to pursue your ambitions, it was best not to have a back-up plan (lest the back-up became all that you ever did), and that if you wanted to say what you really thought, it was best to retain some independence from institutional ties. He enjoyed a literary fame that was unrivalled in his day and he also became extremely wealthy (“opulent” was his own adjective). At one point, he also found himself a job that perfectly complemented his aspirations as a genteel man of letters: the librarianship at Edinburgh’s Faculty of Advocates.

Far from being hard-hearted, this older, more self-assured David Hume was disposed to be warm, cheerful, and funny (or, at least, he tried to be—his jokes always fell a bit flat), and he was well liked by his small group of close and loyal friends. This was the Hume who could write that: “A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoyed a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable.” While in Paris in the 1760s, he also enjoyed the attentions of the salon women and of one woman in particular, the Comtesse de Boufflers, with whom he had an “intense friendship” until his death.

Hume’s sociable nature was aptly reflected in his approach to philosophical writing. “It mattered immensely to him,” Harris says, “that he find the best possible way of communicating his arguments to the reader.” By today’s standards, when philosophy is all-too-often a complex theoretical game, with precise rules and obscure jargon serving to keep out the non-elite, Hume’s approach seems refreshingly egalitarian. Whether his topic was politics, economics, metaphysics, or aesthetics, Hume wrote for the common

educated reader and not for the academic philosopher. He sought to unite accessibility of style with profundity of ideas—to be entertaining and enjoyable as well as edifying and illuminating.

Harris's own narrative admirably lives up to these Humean ideals. At more than 600 pages, the book is in the style of Hume the prolix historian rather than Hume the concise essayist, but it is nevertheless engaging. Readers will not find long disquisitions on competing interpretations of Hume's philosophical arguments, or on the finer conceptual points of Humean epistemology, but rather a lucid, well-organised, and readable narrative, carefully informed by nuanced historical-intellectual scholarship. Like Hume himself, Harris engages in a careful observation of his subject, and avoids making dogmatic pronouncements whenever he can.

Above all, the Hume of Harris's book is a champion of common sense. This Hume did not think that scepticism gave anyone a reason to abandon the ordinary business of practical life, and nor did it warrant the complete and final destruction of the Christian religion. His scepticism was, rather, a way of weaning his readers off their arrogant dogmatic beliefs and extreme prejudices. He was not deeply antagonistic toward theism as such, but rather vulgar superstition and enthusiasm. He aspired to draw a clear demarcation between what reasoned argument could and could not establish in religious matters. On the whole, his predominant attitude appears to have been one of goodwill and kindness toward his fellow human beings, not ridicule and mockery of their unfortunate predicament. He was not the monster who intended to leave us all mired in a hell of uncertainty and self-doubt. In reality, I think it's fair to say, he would have dismissed his enemies with a sympathetic smile and not a sneering retort.

Jacqueline Broad is senior research fellow in philosophy, Monash University, Australia, and author of *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (2015).