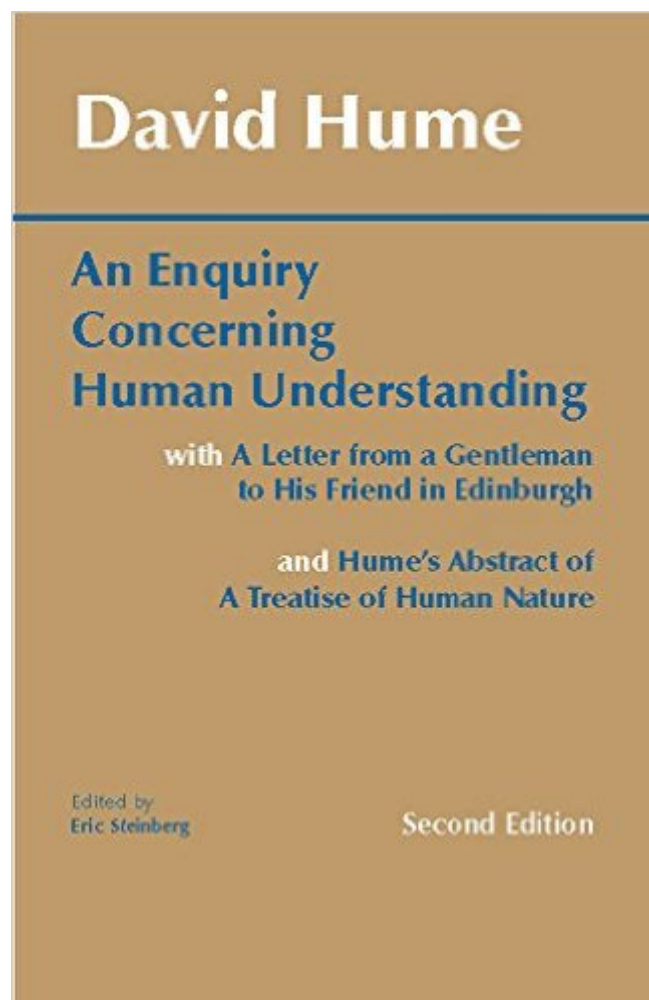


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An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: With Hume's Abstract Of A Treatise Of Human Nature And A Letter From A Gentleman To His Friend In Edinburgh (Hackett Classics)





Synopsis

A landmark of Enlightenment thought, Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is accompanied here by two shorter works that shed light on it: *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, Hume's response to those accusing him of atheism, of advocating extreme skepticism, and of undermining the foundations of morality; and his *Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature*, which anticipates discussions developed in the *Enquiry*. In his concise Introduction, Eric Steinberg explores the conditions that led Hume to write the *Enquiry* and the work's important relationship to Book I of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

Book Information

Series: Hackett Classics

Paperback: 151 pages

Publisher: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.; 2 edition (November 15, 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0872202291

ISBN-13: 978-0872202290

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.8 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (30 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #12,886 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Epistemology](#) #10 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Epistemology](#) #23 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Modern](#)

Customer Reviews

This review mostly concerns the *Enquiry*. The Letter is primarily a defense of Hume's earlier *Treatise of Human Nature*, while his *Abstract* is an anonymous review of the *Treatise*. It strikes me as very funny, though not surprising, that Hume would review his own work. Funny because any author would give his right arm to get at least one favorable review when all the other critics are completely missing its point. Unsurprising because Hume was probably one of the only people alive at that time who could truly grasp all the facets of his radical philosophical claims. The *Enquiry* was written after the *Treatise*. Hume, though he claimed the opposite, seems never to have really recovered from the blow he took from seeing his *Treatise* "fall dead born from the press." As a result, his *Enquiry* is far more cautious in the steps it takes. (For those of you who have read both, yes, I swear, Hume IS more cautious. Compare the claims.) A more robust philosophical stance is

taken in his Treatise, while a more focused stance is taken in his Enquiry. The Enquiry is mainly a work of epistemology and as such, scrutinizes our methods of acquiring knowledge. Making perhaps the most radical (and poignant) claim in all of modern philosophy, it posits, and supports, that there is NO causation, only conjunction. That, for example, when we see a glass drop and break, we cannot say we know gravity caused this (in the way we know two plus two equals four). All we see is constant conjunction. The connection is lacking, i.e., it is not inconceivable that the glass wouldn't bounce, turn to ash, or dissolve into sand (the way it is inconceivable that two plus two equals five). This, in effect, nullifies all the so called "laws" of nature that are formed by science.

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher, historian [History of England], economist, and essayist; the companion volume to this book is An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, and his other writings include A Treatise of Human Nature Volume 1, A Treatise of Human Nature Volume 2, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, The Natural History of Religion, etc. [NOTE: page numbers below refer to the 198-page Bobbs-Merrill paperback edition.] This collection begins with his autobiographical reflection, "My Own Life," in which he says, "Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my Treatise of Human Nature. It fell DEADBORN from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots."

Throughout most of his adult life, David Hume acquired a reputation for eminent reason and good cheer; reading his Enquiry, I find little reason to quarrel with that assessment. Hume's name is as resonant as those of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, and Nietzsche's, but in many ways Hume was quite an unorthodox philosopher. His approach to the problems of philosophy entailed the imprint of a mechanic; that is to say he took to the discipline with a very practical mindset. The popular image of a philosopher, of a man (or group of men) portentously reflecting on boundless abstractions, did nothing for Hume. The only way, Hume believed, one could comment on the displeasure of, say, thirst was to deprive yourself of liquid for extended periods of time. Sex? Don't have it at all? Poverty? Stop working. This basic principle encompassed the body of his philosophy. Hume rounded out the British school of empiricism, following the trail of John Locke and Bishop George Berkeley. Unlike Locke and Berkeley, Hume carried empiricism to its farthest point. Locke's popularity stems from the spirit of his liberalism vis-a-vis American constitutionalism, but his empiricism is little known, while Bishop Berkeley's empiricism smacks of a kind of idealism; reducing material phenomena to mental events. Hume's approach is not so novel, but nor is it plagued with the obvious errors of his historical counterparts. The resurgence of Hume's philosophy in the public

sphere of influence is owed, in my opinion, to the popular New Atheist culture. He is not alone here, as the likes of Bertrand Russell, Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire, Spinoza, and a smattering of other Enlightenment figures, have since come to occupy a significant portion of the public discourse in relation to theology and philosophy.

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