



Hume and Reid: A common legacy

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My favourite quotation from Hume is a warning: ‘the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.’¹ The warning, in other words, is this – that if we get religion wrong some terrible things can follow. Maybe for a century or so nobody quite believed that, but today, whether it’s in shape of some very right-wing forms of Christianity in America, or in the risks of extreme forms of Islam resurrecting themselves, mistakes in religion really are dangerous! All the more reason to turn to the likes of Hume and Reid because there are things they wrote that are still relevant in what they have to say to us. The word ‘relevant’ appears at some point in my briefing and I will try and provide an example of where I think Hume’s analysis of contemporary society is highly relevant. Indeed I even used it as a basis for asking a question in the House of Lords just before Christmas. They have this system of questions and one of the questions laid down was whether ethics had a part to play in business and finance in the City. People debated it and argued about the composition of remuneration committees, boards and non-executives and so on. I thought it was time to ask a very radical question and my mentor, David Hume pointed me in the right direction. The question was roughly this: ‘David Hume argued that greed, which he defined as the avidity to acquire property, money and wealth, is destructive of modern society. Does the Minister think that Hume could possibly be right and if so, what can be done about it?’ Hume’s question couldn’t be more pointed. I hope to come back to it. Hume, arguing from a secular position, laid down certain tests of what a healthy society might be like and how sustainable it might be. I hope to demonstrate how that came about.



A common legacy: John Knox and power and authority

To go back to the starting point, Hume and Reid, had a common legacy which originates as far back as the sixteenth century. There are two elements to that legacy that I wish to draw your attention to. One is the Reformation and the other is the legacy of Isaac Newton through his redefinition of our understanding of the physical world.

Both of these factors were fundamental to the legacy that helped build, amongst other things, the Scottish Enlightenment in the way it developed, factors influential for both Hume and Reid. The Reformation legacy lay in the problem that John Knox had of establishing the *politically legitimate* – the problem, that is, of establishing where authority lies and how to distinguish it from mere exercise of power. This was an issue of profound complexity because the difference between authority and power was not something that was apparent in Scotland in the sixteenth century. Authority belonged to the noble who had the biggest gang of thugs standing behind him. That's how you exercised power and that's how authority was derived and exercised in sixteenth-century Scotland.

Knox was aware of this and was trying to establish a form of society from new, *ab initio*. Now, does the solution lie in working out who is the most powerful of the nobles and then inviting them to back the social system – if not then what? For Knox this was a major intellectual task. We rarely hear much of this side of him – what we mostly hear about him is his lecturing of Mary, Queen of Scots. The Knox we are accustomed to hear about argues about religion and church government – but a fundamental issue for Knox was how to establish where authority lies and what the shape of Scotland's constitution would be.

We are still arguing about that. This was the problem that lay before him and to resolve it he could not adopt the English solution. The English solution had been built up over hundreds of years and it was an appeal to tradition, to continuity, to 300 years since the Magna Carta of finding ways to exercise authority. Kings and Queens *were* powerful, but nonetheless there was a continuing strand that eventually developed into English Case Law. English law is very different to Scottish law. In English law you refer to the case that set the precedent

that now establishes what you do in the case in front of you. This is a very different way of setting *a priori* principles, principles which drive the law of the land. Now that's how it worked in England and worked in a way that was very congenial. It was, in its way, colloquial, but behind it lay a huge legacy of written archives, written records, and records of legal cases. It was all there and you could argue out your position by referring to these written records that existed then as they still exist now. This is what was missing in Scotland.

Knox wanted to settle an argument about where authority lay, about the division between State and Church, between the King and any parliament that arose – and he didn't have the resources that were there in England. Here, there are major intellectual differences in the view taken of society, huge differences. In terms of the Case Law in English law, the records of written individual court cases, the records of laws that had been agreed and established, are all there. Not, however, in Scotland. So what could Knox do about it? When the issue of bishops arose in the church, there were these huge arguments which ran well beyond Knox's time as to whether the church required them or not. If you read some of the records of the General Assembly from the early seventeenth century they were even livelier than today! These records establish how the arguments were developed – and this was not as in England where they would refer back to some precedent. In England, furthermore, those who were trying to impose bishops on the church, used analogies such as, 'The church needs a bishop in charge just as a hive of bees needs a queen bee who will rule the roost and set the pattern'. These analogies and patterns from nature were a straightforward way of arguing in England and it shows up in their philosophy. There are philosophers like Bishop Butler who lived by this analogical argument. All running back to the fact that there was an established tradition and everybody could refer back to that tradition.

There was no such established tradition in Scotland – which is a major problem for any new state. Look round today at what's happening in Libya, in Egypt, or Tunisia. How do you begin to establish what the ground rules are in a way that they will be respected? That was the political problem that confronted John Knox. That's the story in summary form, but it's a very fundamental one.



A common legacy – Isaac Newton and empiricism

The second part of the legacy was that of Newton and all that surrounded him. Ranging from the foundation of the Royal Society to the many individual experimental and observational scientists who established what Hume and others came to see as the science of the natural world. Newton said ‘Let it be and there it was’, and that was how things were. His was a huge intellectual weight which had its impact in Scotland and on all those who came after Newton, both in England and in Scotland, and of course elsewhere. The dual legacy remained, however, of the need to establish and sort out who makes the laws, of how you can bring a case and be fairly and justly heard on the one hand, in keeping with an understanding of the world in which we live on the other, which Newton had revolutionised. Of course there were others – Kepler, Galileo, and so on – who had played a major part in that, but Newton, it seemed, had sorted it out.

It was this dual legacy which forced the philosophers of the Enlightenment, principally Hume and Reid, to ask themselves fundamental questions from first principles. We’ve got to start from somewhere. In deciding what kind of society we want, where do we start from? What will maintain society? What kind of moral rules will operate? What kind of moral judgments will obtain? (I use that word deliberately.) What kind of moral understanding do we have? Where do these issues originate? And this ties up with the political question about where authority lies and the difference between authority – which has intellectual content to it and has its own way of resolving arguments – and power which pays no attention to argument: you just send the troops in! Was it Hitler who said of the Pope ‘We’re his battalions!’? Get the troops behind you and that’s the way you sort things out!

That’s not Knox’s concept of society. The questions that preoccupied him formed the legacy passed on to Hume and Reid. I’m encouraged by the fact that Norman Kemp-Smith, the greatest interpreter of Hume in the twentieth century, in his introduction to Hume’s *Dialogues* (Hume’s major work on religion) refers to Hume’s Calvinistic legacy. What he was referring to was the awareness that Knox had that there is an eternal world that transcends this world.

Hume was well aware of that – the pokiness of the world in which we live now, its frailties and its failures. He was also well aware that if there is a God He has to be a transcendent God, a God who is not simply an extension of the natural world. This problem runs right through his understanding of the relationship between God and the world.

This led, in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, to a realisation that arguments, reasons, deductions, inductions, drawing conclusions from premises are important, indeed play a critical part. Unless you could argue your corner you would be nowhere in the major political and moral issues of the day. You couldn't, after all, simply look up Wikipedia! You couldn't look up a law book that would tell you what should happen. Such matters had to be established from first principles and so Hume set out very much in a Cartesian way to doubt everything that he could doubt. Thomas Reid did so too. Reid had significant elements of scepticism that were specific to him. He doubted what could be doubted because it could not simply be handed on by tradition, or because parents had said it, or the minister, or the General Assembly. There had to be reasons, there had to be an argument, a way of establishing points and, in my view, this led to a typically Scottish characteristic – argumentativeness. This certainly goes back to that period. Unless you could argue you were not able to take part in the discussion. No use referring to tradition, no use referring to ancient continuities, because that particular background was insufficient. Tradition alone was not going to solve the problem of shaping the sort of society human beings might want to live in.

On the scientific side, Newton had established the workings of the universe, and in so doing he had laid out a pattern that just dazzled everyone. He started by saying that the earth is not the centre of the universe. As a result, ideas about human beings and about the natural world were turned on their head. This led to the establishment of science and the scientific method as the critical way of solving all sorts of problems. Hume's response could be summed up like this, 'Newton has given us the science of nature, what I need is the science of man'. These days, I dare say, it would probably be 'a science of persons' rather than 'a science of man', but in other words, Hume seeks to understand what human beings are like in a way that is comparable

to Newton's establishment of what the natural world is like. If we can only understand what human beings are like we will begin to understand the origins of moral inclinations, moral perceptions, moral insights and moral sensitivities. Hume thought the route to doing this, in the end, was to understand what human beings are like. He took this very seriously and indeed, in later life, wrote a series of magnificent histories. His great *History of England* made him a very famous and very wealthy man. Here, Hume was studying human beings and society by observation and seeing how things worked. This wasn't based on a theory or a revelation and it wasn't an *a priori* set of principles like Marxist theory. Hume observed human beings and how they operated in societies and on the basis of that hoped to understand where moral convictions and notions of civil society come from. Out of this study he hoped to understand further how human beings could live together in a way that didn't depend on who had the most troops at their back.

This parallel with science was very congenial to many intellectual Scots at the time. The social underpinning of the great names of the Enlightenment were the various intellectual clubs and philosophical societies. These clubs and societies published journals and papers, some of which were about philosophy, but they could be about all sorts of subjects – the natural world or the agrarian world, for example. Benjamin Franklin published one of his papers on electricity in one of the collections of papers published by what was to become the Royal Society of Edinburgh. This was part of the way in which intellectuals lived, they had all understood that the idea of observing nature and seeing what was going on could be a way of better understanding ourselves and the way in which we live.



An example: the Great Lisbon Earthquake

Voltaire's *Candide*, was written after the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. The majority who died in the disaster were those Christians who had attended church in the city because it was All Saints Day. The pagans had all gone into the countryside to have picnics, wassailing and wine and rounds of cheese. An intellectual problem arose here because of the scale of the suffering. That single event transformed a lot of thinking in Europe – in fact, it turned Europe upside down

in terms of its beliefs – and in *Candide* Voltaire gave it international status.

In Scotland, as elsewhere, there were groups of people around the country observing nature. One of the consequences of the earthquake was a tsunami which crossed the Atlantic and, as recorded in diaries and journals, ended up in the West Indies. Tremors were recorded in Loch Lomond in Scotland by local, mostly amateur scientific observers. In the ten days following the earthquake and accompanying tsunami the resulting changes were being recorded on the surface of the lochs of Scotland and collated centrally. Some of the lochs rose three feet on the day and the day following. One of the lochs had a brewery some eight feet above the level of the loch and they were a bit worried that the waves would rise high enough to sweep through the brewery! All of this was recorded meticulously by ordinary folk in Scotland, many of whom at this time engaged in this minute observation of nature. By 1755, the year of the earthquake, there was a well-established observational network, evidence that the scientific way of looking at things was established in the community. This wasn't two or three great intellectuals or scientists working together – the network was established right in the community.



A methodology established

So there you have a dual legacy – the legacy of the importance and power of science through observation and, in turn, calculations based on those observations which were followed by experiments. Apart from observation of earthquakes there were lots of experiments, and this approach developed in Scotland through various societies and groups. The Royal Society of Edinburgh was formed in 1783 and was one of the ways in which this was further institutionalised.

Hume wanted to understand human beings using the same method. You couldn't simply study humans by referring to the texts of the ancients. The older philosophers or theologians had drawn on Plato or Aquinas. Now, it was rather a case of 'we have seen in human beings and in human society the following ... and the tentative conclusions that we draw are ...'. One of the results of the scientific method and the scepticism practiced by Hume and Reid was that there were no final

hard and fast conclusions. This way of understanding was the legacy shared by Hume and Reid but there was one difference between them. Hume was well aware of the legacy of the Reformation which is that there is a transcendent God and a creation which is not transcendent, is not infinite and is not eternal. Hume was aware of the gap between Creator and creation and he was not prepared to accept (and he and Reid differed here) that just by looking at the world one could infer what God was like by analogy. Of course, many in the Roman Catholic tradition, Aquinas and many others, accepted the theory of what we call analogy. Indeed Bishop Butler, in Hume's own time, argued by analogy. His main argument was that if the world is the way it is, God must be somehow like it. The comparison he used was that of a watchmaker who designed creation, set it running and then stood back. That has its attractions. Or, on the other hand, by way of a different analogy, was God completely and continually involved in creation like a parent bringing up children, who can't stop meddling?

Hume did not accept these analogies because he wanted to lay stress on the gap, the huge gap, between the infinite and the finite, between the eternal and what we call the contingent. In his rejection of these analogies he was, in fact, putting a question mark against one of the main patterns of argument used in English thinking. There was a whole historical tradition behind that to which one could appeal. Just like the bees having a queen bee who rules in the hive, the church required an equivalent. At least, this was what was argued by James Law, Bishop of Orkney. He maintained that you need the rule of a bishop – without such a central figure the church cannot function. Hume rejected this form of argument by analogy.

Reid, on the other hand, didn't. In his discussion concerning the legitimising of moral convictions, beliefs and the nature of the structure of society, Reid's method was to examine the human mind and see *how it worked*. In doing so, he developed the notion of 'common sense'. We naturally associate this with 'the Scottish philosophy', not always quite realising that it means, basically, the analysis and examination of the human mind. That was Reid's method, though he refused to accept that there were analogies to be drawn between how the mind works and the way the physical world works. If you read his great works of philosophy, however, he is actually examining *the way the*

mind works and by natural extension how language works. That was where he thought the clues to the basic questions and the answers to them were to be found.

So, there was Reid rejecting one kind of analogy between the mind and the physical world and Hume rejecting other kinds of analogies between the physical world and the way in which God had brought about creation. Hume's key argument there, is so fundamental, I'll try to summarise it very quickly. In the *Dialogues* he has one of the characters use the following argument: 'Of course we know what God is like. We see the clues. There seems to me to be a mind operating behind nature. Otherwise, how would all this work in the simple and clever ways it does?' In the *Dialogues*, Philo the sceptic says, 'Ah yes, you believe this reveals something about God'. Then he goes on to say that the more the mind that planned nature is like a human mind that made a watch or clock, the stronger the argument. If that is the case, continues Philo, 'you have denied the transcendency of God. The stronger the argument that the mind of God is like the mind of man, the more His transcendency is reduced.' Here we touch on the essence of Hume's rejection of analogies drawn from the world. To say God is like the Great Watchmaker in the sky is ultimately demeaning because it affects the transcendency of God. Hume's rejection of analogy, then, also has its origins in the joint, common legacy.



Hume and Reid's thinking

Hume rejected the traditional ways of establishing where truth lies in relation to society and to moral conviction. This rejection included relying on revealed religion as a source. In this way he made many enemies. The Establishment of the day refused to let the greatest philosopher that ever lived in Britain, become a professor in Edinburgh or Glasgow. The town council wouldn't accept his appointment. There is something ironic in that! Sometimes he rejected religion, but this was not necessarily a rejection of God. He rejected religion as a source for moral values or the shape of the good society. He rejected, as Newton had done, *purely* rational argument, declaring that 'the distinction between moral evil and moral good is not founded on logic'. We all like to think moral people are reasonable people but Hume warned us

not to take that too far. He rejected religion, rationalism and the pure appeal to reason. There he was, then, pulling out all the plugs on which people had founded their understanding of the world and on how you draw distinctions between good and evil. Reid pulled out many of the same plugs. Reid's answer, however, was a version of what we have come to call 'common sense'. Reid didn't understand 'common sense' as straight intuition, pure and un-maligned. He thought this sense should be subject to further education. However, he too rejected the traditional approaches to how to draw moral distinctions and replaced it with the creation of 'a sensitivity of the mind' that, in turn, could draw the required distinctions.

In similar ways Hume developed the concept which Adam Smith made much of – '*sympathy*'. Hume's view of human beings (and there is something of Calvin here I think) was that on the whole we are a bit of a bad lot. While he never used the language of original sin he did think we were capable of pretty bad things as his reading of history shows. In the same way he thought that since we are capable of bad things so what we have to learn to do is amend or redirect our view or sense of the world by trying to understand the other through sympathy. Hume argues that we all have that capacity and that we have to learn by the extension of this *capacity of sympathy* to take ourselves out of the middle of the picture in realising that these distinctions apply to human beings wherever and whoever they are, wherever and whenever they lived, even if they seem unlike us. This 'moving of us out of the centre' became the key for Hume of how to develop moral sensitivities further.



Four basics for civil society to work

Let me conclude. One can detect here, perhaps, a Calvinistic influence regarding the self. It is thought, reasonably correctly I think, that Hume had read the whole of *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* by Thomas Boston. This was the one of the great tracts of the time and Hume judged, as a youth, his whole moral development against this very Calvinistic picture. That is, the capacity to remove oneself from the centre of the scene and have the appropriate *sympathy* when it's another parent's child who is suffering, or the neighbour who is in

difficulty or needs your help. Hume asked himself the question, and here I'm speculating a bit because he didn't write it down in this way, 'What are the conditions required for (what we call) civil society to be built, maintained and sustained over the generations?' He isn't asking how we have arrived at this point, but how to get there. He came to some amazing conclusions, in a way.

First – we learn that in a **family**, the 'self' isn't in the middle of the picture all the time. In a family you begin to realise that you cannot be a two-year-old all your life – where there's only one person and that's *me*! He more or less argues that it's in the family that we begin to realise the nuances and distinctions of social life. (How traditional!)

Second – through **education**. Hume didn't think education was perfect by any means and he thought there was such a thing as bad education and good education. Through education, however, we extend our mind and we begin to see how others live. We begin to see how relationships might be different in the process of interacting with others, first in the family, then within a system of education. Language is also included in this process because unless, in a system of education, we develop a means of articulating to others and learning from others how decisions are made and views formed, we will have lost a sense that is fundamental to society. Hume paid a lot of attention to language and the subtleties of language and wrote beautifully – there are always profound nuances in the points that he makes.

Third – Hume pointed out that if you are going to have a civil society that works there are two or three things that you have got to have. One is a **concept of justice**. What is appropriate in the relationships between human beings? The modern word, I suppose, is 'fairness', though Hume had serious doubts about notions of absolute equality. Justice – how do I know that the demands I make on others and the demands that they make on me are legitimate and can be sustained in the society in which we live? The answer to that involves a concept of justice. In English law, as you will recall, this is established by referring to traditions and precedents. This is also true of Scottish law, but in addition to this were included the first principles from which

law is derived. A reasonable notion of justice is fundamental to any society.

Fourth – you have to have common a understanding concerning **property**. Who owns what? Who has a legitimate claim to what? In what proportions? Here, Hume placed property in relation to definitions of appropriateness, legality, fairness and the justice of who can have what, and this is fundamental to any civil society. It is at this point that Hume identified greed as the most dangerous of the vices because of its potential to destroy society.

We'll return to greed later, for the moment, however, the other significant point Hume made concerns what it is to be an empiricist. Hume turned this into a form of pragmatism, particularly in his views of monarchy. He was a close friend of many French intellectuals and he was also a great supporter of the American Revolution, though he died before the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. A question that was sometimes put to him, given his support of the American Revolution and developments in France, was why he was not a Republican here in Britain. Hume's response was that the powers of the monarchy in this country had been progressively limited through the course of history, such that they were no longer the absolute powers that afflicted the French. So, Hume is a pragmatist! That was Hume's pragmatic reading of history. We live in a society, in a world where we try to be pragmatic – so 'If it ain't broke don't fix it'. That was Hume's view on the monarchy.



Conclusion

To conclude – consider Hume's basic requirements for the survival of civil society and think of the riots last summer in London and elsewhere. Hume has certain points which I think are relevant. One of them is: If society is being driven by greed, whether the greed of the looters or of those who insist on exorbitant levels of pay, then you will begin to destroy society. Could that be what is happening now? What the bankers are getting up to could be very destructive of society. Without an understanding of what level of ownership of

property is appropriate across society, social coherence may begin to be weakened. If you don't have a sense of justice that can be applied in society then similar problems arise. If you do not have the family as one of the basic training grounds of moral sensitivity then you will need something to replace that urgently. If you look at the accounts of those who were arrested many of them come from backgrounds where the family no longer functioned. If you look at the educational background a huge proportion of those arrested had been regularly excluded from school. Now, I'm not getting into the argument as to whose fault this is. What I am saying is that Hume points us to certain basic conditions for civil society. If the education system leaves up to half the population without an adequate basis for finding employment, then there is something wrong with it. If you do not have the structures that were traditionally provided by families then there's something wrong.

Hume's argument is that these four elements – family, education, a system of justice, and an ordered relation to property – can work very positively in society. If we let these go, then we will need to provide an alternative. I don't think there *are* alternatives to a sense of justice, a decent definition of property and so on, but these alternatives may, of course, form the proper subject of reasoned discussion. In terms of relevance, however, David Hume still has much to contribute to that ongoing debate.

Note

- ¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge; 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch; Oxford: Clarendon, 1978 [1739–40]), 272.