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To cite this article: James A. Harris (2022): How to write a history of philosophy? The case of eighteenth-century Britain, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2022.2116695](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2116695)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2116695>



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Published online: 20 Sep 2022.



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How to write a history of philosophy? The case of eighteenth-century Britain

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ABSTRACT

This paper raises the question of how a history of the philosophy of eighteenth-century Britain should be written. First, it describes the usual answer to this question, which divides the period into what happened before Hume, then Hume, then responses to Hume. It notes that this answer does not correspond well with how the period saw itself. It then considers how 'philosophy' is defined in Britain in the eighteenth century, taking into account dictionary definitions, book titles, and university syllabi. Obvious differences between eighteenth-century and twenty-first-century philosophy are explored, including the idea that 'natural philosophy' is as much part of philosophy as moral philosophy, metaphysics, and logic, and the difficulty of making a distinction between philosophy and what we now call psychology. In the final section of the paper some difficulties are raised regarding the hypothesis that 'enlightenment' might provide an organizing concept for a more historically sensitive account of eighteenth-century British philosophy.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 13 May 2022; Revised 16 August 2022; Accepted 21 August 2022

KEYWORDS History of philosophy; natural philosophy; enlightenment; Leslie Stephen; David Hume

1. Hume, the great caesura

Anyone writing a history of British philosophy in the eighteenth century does so in the shadow of Sir Leslie Stephen.¹ Stephen's two-volume *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, first published in 1876, remains the most comprehensive account of philosophizing in Britain in the period from Locke to Paine. Stephen at one point thought of calling his book, simply, *English Deism in the Eighteenth Century* (see Maitland, *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 252). Three quarters of the first volume is taken up

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¹Of course, many other historians of eighteenth-century British philosophy have shaped my understanding of the subject, but in presenting here the text of an occasional lecture I do not think it appropriate to detail in a formal fashion all my intellectual debts. The bibliography lists only texts that I either quote from or directly refer to.

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by an account of religious thought from around 1688 to around 1750. What happened then, on Stephen's account, was that the seventeenth century's engagement with religious pluralism developed into, first, a search for the essence of Christianity, then, among the deists, a search for the essence of religion as such. The great question became the relationship between the revealed doctrines of Christianity and the religion of reason espoused by deists from Toland to Middleton. Having identified the "speculative" source of deism in the scepticism inadvertently let loose by Descartes and Locke, Stephen described the controversy in detail, even while he was careful to treat it *philosophically*, as a "historian of thought" and not as an "annalist" (Stephen, *History of English Thought*, i, x). His concern was with deism considered as the chief symptom of the doubt that was, as he saw it, the spirit of the Georgian age. That doubt had been given full expression by the mid-point of the century, and after that Stephen detected a general exhaustion in British thought. Neither side of the controversy had anything more to say, and Stephen himself finds little to say about the century's second half. However, vigorously critical treatment of religious dogma was bound to have consequences for the understanding of morality and politics, and Stephen explored these in his second volume. The book finished with a hundred pages on the mark made by theological controversy on literature and taste.

Hume, Stephen recognized, was no deist, but in Hume the spirit of the age found its most complete expression. Hume's scepticism was, as Stephen put it, "the last word of the English criticism" (i, 47). The eighteenth century divided into what happened before Hume, and what happened afterwards. What happened afterwards was, according to Stephen, that everyone pretended that the deist controversy's dramatic confrontation between Christianity and philosophy had not taken place. Nothing, after all, had actually been achieved. Neither side had won. A stalemate had been reached, and after that, everyone just decided to talk about something else. "In England", Stephen wrote – and as usual by 'England' he meant 'Great Britain' – "In England, the national intellect seemed for the time to have abandoned all serious philosophical enquiry, and occupied itself exclusively with party politics, with superficial history, and with popular science" (i, 323). Hume's own turn from philosophy to history was, as Stephen saw it, an emblematic case in point. It was a rejection of 'speculation' in favour of the mere amassing and ordering of empirical data. For Hume, like Robertson and like Gibbon, wrote "superficial" history which manifested "a complete acquiescence in the external aspects of events, and the accidental links of connection, without any attempt to penetrate to the underlying and ultimate determining conditions" (i, 48). The only great philosophical achievements of later eighteenth-century British thought were Smith's political economy and Burke's "conception of a nation as a living organism of complex structure and historical continuity" (ii, 195). What distinguished Smith and Burke was,

precisely, their search for a proper historical method. Their contemporaries contented themselves either with common sense philosophy's attempt to convert *vox populi* into *vox dei*, or with Hartley's and Priestley's attempt to convert the philosophy of mind into physical science. Generally, there was intellectual torpor until the great wake up call that was the publication of Paine's *The Age of Reason* in 1794.

It is not impossible that Stephen's detailed exploration of the eighteenth-century's application of the free exercise of reason to the mysteries of Christianity had its initial impetus in his own loss of faith ten years earlier. As George Croome Robertson put it in his review in *Mind*, Stephen was "somewhat over-ready to see the present in the past, and to reckon with the long-departed as if they were adversaries or allies" ("English Thought", 366). Stephen had been a fellow of Trinity Hall since 1854, tutor since 1856, and had been ordained priest in 1859. But he then resigned his tutorship in 1862, and his fellowship in 1867. In 1865 he wrote in a notebook that, "to put it shortly", he believed in nothing (Maitland, *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 144). It was not that Stephen himself had any sympathy with the deists. He regarded them as shallow and overly optimistic. Stephen believed that Hume – his "dear David Hume", as he put it in a letter (Maitland, *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 252) – was unassailable in the conviction that reason, having left revealed religion behind, could not then satisfy itself in natural religion. Scepticism, or as Stephen preferred to call it, agnosticism, was the only possible endpoint of honest inquiry. The fact that the eighteenth century did not see this, and tried to carry on regardless, was why, taken as a whole, it did not deserve to be called the age of reason.

Stephen was not the first historian of eighteenth-century British philosophy to have had a problem with the second half of the century. In lectures on the history of philosophy given in Berlin sixty years earlier, Hegel had taught that all the genuinely philosophical action was in the movement of thought from Locke through Berkeley to Hume. Locke, according to Hegel, was an instantiation of a pure empiricism, according to which the only question was how to derive from experience the general conceptions that are the constituents of human knowledge. What was unavoidably the case, and what did not bother Locke, was that this was in fact a merely psychological project. The essentially philosophical question of *truth* is not Locke's concern, "inasmuch as the only object aimed at is to describe the manner in which thought accepts what is given to it" (*Lectures*, iii, 310). Berkeley, working from Lockean premisses, then showed that a metaphysic of pure experience had no means of making sense of the idea of substances that were not themselves subjects of experience. In fact, experience as such depended for its possibility on the actions of the divine mind. But, again, Berkeley did not concern himself with knowledge as distinct from experience. When it

comes to our understanding of ourselves and our world, Berkeley's kind of investigation "keeps entirely to the phenomenal" (iii, 368). It remained for Hume to draw the sceptical moral, and to make explicit that, on the assumptions of Lockean empiricism, no sense can be made of the concepts of necessity and universality that are essential components of any attempt to distinguish appearance from reality. As Hegel put it, Hume "destroyed the objectivity or absolute nature of thought-determinations" (iii, 371). In the process, he made clear the need for an entirely new start in philosophy, which for Hegel meant Kant. No British philosopher after Hume even tried to solve the problem which Hume exposed. Hegel acknowledged the existence of the common sense philosophy of Reid, Beattie, Oswald, and Stewart, but only in order to deny that it was, properly speaking, philosophy at all. It was in fact merely a description of what was felt and believed by "the healthy human understanding", in which "speculative philosophy quite disappears" (iii, 376).

In Hegel, a familiar picture of eighteenth-century British philosophy comes into view. The only texts that matter are those by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Locke's empiricism set the agenda, Berkeley pushed it in a surprising direction, and Hume took it as far as it could be taken. After Hume, something entirely different was needed. This picture is so familiar, in fact, that it requires an effort of mind to see it as just one possible story of what happened in the eighteenth century in Britain, and as a story that someone had to tell for the first time. Ironically, given that this story has so often been told as a prologue to accounts of the passing of the world historical philosophical baton from Britain to Germany, the person who told it for the first time was probably Thomas Reid, in the first chapter of his *Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, published in 1764. For Reid, as not for Hegel, Locke was as much concerned with answering scepticism as Descartes had been. He wanted to prove the existence of an external world, and of a persisting self, but he tried to do so on the basis of a theory, the theory of ideas, which made that impossible. Berkeley, despite his "warm concern for religious and moral principles", ended up proving from Lockean premises that there was no such thing as an external world of material objects (19–20). Hume then showed from the same premises that there was no such thing as a self. Moreover, Hume, despite his claim to be establishing a science of human nature, really intended "to show that there is neither human nature nor science in the world" (20). In other words, he embodied a revival of Pyrrhonist scepticism, according to which credit was to be given neither to the senses, nor to memory, nor to reason. This set philosophy so completely at odds with common sense and natural belief that it was obvious that Lockeanism needed to be dispensed with.

At the same time that Hegel was adapting an essentially Reidian story to his own post-Kantian ends in his lectures in Berlin, Dugald Stewart was

filling out the details of the same story in the first extended history of modern philosophy written in English. This was a “dissertation” written for the fourth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, exhibiting, according to its subtitle, “the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy, since the Revival of Letters in Europe”. Stewart only completed the part on metaphysics, where ‘metaphysics’ meant “not the Ontology and Pneumatology of the schools, but the inductive Philosophy of the Human Mind” (22). What is especially striking about Stewart’s narrative is the central place it allocates to Hume. The *Treatise of Human Nature*, he remarks, “has contributed, either directly or indirectly, more than any other single work to the subsequent progress of the Philosophy of the Human Mind” (431). Stewart was one of the earliest British readers of Kant, and he was aware of the role that Hume’s scepticism had played in the genesis of the critical philosophy. But he was rather more interested in “the far more luminous refutations of scepticism by Mr. Hume’s own countrymen” (445). The idea that the principal concern of eighteenth-century philosophy was the refutation of scepticism, and of Hume’s scepticism in particular, was prominent also in the lectures on the history of modern philosophy given in Paris by Victor Cousin in the 1810s. Following Reid closely, Cousin described Locke inadvertently letting scepticism loose, Berkeley applying that scepticism to “la substance extérieure”, and Hume applying it to “la substance spirituelle” (Cousin, *Cours d’Histoire de la Philosophie Moderne*, 37–90).

Together, Hegel, Stewart, and Cousin, though different in their agendas, succeeded in creating a single narrative which has been strikingly influential. According to this narrative, eighteenth-century British philosophy has a definite shape. There is what happened before Hume; then there is Hume’s scepticism; and then there are more or less adequate responses to Hume’s scepticism. As we have seen, Leslie Stephen’s account has just this shape. So also, for example, does the relevant part of Bertrand Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*. One could read Russell and be left believing that there were no philosophers in eighteenth-century Britain other than Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Hume, we are told, is “one of the most important among philosophers, because he developed to its logical conclusion the empirical philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, and by making it self-consistent made it incredible” (634). “He represents, in a certain sense, a dead end”, Russell says: “in his direction, it is impossible to go further” (634). Frederick Copleston ranges more widely in the “Hobbes to Hume” volume of his *History of Philosophy*, but gives very much more space to Berkeley and to Hume than to anyone else. After Hume in Copleston’s narrative comes a chapter entitled “For and against Hume”, in which the entire second half of the eighteenth century is covered in forty pages. In the “History of Western Philosophy” published by Oxford University Press in the 1980s and 1990s there is a volume on

"The Empiricists", and another on "English Language Philosophy 1750-1945".² Hume is, again, the great caesura.

The difficulty this narrative raises for the historian even minimally concerned with *wie es eigentlich gewesen* is that it does not appear to correspond at all with how, philosophically speaking, the eighteenth century understood itself. At least, outside of the Aberdeen of Thomas Reid – which was, importantly, also the Aberdeen of James Beattie – there is little sign that the publication of Hume's *Treatise* constituted an epochal moment of crisis after which things were never the same again. While Hume himself exaggerated the extent to which his first book was ignored, Stewart, equally, exaggerated its contribution to the subsequent progress of the philosophy of the human mind. The work of Hume's which had the biggest impact on his contemporaries was, undoubtedly, "Of Miracles", and the general view was – not unreasonably – that its main argument could be answered without need of a fundamental reorientation of philosophy. There were some who believed, or pretended to believe, that Hume posed an existential threat to morality and religion, but there were also those, including Bentham and the Paley of *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, and Adam Smith and John Millar, who believed that Hume made a contribution to philosophy that could be built upon and developed further. In addition, there were those who, like David Hartley or Abraham Tucker, were either ignorant of Hume or continued with their philosophical projects regardless. And for the most part, philosophical debate, whether about sense perception, the freedom of the will, taste, or the origin of government, carried on either as if Hume had never written philosophy, or as if his was just one interesting contribution, with a place no more important than others in the century's ongoing philosophical conversation. It is worth adding that, outside Aberdeen, it does not seem to have been the case that answering scepticism, whether about the external world or about an enduring self, was regarded as being the quintessential task of the philosopher. If anything was first philosophy in Britain in the eighteenth century, it was probably practical ethics, understood as needing support first and foremost from religious belief.

We might say, with Leslie Stephen, that this is no more than proof of the period's essential philosophical shallowness. That things continued as before after Hume was, as Stephen saw it, precisely what was wrong with the second half of the eighteenth century. 'Philosophical speculation' simply ground to a halt. The situation, Stephen thought, had not changed even with the arrival on British shores of Kant and his German successors. "Our English sobriety and unwillingness ... to make fools of ourselves", Stephen supposed, "has checked our philosophical ambition" (Stephen, *History of English Thought*, i, 51). Equally, though, we might say that the way philosophy actually

²Woolhouse, *The Empiricists*; Skorupski, *English-Language Philosophy 1750-1945*.

proceeded after Hume is proof that Hume's importance in eighteenth-century British thought has been drastically exaggerated by historians of philosophy. First it was exaggerated in the partisan histories written by men like Hegel, Stewart and Cousin in the first decades of the century that followed. Then it was exaggerated by men like Stephen, who were obsessed with the receding of the sea of faith in the age of Lyell and Darwin, and who saw Hume as the fountainhead of modern unbelief. And then it was exaggerated in twentieth-century histories of philosophy which took it as just obvious that the history of philosophy pays its way by finding the present in the past and reckoning with the long-departed as if they were adversaries or allies. After a long period in which he was seen to have shown the necessity of the Kantian or Hegelian revolutions, Hume was made philosophically credible again by the logical positivists, and, especially, by their great publicist A. J. Ayer. No one now believes that that provided the right way of understanding what Hume was really about. Hume studies has made enormous progress over the past one hundred years. But this, I believe, has been to the detriment of progress in the understanding of the eighteenth century taken as a whole. Hume still gets in the way.

2. Knowledge of things natural and moral

We would do better, I want now to suggest, if we kept an open mind about what philosophy actually was in Britain in the eighteenth century. Leslie Stephen was perfectly sure that he knew what philosophy was, and the fact that he could not find that kind of thing in the second half of the century told him that something must have gone wrong. Bertrand Russell was sure that distinctively philosophical questions were ones that neither science nor religion could answer, and that, again, the eighteenth century's capacity to engage with such questions had ended with Hume. But what did eighteenth-century Britain think that philosophy was? Here we need, in the manner of Pierre Hadot, to make philosophy itself the object of historical enquiry.³ We need, in other words, to understand this particular period in the history of philosophy by way of its own ambitions, methods, and criteria for distinguishing failure from success. We might ask about the persona of the philosopher in this place and time, and ask also who succeeded in making that persona their own, and how. One question that would arise in that connection would be whether it was possible for women in eighteenth-century Britain to adopt a philosophical persona. We might ask *where* philosophy was done, and what its audience was. We might also ask how the philosopher was understood by non-philosophers, what the public image of a philosopher was, how philosophy was represented in the culture at large. We might ask

³See especially Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie Antique?*

what kind of social role, if any, a philosopher had, what was expected of him, or her, and what the general attitude was to someone who professed philosophy as their vocation.

These are large questions, none of which I will try to answer properly here. It is not obvious in which order they should be addressed. But one has to start somewhere, and I shall start with dictionaries. How is 'philosophy' defined in the many 'new' and 'complete' and 'universal' dictionaries of the English language published in eighteenth-century Britain? In John Kersey's *New English Dictionary*, published in 1702, it is said to be "the knowledge of divine and humane things; being chiefly of two sorts, viz. Moral and Natural" ("Philosophy"). In Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, published in 1721, it is said to be "the Knowledge of Things natural and moral, grounded upon Reason and Experience" ("Philosophy"). Moral matters, according to Bailey, are those "belonging to Manners or Civility, or the Conduct of human Life" ("Moral"). Thus moral philosophy "is an Art of giving Rules, and which lays down Methods concerning Manners, Behaviour, and the Regulation of the Actions of Man, only as he is Man" ("Morality"). Natural philosophy, on the other hand, "is that Science which contemplates the Powers of Nature, the properties of natural Bodies, and their mutual Action, one upon another" ("Natural Philosophy"). These definitions stay pretty constant throughout the century. They are filled out and expanded upon, sometimes at considerable length, in encyclopaedias like those compiled by Ephraim Chambers in 1728 (*Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*) and by William Smellie and "a society of gentlemen in Scotland" in 1771 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica; or a Dictionary of Arts and Sciences upon a New Plan*). Charles Marriott's *New Royal English Dictionary*, published in 1780, boils those more extended definitions down to a division of philosophy into "three parts, intellectual, moral, and physical": "The intellectual part comprizes logic, and mathematics; the moral part contains the laws of nature and nations; and the physical part comprehends the doctrine of bodies, animate and inanimate" ("Philosophy"). The entries under "C" in Franz Swediauer's *Philosophical Dictionary* of 1786 include "Calvinistic divinity", "Cause and effect", "Certainty", "Character", "Children", "Christianity", "Civil commotions", "Climate", "Commerce", "Conversation", and "Corn".

Book titles are another possible place to begin. How do 'philosophy', 'philosophical', and 'philosopher' figure in the titles of books published at this time? A search on the database Eighteenth-Century Collections Online yields over three thousand books and pamphlets whose titles identify them as works of philosophy. Among those published in, for example, 1704 are *A Philosophical Epistle, Discovering the Unrevealed Mystery of the Three Fires of the Sophi*; *A Philosophical Discourse of the Nature of Rational and Irrational Souls*; and *The Grand Essay: or, a Vindication of Reason, and Religion, Against Impostures of Philosophy*; and *A Treatise of Fluxions: or, an*

Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy. Ninety years later, in 1794, philosophy appears to be no less miscellaneous. Titles published in that year include *A Dissertation upon the Philosophy of Light, Heat, Fire; Letters on Philosophical Subjects: Particularly the Creation, the Deluge, Vegetation, &c.*; and *Practical Philosophy of Social Life; or, the Art of Conversing with Men*. In many cases, possibly in most, ‘philosophy’ and its cognates are used in a book title to advertise the fact that the work in question treats its topic as we would say *empirically*, which at this time usually means, in accord with Newton’s rules of reasoning. Joseph Priestley calls his treatment of the free will problem *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* in order to make it clear that what distinguishes his contribution to this age-old question is the fact that he approaches it in the manner of a natural philosopher, identifying causes by means of regular conjunctions of types of events.⁴ But ‘philosophical’ books are also published about the senses, about planting and gardening, about sound, about music, about medicine, about gravity, about barometers, about hemp, about water and water works, about the navigation of the river Dee, about gout, about ‘fecundation’, about electricity, about geology, and about worms ‘in all parts of human bodies’. There are ‘philosophical’ treatments of political matters such as the south of Ireland, the spirit of Athens, the history of the thirteen American states, the revolution in France, and slavery. There are, of course, many ‘philosophical’ treatments of religious topics – and many critiques of the very idea that religion might be susceptible of philosophical treatment.

What about histories of philosophy? What do they purport to be histories of? It is a striking fact that eighteenth-century Britain, what Hume called “the historical Age” (*Letters of David Hume*, ii, 230), does not appear to have been very interested in the history of philosophy. The most substantial works on the subject were translations – of Johann Jakob Brucker’s *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, and of Johann Samuel Heinrich Formey’s *Abrégé de l’Histoire de la Philosophie*, itself a paraphrase of Brucker. The bulk of such books was taken up with detailed accounts of the theories of nature and of morals of the sects of ancient philosophy. All convey the impression that philosophy stopped happening at around the time of the fall of Constantinople and was only revived in the sixteenth century. As William Enfield put it in his abridged translation of Brucker, the period in between “resembles a barren wilderness, where the traveller is fatigued with beholding dreary wastes, in which he meets with scarcely a single object to relieve his eye, or amuse his fancy” (Enfield, *History of Philosophy*, ii, 317–18). After fruitless attempts to revive one or other of the ancient sects, genuine reformation and modernization

⁴To establish the doctrine of necessity, Priestley claims, “nothing is necessary but that, throughout all nature, the same consequences should invariably result from the same circumstances” (*Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 9).

of philosophy was finally achieved by Bacon, “who did more ... to discover the establish the true method of philosophising, than the whole body of philosophers which many preceding ages had produced” (ii, 520). The next important figure was Descartes, who mattered as much, if not more, for his physics as for his metaphysics. Leibniz and others had built on and improved Descartes’ system, producing new work in metaphysics and logic. Locke had produced a highly useful logic based on different principles. There had been substantial progress in moral philosophy, thanks above all to the work of Hugo Grotius. But the greatest achievements of modern philosophy had been the result of the application of Baconian method to the study of the natural world. Brucker finished his history with only a cursory account of modern natural philosophy, because a full account would have needed a book by itself.

The philosophical component of the university arts syllabus, like Charles Marriot’s dictionary definition, had three parts: logic, moral philosophy, and natural philosophy. It was the purpose of logic, the Aberdeen professor William Duncan told his students, “to explain the Nature of the human Mind, and the proper Manner of conducting its several Powers, in order to the Attainment of Truth and Knowledge” (Duncan, *Elements of Logick*, 13). Sometimes, as at Glasgow, the professor of logic taught rhetoric too, and belles lettres, the principles of criticism. Moral philosophy, in the Scottish universities, was even more capacious a subject. Adam Ferguson at Edinburgh divided his lecture course into seven parts: the natural history of man, the theory of mind, the knowledge of God, the moral laws and their most general applications, jurisprudence, casuistry, and politics (meaning, the study of constitutions, and political economy).⁵ Lectures on natural philosophy, sometimes supported by experiments and practical demonstrations, introduced students to what had been achieved in the study of nature since Newton. Richard Helsham at Dublin lectured on the principal elements of the Newtonian system and its later developments, from the attraction and repulsion of bodies to hydrostatics, pneumatics, sounds, optics, magnetism, and electricity.⁶ Courses of study at the English dissenting academies were, if anything, even more wide-ranging and ambitious. No institution’s syllabus was exactly the same as any other’s, and all were subject to change throughout the century, but in every case it was a carefully considered programme of study, in which all three parts of philosophy had an essential place.

Each of these sources of information concerning the eighteenth century’s understanding of philosophy could be the subject of a lecture by itself. And there are, as I have said, other possible avenues of research. One might also look at, for example, how philosophers figure in novels, poems and plays, or

⁵See the summary of Ferguson’s moral philosophy syllabus in *Institutes of Moral Philosophy*.

⁶See Helsham, *Course of Lectures in Natural Philosophy*.

at how they are represented in paintings and cartoons. Such investigations would, I suspect, throw some light on how women were supposed to stand in relation to philosophy. One might also, needless to say, consider moments of self-reflexive analysis in philosophical texts themselves – in Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*, for example, or Hume's *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, or, for that matter, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. But we are already in a position to see that the eighteenth-century conception of philosophy appears to have been somewhat different from the conception that has been in place in the Anglophone world since, let us say, 1900. It is different, first and foremost, insofar as the study of nature was as much part of 'philosophy' as moral philosophy and logic. There was no distinction, and no possibility of making a distinction, between philosophy and what we now call 'science'. On the contrary, 'the philosopher' was very often precisely what we would now call a scientist. In Hume's essay "Of the Middle Station of Life", for example, the examples given of "great Philosophers" distinguished by their supreme "Genius and Capacity" are Galileo and Newton (Hume, *Essays, Moral and Political*, ii, 51). John Kay's cartoon entitled "Philosophers" is a picture of James Hutton and Joseph Black. In Benjamin Martin's *Biographica Philosophica*, Locke is described as "a celebrated Politician, and Metaphysician, rather than a Philosopher" (390).

Eighteenth-century British philosophy is different from what we now call philosophy also in so far as inquiry into the human mind – part of logic according to William Duncan, part of moral philosophy according to Adam Ferguson, and sometimes described as a part of 'pneumatology' – is often indistinguishable from what we would now call psychology. When Adam Smith called Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision* "one of the finest examples of philosophical analysis that is to be found in our own or in any other language" (Smith, *Essays*, 148), he was not employing a distinction between 'philosophical analysis' and empirical investigation. Praise for Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* was usually praise for it considered as, in Tristram Shandy's words, "a history-book ... of what passes in a man's own mind" (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 107). Locke's 'logic', when and where it eventually displaced the neo-scholastic logic taught in the universities through the seventeenth century and beyond, was admired because, unlike the logic of the schools, it described how people actually thought – and therefore served as a means of helping them think better. Moreover, the remit of the moral philosopher was so wide as to include, not only theology and jurisprudence, but also elements of what we would now call anthropology, economics, and political science. There is also the supremely important fact that, like logic, moral philosophy was generally supposed to be a practical discipline. Its 'theoretical' or 'speculative' part was subservient to its practical part, which was usually described in terms of knowledge of

one's duties to oneself, to one's fellow human being, and to one's creator. Throughout the century works of practical philosophy, reminiscent of the self-help guides of more recent times, were immensely popular. James Forrester's *The Polite Philosopher: or, an Essay on that Art which makes a Man Happy in Himself, and Agreeable to Others* was published in 1734 and was in its ninth edition by 1780. "To philosophize, in a just signification", Shaftesbury had said early on in the century, "is but to carry *Good-Breeding* a step higher" (*Characteristicks*, iii, 99).

There is a significant difference too as regards *where* philosophy happened. I have said something about university philosophy in Britain in the eighteenth century, but, as everyone knows, it was certainly not the case then that the universities dominated the philosophical scene as they do now. University professors made a very significant contribution in Scotland, but even there they were outnumbered by authors of philosophical books, from Andrew Baxter and William Dudgeon through Kames and Hume to Monboddo and Alexander Crombie, who never held a university position. In England, outside of the dissenting academies only a very small handful of university teachers made any philosophical impact at all. The professions of law and the church provided a position of security for many authors, but the truth is that at this time philosophy was *everywhere*, and was no one's preserve or monopoly. It was neither a discipline nor a distinct and definable subject matter. It would be more accurate to think of it as a style of thought, or as a way of approaching a subject matter. In fact, though, more than one way of thinking called itself philosophical. There was self-consciously empirical, inductive, Newtonian analysis. But there was also the deist's exploration of religion, 'philosophical' in so far as it rejected all assistance from revelation. And there was the approach to politics portrayed in an anonymous 1771 dialogue entitled *The Philosopher*. A "real philosopher", one of the speakers says, is "one who sees into the character of men, who is above attachment to party, and friend to the loyalty and obedience which are due to government" (15). Philosophers, according to Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, "are men of speculation, whose trade it is, not to do any thing, but to observe every thing" (i, 21). If he had observed enough, the philosopher might have something useful to offer those in government. Then a politician could be thought of as, in Burke's phrase, "the philosopher in action" (*Present Discontents*, 57).

The question for the historian is how to order and organize the very large and very diverse number of things that, in eighteenth-century Britain, counted as philosophy. The question is also how to give it all a narrative form. A history of a century of philosophy needs, presumably, to be something other than a guidebook. It needs, presumably, to be an account of something, or of some two or three or more things, which *happened* during that century. We have seen what the usual story looks like: first an exploration of the consequences of Locke, then Hume and his pushing of

Lockeanism to its logical extreme, then responses to Hume. What are the alternatives? Is it possible to do for the British eighteenth century what Sarah Hutton has done so successfully for the seventeenth?⁷ In other words, to widen one's focus so that it brings into view more than a small handful of canonical (and all male) philosophers, while at the same time telling a clear story of development and change? Looking forward to the nineteenth century, a number of possible narrative lines seem to offer themselves to the historian, in the form of the arrival and dispersal of Kantianism and Hegelianism, the professionalization of philosophy and its transmutation back into an academic discipline, and the stripping away from philosophy first of natural science, and then of psychology, anthropology, and political science. But *what was it* that happened in between in British philosophy from around 1700 to around 1800?

3. The history of a field, not a tree

The obvious alternative to what I have called the usual story might be thought to be a narrative account of eighteenth-century British philosophy organized by the concept of 'enlightenment'. Roy Porter provided the framework for such an account in his 2000 book *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*. Porter was careful to present a British enlightenment that was not, *à la* Ernst Cassirer, a matter of the construction of abstract systems in a canon of classics, but was instead "a living language, a revolution in mood, a blaze of slogans, delivering the shock of the new" (3). It was "*engagé*", "criticizing, cajoling and calling for practical improvement on a broad front" (4). It was intensely pragmatic and worldly, but all the same it "embodied a *philosophy* [Porter's emphasis] of expediency, a dedication to the art, science and duty of living well in the here and now" (15). So there was a story to tell about the articulation of that *philosophy*, a story which, according to Porter, naturally culminated in support for the French Revolution. The fact is, though, that any definition of 'enlightenment', in Britain as anywhere else, is highly contestable – if only because it was not, for the most part, a concept by means of which the eighteenth century understood itself. It is, rather, a concept which has first to be engineered, then retrospectively projected onto the period. On the definition which I myself prefer, there is no clear distinction between 'Enlightenment British philosophy' and 'eighteenth-century British philosophy'. Enlightenment in Britain was, I think, *all of it*, a century, more or less, of more or less empirically informed argument about the natural and the moral, the religious and the political. It issued just as naturally in Burke's opposition to the French Revolution as in Richard Price's support for it. It had no one tendency or direction. So, on

⁷See Hutton, *British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*.

my view, the concept of 'enlightenment' fails to answer the question of how to give narrative shape to the philosophy of eighteenth-century Britain.

The obstacle in the way of any easy answer to that question is simply that there is always so much going on at the same time. Take, for example, the year 1779. That was the year of the publication of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, a brilliant exercise in scepticism about what natural philosophy could say about the creation of the universe – and also a subtle attempt, in its final part, to separate the question of religious belief from matters of conduct and morality. Hume had been so concerned about the reception that the *Dialogues* might meet with, and in particular about the embarrassment it might cause his friends, that he kept it in manuscript until after his death. Yet when it did appear in print, it caused hardly any controversy at all. 1779 was also the year of Gibbon's *Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon had been accused of intentionally misreading his sources with anti-Christian intent. His devastating response to his critics succeeded in divorcing altogether the question of the quality of his scholarship from the question of his attitude toward religion. There was no serious possibility of reply. You could, if you wanted, take both texts, along with the relative silence that followed them, as evidence of the progress of 'enlightenment' in Britain.

You could, if you wished, find further evidence of British enlightenment in other works published in 1779. Translations of Rousseau's *Émile* and the *Discours sur l'Inégalité* came out, along with translations of several works by Voltaire. New editions appeared of Kames's *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* and his *Sketches of the History of Man*, as well as of John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* and of Reid's *Inquiry*. Locke's *Some Thoughts concerning Education* was reissued, and there was yet another new edition of *Two Treatises of Government*. The liberal dissenter Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* was republished, but, rather more interestingly from the point of the view of the spread of 'enlightenment', there also appeared a collection of the public addresses of the latter-day deist David Williams. By this time, Williams had left the Presbyterian church, and had started preaching a non-denominational religion of reason. It could no longer be doubted, he declared in the book's introduction, "[t]hat good men of all nations and all religions; that believers in Moses, Christ, and Mahomet, Free-thinkers, Deists, and even Atheists who acknowledge beneficent principles of nature, may unite in a form of public worship, on all the great and most important truths of piety and religion" (*Lectures*, i, iv). Also in 1779 Williams published "The Nature and Extent of Intellectual Liberty", a call for unlimited freedom of expression which, following Priestley and Price, went far beyond what Locke had argued for in the *Letter concerning Toleration*. The very idea that there might be a means of distinguishing true

Christian belief from false was undermined, Williams claimed, by the fact that “[t]he Scriptures are at this time ... in a condition, which renders them unfit to be offered as a test” (9).

The same year, however, saw the publication of the first volume of Lord Monboddo’s *Antient Metaphysics: or, the Science of Universals*. This was first instalment of a comprehensive rejection of almost everything that had happened in the philosophy of mind since Locke’s *Essay*. The very idea that the human mind was part of the natural world, to be studied using the methods of Newtonian natural philosophy, was, according to Monboddo, a deep and dangerous mistake. So-called ‘experimental philosophy’ was, in fact, not really philosophy at all. It was mere natural history, the collection of facts. “[N]othing deserves the name of philosophy”, he asserted, “except what explains the causes and principles of things” (iv). *Philosophy*, in other words, was metaphysics as Aristotle had defined it. Monboddo was not anti-Newtonian, but he did believe that Newton’s system was inadequate as an account of the universe taken as a whole. Newton himself had acknowledged this, but his followers did not. Monboddo consciously took Plato and Aristotle as his masters, along with “the later philosophers of the Alexandrian School” and Proclus. However, he believed that the true metaphysics was older even than Plato and Aristotle, that they had found it in the Pythagoreans, and that earlier still it had come to Greece from Egypt. Among the modern philosophers he sympathized only with Cudworth, Baxter, and James Harris. The general atheism and irreligion of the age – and of Hume in particular – was, he thought, the product precisely of the neglect of metaphysics and the study of final causes. Christianity would only be secure when placed on a metaphysical foundation. In later volumes he would, in Rousseauian style, lament the condition of man in his modern state, and argue that declining levels of population were symptomatic of a more general decline in humanity’s moral and spiritual health.

Monboddo’s *Antient Metaphysics* was not the only text published in 1779 which problematizes the idea of the increasing prevalence of the spirit of ‘enlightenment’ in Britain, where ‘enlightenment’ is understood, à la Porter, in terms of a forward-thinking and worldly project dedicated to improvement and modernization. In the same year, Jackson Barwis produced *Dialogues concerning Innate Principles*, intended to re-open the question of the status of innate principles of belief, and especially innate principles of morality. Those principles are God-given, Barwis argued, and exist in the mind even before we begin to reason about them. A prime example of the kind of reasoning criticized by Hume in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, William Derham’s *Physico-Theology*, first published in 1713, was brought out in a third edition in 1779. The Oxford theologian George Horne produced a collection of his sermons, including one which defended the political principles of Sir Robert Filmer. Vigorous criticisms of Priestley’s materialism and

necessitarianism continued to appear, along with numerous affirmations of the inadequacy of 'philosophical' religion and of the need for revelation. In the year before the Gordon Riots, pamphlets were issued with titles such as *Poperly Unmasked* and *The Scarlet Whore*. Thomas Boston's Calvinist tract *Human Nature in its Four-fold State* was reissued in its twenty-fifth edition. Thomas Delamayne, in an *Essay on Man, in His State of Policy*, asserted that "Evil in Man's political State arises from Moral Evil in his State of Nature" ([v]). No fewer than eighteen books and pamphlets were published with John Wesley's name on their titlepage. You could use this material to argue that in fact 'enlightenment' had never taken hold in Britain at all.

A full history of the philosophy of 1779 would be complex enough. There is, moreover, no very clear sense in which the philosophy of 1779 was different from, say, the philosophy of 1729. 1729 was close to the peak of the deist controversy, the year before the publication of Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation*. Fifty years later, as I have just noted, debate about the status of philosophical religion and the necessity or superfluousness of revelation was still going strong. Just as Jackson Barwis sought to refute Locke's philosophy of mind in 1779, so also had Peter Browne in 1729, in a new edition of *The Procedure, Extent and Limits of the Human Understanding* – though Browne's critique was not directed at Locke's anti-innatism, but, on the contrary, at his refusal to derive all ideas and principles from sensation alone. Isaac Watt's *Logick* was in its third edition in 1729 and in its twentieth fifty years on. New editions of Joseph Addison's *Free-Holder* came out in both 1729 and 1779. Newton's works appeared in English translation in 1729. 1779 saw a new edition in Latin. Both years saw the publication of a number of other works of experimental natural philosophy. Priestley's debate with his critics about 'philosophical' necessitarianism could be seen as a re-run of an earlier debate about the freedom of the will between Anthony Collins and Samuel Clarke, a debate that Collins had returned to in 1729 with his *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*. In 1729, as in 1779, Catholicism was an object of criticism and ridicule – see, for example, James Cullen's *Sermon against the Infallibility of the Church or Pope of Rome*.

So far as I am able to see, there is no one story to be told about how philosophy developed and progressed in the fifty years between 1729 and 1779 – nor about the one hundred years between 1700 and 1800. Certainly, the concept of 'enlightenment' does not help, any more than did the now – so one hopes – completely discredited concept of 'secularization'. In any given part of the century, a great deal of philosophy was happening simultaneously, some of it describable as 'enlightened' according to one or other understanding of what that word means, and some of it probably not describable in that way. The sense that one has as one pulls back and tries to see the period as a whole is not one of linear, sequential change. The dynamic of eighteenth-century British philosophy is, if anything,

centrifugal. What happens is that 'philosophy' quickly spreads out from a collection of relatively small coteries that included the world of the Boyle lectures, aficionados of ancient thought such as Shaftesbury, and Scottish university engagement with post-Grotian natural law. In the process it occupies an ever-greater amount of intellectual space. As many saw it, *everything* needed to be made 'philosophical': not only the study of the natural world, including chemistry, natural history, and geology, but also religion and politics, as well as ethics and its account of human nature, and 'criticism' and history too. Sometimes it seems to me that an adequate history of eighteenth-century British philosophy would be the same thing as a history of eighteenth-century British intellectual life taken as a whole.

That, though, would be an exaggeration. For, as I have mentioned in connection with religion, not everyone welcomed philosophy's take-over of science and letters. It seemed to some to be a mistake, and a dangerous mistake at that, to imagine that the faith which saves could be the product of reason alone. Hadn't the apostle Paul written to the Colossians warning them "lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2.8)? There was, in addition, a longstanding worry about the place of philosophy in the world outside the philosopher's study. One can see this in the novels and plays – now long forgotten – which depict the philosopher as impractical, a builder of castles in the air whose theories do not survive their first contact with reality. The impotence of philosophy is depicted in comedies which show a serious young man, puffed up with philosophical pride, overcome by the beauty of a young woman – as in, for example, an anonymous 1730 short story called *The Captivated Philosopher, or the Power of Love over Reason*, or the also anonymous 1732 play *The Married Philosopher: a Comedy*. It was a more serious question for some whether it was true that philosophy had a contribution to make to politics. The agriculturist John Mills reported in 1772 that "There is not a more vague expression at present than to say of a man, he is a philosopher: it often proceeds from the contempt we would cast on him". "Some modern politicians go still father", Mills continued: "They lay many disorders of the state to the charge of the spirit of philosophy. According to them, it favours luxury, the arts, the idle class of the people, and confines population. A philosopher, in their eyes, is not only a useless member of community, but even a bad citizen" (*Essays*, 1). "The philosophical or contemplative", the Bristolian William Combe claimed in 1775, "having his mind continually directed to the sublime views of human comprehension, cannot bring it down to the level of those moderate capacities, which are best adapted to the less refined pursuits of men, and have, generally, the greatest success in them" (*Philosopher in Bristol*, i, 95–6).

In the eyes of some, the French Revolution was dramatic and unanswerable proof of the justice of these criticisms of philosophy – as can be seen in Thomas Rowlandson’s 1792 cartoon “Philosophy run Mad, or a Stupendous Monument of Human Wisdom”. Estimations of the value of distinctively philosophical styles of reasoning changed in the 1790s, as the importance of tradition and deference to authority was asserted in reply to Wollstonecraft, Paine, and Godwin. Here it is possible to see where the eighteenth century itself marked the beginning of the end of one philosophical era and the start of the beginning of something different. For my purposes, the question of when eighteenth-century British philosophy began has to be understood in the same way, as the question of when those who wrote philosophy in Britain at that time supposed it began.⁸ The best short answer to that question is probably that eighteenth-century British philosophers regarded themselves as living and working in an intellectual era that had begun with the publication of Newton’s *Principia* in 1687. However that may be, when the beginning and end of this philosophical period are fixed there remains the question of how to write a *history* of what happened in between. The problem is nicely stated by Jonathan Rée in the introduction to his magnificent book *Witcraft: The Invention of Philosophy in English*. When you look at it closely, philosophy’s past does not look like a stately tree, developing upwards and outwards from its roots, with a single central body out of which branches slowly grow. Instead, as Rée puts it, it looks like a meadow full of flowers (9). And a history of a field is a different thing from a history of a tree.

Acknowledgements

This article is the lightly edited text of the British Society for the History of Philosophy annual lecture that I gave in Cambridge in November 2021. I am grateful to the Society for the invitation, and especially to Sophia Connell for organising my visit to Cambridge.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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⁸I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for insisting on the importance of such an approach to the question of the beginning and the end of eighteenth-century British philosophy. In the lecture on which this article is based, I suggested that the place to begin might be Toland’s unauthorised 1699 publication of Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry concerning Virtue*. As the reviewer pointed out, though, it is far from obvious that philosophers of the time accorded epochal significance to Shaftesbury’s moral philosophy.

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