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A Teachable Moment? David Hume and the Tower of Babel

Jonathan Hearn

Abstract: This essay reflects on the de-naming of the David Hume Tower at Edinburgh University in September 2020. It critically examines and contextualises the racist footnote written by Hume, that was the focus of calls to remove his name from the building. It argues that an opportunity was lost to ask deeper questions about the contribution of David Hume to current thought, and why we may want to commemorate historical figures, despite their flaws. In short, a 'teachable moment' was squandered in this event. I conclude by suggesting that such symbolic gestures as the de-naming of the David Hume Tower are not effective ways to oppose racism.

Keywords: David Hume, Racism, Enlightenment, Competition of ideas, University of Edinburgh, David Hume Tower

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On my office wall hangs a small framed portrait of David Hume, looking down on my desk. He is there as an acknowledgment that he has long served as a muse for my thinking about anthropology, sociology, politics, history, and social science more generally. I don't 'follow' Hume, or belong to any Humean 'school' or 'camp'. It is more that I have found myself, like many others, continually returning to fundamental intellectual problems he posed long ago. He is an interlocutor, someone I enjoy conversing with across the expanse of time that separates our lives.

How can I have this positive relationship with Hume, given that we know he held racist beliefs, as expressed in a footnote to his essay *Of National Characters* from 1753-54? The issue of Hume's racism erupted into public debate at the University of Edinburgh, and in the Scottish and UK press, in September 2020, when it was announced that the University had renamed the David Hume Tower (known more generally as DHT) as 40 George Square, in response to a petition campaign led by students offended by the idea of his name being there. As I said in a blog at the time (Hearn, 2020), I am not someone who cares deeply about the names of buildings. However, I do care about teaching and learning, and was troubled by how unedifying the subsequent limited debates around this event were. Prior to the 'renaming'- since this possibility was in the air - I had been asked to participate in discussions about the building's name, and the University's colonial heritage more generally, and had repeatedly expressed my readiness to do so. But this was pre-empted by the renaming decision. This struck me at the time, and still does today, as a missed opportunity to open up and discuss complex and sensitive issues about how we deal with an intellectual legacy that is morally troubling and alien at times, while at the same time represents a rich cultural endowment worth keeping alive. It should have been a 'teachable moment', but instead became one more face-off between opposing views. I was left with the overwhelming feeling that the question of the building's name had nothing to do with knowledge about Hume, and that indeed Hume was only standing in as a symbol of something else - a rather vaguely conceived notion of the oppressiveness of western, Enlightenment thought. The David Hume Tower in this situation was a Tower of Babel, with people speaking past each other, in different 'languages', unable to communicate and work toward mutual understanding.

In this essay I want to recover that opportunity, and make the case for trying to understand Hume, and for appreciating his still relevant contribution. I claim that it is not adequate to make a judgment about whether he is a suitable person to name a university building after solely on the consideration of one footnote, however offensive it is. I will begin with the infamous footnote in question, and the challenges of interpreting it. Then I will move out to a wider consideration of Hume, his ideas, and their enduring relevance. And finally I turn to the underlying principle, about the competition among ideas, and why we remember some, and the thinkers associated with them, more than others. This requires us to grapple with the nature of intellectual traditions, and of the 'western/European' tradition of which Hume's ideas are a part.

I hasten to add that I mean 'a teachable moment' not in the sense of those with authority instructing the ignorant, but rather as an open encounter among opposing ideas. It may be that nothing I say here moves anyone from previously held positions. But at least we may move towards a fuller understanding of what we disagree about.

The Footnote

To my knowledge, on all sides of the debate about the naming of the David Hume Tower, there is no disagreement that the views expressed in Hume's footnote are racist, and should be rejected. In it Hume states beliefs about race that we all believe are wrong, and offensive.¹ The original footnote read:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptom of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (Hume, 1985 [*Of National Characters*]: 629-30)

The statement is sweeping and factually ignorant, extracting conclusions from Hume's flawed premise about the 'natural' basis of race. But because Hume did not address race to any significant degree in any of his other writings, it is impossible to attribute any extensive theorisations about race to Hume on this basis. It appears to be a firmly held and clearly prejudiced opinion, one not uncommon in his day, but not a systematic part of his philosophy. As Aaron Garrett has effectively shown, Hume's contemporary James Beattie had the better argument when he countered:

That a negro-slave, who can neither read nor write, nor speak any European language, who is not permitted to do any thing but what his master commands, and who has not a single friend on earth, but is universally considered and treated as if he were a species inferior to the humans;--that such a creature should so distinguish himself among Europeans, as to be talked of through the world as a man of genius, is surely no reasonable expectation. To suppose him an inferior species, because he does not thus distinguish himself, is just as rational, as to suppose any private European of an inferior species, because he has not raised himself to the condition of royalty. (Beattie, quoted in Garrett, 2000: 175-176).

Hume held Beattie in low regard, as a mediocre philosopher blinded by his Christianity, and unfair in his attacks on Hume as an atheist. Although the terms 'monogenism' and 'polygenism' weren't really current in this early period, it is the case that the idea of the unity of humankind tended to be aligned with certain interpretations of the Bible, and the idea of separate 'species' more aligned with the 'harder' naturalistic perspective. Beattie

and Hume clearly fell at either end of this dichotomy. But as Garratt also shows - contra Immerwahr (1992) - it is doubtful that Hume was responding to Beattie, when he revised the first two lines of the footnote for the posthumous 1777 edition of the essays (which despite his instructions was not added until a much later edition of the essays). The revised footnote very slightly qualified the certainty of its assertions, and made clear that Hume's beliefs about natural inequality were really directed at black Africans:

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, not even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. (Hume, 1985 [*Of National Characters*]: 208 [f.10])

Such narrowing of focus hardly makes the footnote more palatable. Although we can only speculate, I agree with Garratt's suggestion that Hume may have responded to the ideas of others he respected, acknowledging the ample evidence of civilisational achievements among the other 'non-white' races, but retaining his prejudice against black Africans. Hume acknowledged his own vanity in regard to intellectual and literary achievements, and the high value he placed on literary culture may have played a role in his prejudice (Hume, 1985: xxxi-xli. See also Harris, 2015: 14-24). Seeing no major religious, philosophical and literary traditions arising from sub-Saharan Africa - in short, civilisation as he narrowly understood it - may have played a role in his blindness to arguments like Beattie's. But because he never thought or wrote systematically about race, we can never really know. We will never know exactly what was going through his head when he wrote and maintained the footnote, but I suspect there were two main factors. As I've already suggested, within the contemporary field of debate on the topic, he was locating himself in proximity to a kind of scientific naturalism, that stood in opposition to supernaturally based biblical views. As I will elaborate in a moment, the footnote was at odds with the tenor of the essay in which it was located. It had the rhetorical form of 'if there is any exception to the argument I am making, it is this', and its emphatic tone may be a symptom of that rhetorical purpose.

It has been argued that Hume was an important figure in the rise of scientific racism, that the citation of his footnote by others later (e.g., Immanuel Kant) is an indication of his importance in this line of thought, and that the footnote indicates that Hume regarded Blacks as subhuman (Curry, 2020). However, these arguments are hard to sustain. Locating Hume as a significant figure in the history of the scientisation of racist thought makes little sense given his lack of writing on the topic compared to other contemporaries, such as the Scottish lawyer Lord Kames (1696-1782 - a biblical 'polygenist' contra Beattie), the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1702-1778), the French naturalist Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), or the English physician Charles White (1728-1813), who did early anthropometric studies. Serious attempts to develop biological theories of race really developed in the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth century, some time after Hume's death in 1776. His use of terms like 'species' is in the loose, relatively unscientific sense of the day. That later racists may have cited the footnote for authoritative validation of their beliefs may tell us something about the rhetorical techniques used by those racists, but it tells us very little about the actual genealogy of ideas, to which Hume contributed very little compared to others, such as those just cited. The claim that Hume regarded blacks as non- or subhuman is not warranted by anything in the footnote text. This claim, far from rejecting the ideas of the Enlightenment, encodes later Enlightenment ideas that arose out the wake of the

French and American revolutions that tended to treat 'equality' as logically internal to recognising 'humanity'. This was not the way Hume and many of his contemporaries saw it. Hume opposed slavery because it was inhumane and dehumanising (see, for example, *Of The Populousness of Ancient Nations* in Hume, 1985: 383-384). But he assumed that people were, evidently, unequal in their talents and capacities, not just between races, but within them. It is anachronistic to read into Hume's times the philosophical assumption that recognising humanity entails assuming equality, or that using the term 'inferior' implies being 'subhuman'.

On the enduring relevance of Hume's Ideas

However reprehensible, Hume's thoughts on race are not an important part of the ideas that he is remembered for. To form a rounded judgment about his intellectual legacy, we need to consider some of his ideas that have garnered lasting attention since his day, and we can start with the essay 'Of National Characters' (see Hume, 1985: 197-215) in which the offending footnote was located. Notably, Hume's suspicions about race in the footnote run in a contrary direction to the argument of the essay itself, and he is clear about this. The essay engages with the then widespread idea, associated with Montesquieu, Kames, and others, that perceived differences in 'national character' had material causes in factors of climate and how these shaped human dispositions. Hume was sceptical about this argument, proposing that the differences instead had 'moral' causes, which in our terms means they were the results of the histories of institutions and culture, and more 'path dependent'. In short, against a trend of his day, Hume was saying the differences we perceive between these national groups was a matter of 'culture' and 'nurture', not 'nature'. He was very attuned to the fact that societies are complexes of social conventions, around norms and behaviours, and that this made them potentially highly variable. If you see yourself as in this tradition of thinking about cultural differences, then Hume is a part of your intellectual genealogy.

This connects to what we can call Hume's moral naturalism (see Mounce, 1999). His scepticism and atheism led him to reject arguments that morality is ultimately grounded either in God and the supernatural, or in some notion of natural laws that can be confirmed through reason. Picking up on the work of Francis Hutcheson, and in tune with his younger intellectual friend Adam Smith, he argued that we must look for the sources of human morality in our social natures. We are so constituted that we need and are sensitive to the approval and disapproval of others, and moved by sympathy. We judge others and ourselves according to how useful our conduct is in sustaining a stable, peaceful, and reasonably just society. Although it precedes Darwinian ideas of evolution, there is a notion of adaptive functionalism lurking in Hume's treatment of morality. Because of the way he shifts the emphasis from reason to our emotional natures in explaining the sources of moral order, the feminist philosopher Annette Baier (1991) has suggested he is an important figure in the line of thought leading to current ideas of an 'ethics of care'. Those in this tradition also owe Hume a debt.

In his lifetime, Hume became better known as a historian than a philosopher, his multivolume *History of England* (really, Britain) enjoying considerable success. He rejected

prevalent tendencies in Britain to treat the writing of history as an opportunity to make the case for either the Tory or Whig views of history, each side casting themselves and their favoured historical figures as the heroes, and the other side as the villains of the historical narrative. Hume sought an impartial view, equally sceptical of dogmatic claims on both sides (see Phillipson, 2011). He preferred an approach to history that treated historical figures as individuals, with specific personalities, responding to situations never entirely of their own making, either successfully or unsuccessfully. In terms of recent trends in historiography he might be viewed as trying to balance the roles of individual agency and encompassing historical structures. This approach resonates with his naturalistic approach to morality, in which the question is not how do we measure human conduct against transcendent ideals, but how do we understand it in context. His ability to reject the politicised and polarised extremes of his day and instead show genuine interest in what motivates the behaviour of real people, might be regarded as a model approach with current relevance.

Hume the philosopher made one of the deepest and most enduring critiques of the limits of human rationality. Far from being the champion of 'Enlightenment' reason, he was its most sceptical critic. This is part of his argument that we have to take our emotional natures more seriously, because he saw reason as insufficient for explaining human behaviour. In his day, the heyday of deism, arguments attempting to ground morality in reason were often presented as compatible with, and affirming the existence of God, which he rejected (see Russell, 2008). More deeply and troublingly, Hume bequeathed to us one of the sharpest statements of the nature of the modern condition - one which anticipates the nihilism and uncertainty about the relationship between reality and morality - that haunts us to this day. Hume asserted that, try as we might, we can derive our moral judgements about human affairs neither from reasoned deduction, nor from empirical observation (see Hume, 1978: Book III, Part I, Section I). Such judgments have no ground other than our natural impulses to approve and disapprove. Thus Hume's treatment of morality has frustrated moral philosophers ever since he wrote, because he regards our moral behaviour as facts that can be observed, but does not offer any meta-level theory for evaluating them. He thinks about morality like a social scientist, interested in continuity and variation among human moral orders, but not seeking ultimate ground or justification. He seems to take comfort in the fact that people, when their sentiments are not overly distorted by the poor reasoning of ideological convictions, generally want the same pro-social things: peace, prosperity, comfort, conviviality, fellowship. But this is an amenable brute fact, not a claim that the world ought to be this way. His delinking of 'is' and 'ought', his claim that no amount of description of how the world is can prove that it ought to be that way, exposed the dilemmas of moral relativism that are characteristic of the modern, disenchanted world. Our ongoing debates about the relationships between facts and values, and the inability of science to provide moral grounding, were powerfully articulated by Hume in the period when the secularised, science-infused world was taking shape. He was one of the first to express this defining aspect of the modern world, for which we are indebted to him, even if we wish things were otherwise.

The Competition among Ideas

A world bereft of ultimate authority must find other ways to negotiate conflicts over our interpretations of reality, and the moral claims we make on one another. The most tolerable

and successful solution to this problem has been to institutionalise conflict, creating rule-bound contexts in which contending views, opinions, and beliefs can confront each other, and test each other. The modern university, science in the broadest sense, and liberal forms of society, are premised, however imperfectly, on the principle that ideas must earn their keep (see Rauch, 2013). No ideas are sacrosanct - all must weather the competition with other contending ideas, and win and lose support in an environment where beliefs and opinions are not compelled, but subscribed to. We inherit and take for granted many of our ideas, and many ought to be more tested than they are. We are not so constituted that we can keep all our beliefs and opinions under constant scrutiny and review. But we are fortunate to live in a kind of society in which it is both accepted and often encouraged precisely to challenge ideas where we have doubts, and confront them with other ideas that may take their place. Scholarship, science, public opinion, are mechanisms for keeping this process alive.

The result of this process is an intellectual tradition, a liberal tradition that is open to challenges and which evolves, but a tradition of ideas nonetheless. For all the ideas that remain, are referred back to, challenged anew, many more have been abandoned, discarded and forgotten. It is not a monolithic block of ideas laid down to be followed, but an organic and open-ended process to be participated in. However, to make this generating and winnowing process work, we have to deal with the ideas themselves, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses apart from the persons who articulated and expressed them. Intellectual history is a fascinating and illuminating field, and we can learn much about how ideas form by studying their contexts in the lives of persons and their times. But we enter into deep confusion when we evaluate thinkers simply on the basis of single ideas we select for praise or condemnation, and treat them as figures we follow or oppose in some great moral struggle. Looking at it this way flattens out the intellectual complexity, and turns the struggle among ideas into one between icons backed by followers.

The fact that Hume's racist footnote has been marginalised in the literature on Hume is not evidence of a cover-up or denial of our racist past (or present). On the contrary it is evidence that the process of putting ideas in competition with each other basically works. The footnote is largely forgotten, because it expressed bad ideas that most people now firmly reject, and therefore it doesn't deserve our attention. The footnote is itself, at best, a curious historical footnote to the history of racist ideas. Scholars of Hume, and those like myself who hold his work in high regard, have focused on, and continued to discuss and debate, precisely those ideas which are of enduring significance, which still make contributions and pose challenges to our basic understandings of such things as the natures of morality and reason.

The tower was named after Hume to recognise his valuable intellectual achievements, not to celebrate his egregious errors. I am sure if we found the university documents marking the decision to name the tower after him, his racist footnote would not figure there. Contrast this with controversies around Civil War statues in the US south, such as the statue of Robert E. Lee that was the trigger of violent demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. Those statues celebrate military and political figures who played roles in defending the institution of slavery through secessionist war. They were generally built in the period after Reconstruction, when southern white elites were reasserting their power

and the system of racial stratification known as Jim Crow. These clearly were intended as symbols of racial domination, and it makes sense to regard them that way. The David Hume Tower did not commemorate racism.

I think some of those on my side of this debate about the naming of DHT were dismayed by my initial concession that the naming of buildings was not in itself a terribly important issue. And that is not what this essay is about. It is about how we relate to our intellectual inheritance. But I think a further implication of what I was saying is worth bringing to the fore. The de-naming of that building is not an important issue in regard to contemporary struggles over racism. No prejudicial laws or policies were exposed or changed. The name of the building, before or after, had no noticeable effect on people's beliefs about race. The vast majority of people, probably even at the University of Edinburgh, don't know or care who David Hume was. The controversy shed no real light on the nature of racism today, and was largely a dispute among locally interested parties, slightly and briefly amplified by newspapers and online media. In the struggle against racial patterns of inequality, and their ideological and institutional causes, it was an insignificant event. It was largely a very local and symbolic contest of wills among academics. Fighting actual racism requires very different methods - changing the name of the David Hume Tower will have no significant effect. We should seek to change ideas and institutions, and not get distracted by ambiguous symbols.

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¹ In normal everyday speech, we 'take offense' at things said and done by other living people, and showing our offense is part of a social process of making them aware of the effects of their actions, and possibly modifying their behaviour. It implies a certain emotional engagement with others. There is a debate to be had about whether extending 'offense' to our reactions to distant historical utterances and actions - those that cannot themselves be affected by our offense - is really the same kind of thing. It may make sense to disapprove, and morally judge such things, in order to draw lessons from the past. But taking offense, at an emotional level, may be rather fruitless, and 'the wrong tool for the job'.