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Book Review by Edward Feser

## A MERE—BRILLIANT—SOPHIST

*Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, by James A. Harris.  
Cambridge University Press, 633 pages, \$55



THE BEST-KNOWN EVENT IN SCOTTISH philosopher David Hume's life is his death in 1776. Historians tell us that the great skeptic and critic of traditional religious belief faced the end with tranquility and even good cheer, untroubled by the thought that his demise would be his annihilation. The 65 years that preceded that demise were not uneventful, exactly. There were, for example, the public controversies caused by his various works, and his troubled relationship with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But neither, for the most part, was his outward life plausibly the stuff even of a good PBS costume drama. As with so many philosophers, what was of greatest interest in the life of Hume is to be found in his head and in the pages of his books.

This is precisely what James Harris's new book on Hume is concerned with. It is, as his subtitle alerts us and as he emphasizes

from the outset, an *intellectual* biography. To be sure, Harris, who teaches philosophy at the University of St. Andrews, offers the reader some valuable insights into Hume's outer life. Most interesting is his account of the philosopher as a young man. The older Hume—serene and worldly-wise, a literary eminence and toast of Paris who rubbed shoulders with Rousseau, Adam Smith, and James Boswell—is well known to students of philosophy. Less familiar is the 18-year-old who suffered from anxiety and depression to the point of a nervous breakdown, and the first-time author who veered between bouts of elation and panic when contemplating what he hoped were the merits (but also feared were the deficiencies) of his forthcoming *Treatise of Human Nature*.

For the most part, though, what Harris provides is a wealth of details, drawn from letters and other documents, concerning the

influences on Hume's intellectual output—on the evolution of his thinking, the composition and publication of his works, and the nature of the controversies into which he entered. Harris's book is a work of superb scholarship, well-written and insightful, and will be an invaluable resource to students of early modern thought. It is novel in its very conception—an intellectual biography of Hume has not been attempted before—and offers a fresh perspective on Hume's motivations and the character of his work.

HUME'S MULTIVOLUME *HISTORY OF England* was among the works for which he was best known during his lifetime. Indeed, commentators in the decades after his death tended to see him primarily as a historian, and regarded his philosophy as having an essentially negative significance, a collection of skeptical errors to which

later thinkers provided a corrective. By the middle of the 19th century his significance as a historian was also being challenged, on the grounds that his research was weak and his style too bloodless.

John Stuart Mill began the trend toward a more positive estimation of Hume's importance as a philosopher. Mill argued that Hume posed a serious challenge that had not in fact successfully been addressed by Thomas Reid, Immanuel Kant, and others who were thought to have refuted him. In the early 20th century, Norman Kemp Smith inaugurated the interpretation of Hume as more than a mere skeptic. Hume had, Kemp Smith argued, a positive account of human nature, and one that provided the key to understanding Hume's project as a unified philosophical program, one set out in the *Treatise of Human Nature* and implemented in the later works. Later 20th-century commentators would cement the Kemp Smith interpretation.

**I**N HARRIS'S VIEW, NONE OF THESE APPROACHES to Hume is quite right. He agrees that Hume was always a philosopher, and never merely a historian or man of letters (though his conception of philosophy was broader than that of the contemporary academic). But Harris thinks it a serious interpretive error to try to find a single, unified program running through all of Hume's work, and he urges us not to discount either the skeptical tenor of much of that work or the role that literary ambition played in motivating it.

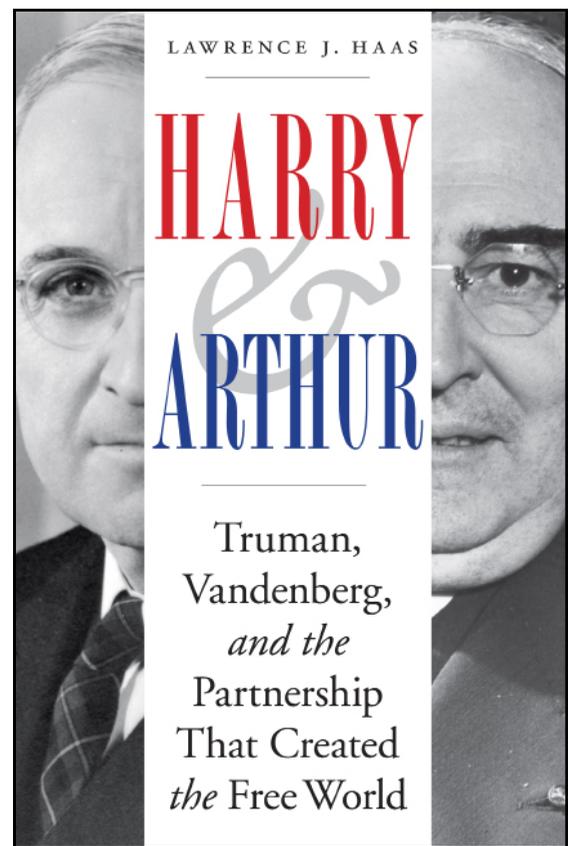
What one will not find in Harris's book is much in the way of critical, philosophical analysis of Hume's ideas. For the most part, that is not a problem, and Harris's approach is certainly defensible. There are already a great many works devoted to such critical analysis, and it is precisely the *gap* in the existing Hume literature—the lack of sufficient attention to what Hume was reading, to the circumstances under which he wrote specific works, to his interactions with other prominent figures of the day, and so forth—that Harris is trying to fill.

On the other hand, the mixing of critical analysis with historical research has in contemporary academic philosophy become a standard part of writing works on the history of the subject, and for good reason. The critical philosophical analysis of the ideas of some thinker of the past involves asking questions such as: What exactly does this or that particular claim made by the thinker *mean*? Apart from what the thinker explicitly said about it, what are the different ways

it *could be* interpreted? And apart from the arguments the thinker actually gave for it, what arguments *could be* given for it? Furthermore, what objections might be raised *against* it? And what *responses* to those objections could be given? Asking questions like these not only helps us to see how the ideas of past thinkers might be relevant today, but also helps us to see what a past thinker himself might have intended, and what the critics and admirers he engaged with might have had in mind in responding to him the way they did. Hence an approach which neglects such questions and confines itself to the gathering of documentary evidence and the like is bound to be less penetrating than it might have been.

**T**HERE IS ANOTHER ASPECT OF MUCH contemporary scholarship on the history of philosophy that is relevant here. Pop accounts of the history of early modern thought famously present Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and company as having liberated Western philosophy and science from the bogeyman of medieval Scholasticism. Sweeping away this purported mishmash of religious dogma and uncritical attachment to Aristotle, the early moderns—so the story goes—rebuilt Western thought from scratch. Contemporary historians of science and of philosophy know that this is a myth. For one thing, what the traditional narrative *represents* as “Scholasticism” is in fact largely a crude caricature. For another thing, early modern thinkers often betray a much greater reliance on actual Scholastic ideas and assumptions than modern readers are aware. Twentieth-century scholars like Étienne Gilson (in philosophy) and Thomas Kuhn (in the history of science) inaugurated a trend toward a more nuanced reading of the relationship between early modern thought and its Scholastic antecedents. Contemporary historians of philosophy like Margaret Osler, Dennis Des Chene, Walter Ott, Helen Hattab, and many others have greatly furthered this recovery of the actual history of the Scholasticism-to-early-modern transition.

Surprisingly, and disappointingly, Harris's book shows little evidence of having been informed by these developments. Yet the topic of Hume's relationship to Scholasticism is ripe for a serious and detailed treatment. This is so in several respects, not the least of which being that Hume famously declared “School metaphysics” to be among the chief targets of his skeptical arguments. But in fact, as several historians have pointed out, at least one of Hume's most famous themes—his skepticism about causality as a real feature of the



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world (as opposed to a mere projection of the mind onto the world)—has medieval Scholastic antecedents. In particular, one finds anticipations of Hume’s claims and arguments on this subject in William of Ockham and in Nicholas of Autrecourt (who is sometimes described by historians of philosophy as “the medieval Hume”). Some of Hume’s criticisms of anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity are also of a kind a Scholastic might endorse.

**T**HEN THERE IS THE FACT THAT POSITIONS like Hume’s are also sometimes anticipated and criticized by Scholastic writers. For example, much of the edifice of Hume’s thought rests on his assumption that to have a *concept* is essentially to have a kind of *mental image*. It is because he cannot trace certain key metaphysical concepts—the notion of a substance, of causal power, of the self, and so on—to any specific mental image that he denies that we really have such concepts. But Thomas Aquinas (under the influence of earlier thinkers like Aristotle) would have pointed out that this conflation of concepts with images cannot be correct. For example, we quite easily grasp the concept of a *triangle* as that of a closed plane figure with three straight sides. This *concept* applies to all possible and actual triangles—red ones and

green ones, right and obtuse triangles, isosceles and scalene triangles. By contrast, any *image* we can form of a triangle will *not* apply to all triangles, since it will always exhibit features had by some triangles (e.g., a blue right triangle) but not by all (e.g., a red obtuse triangle).

Hence, whereas the pop narrative would have it that Hume put forward novel and devastating objections that earlier philosophers like the medievals had never thought of, in fact from a Scholastic point of view, at least, all he had done was to revive elementary fallacies that had long before been exposed and refuted. (The eminent 20th-century philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe—herself influenced by Aquinas—famously described Hume as “a mere—brilliant—sophist.”)

**A**ND THAT IS NOT ALL. AS HARRIS notes, Hume spent more than two years at the Jesuit College at La Flèche in France. Harris observes rather dryly that “we know almost nothing of how he passed his time there,” but that Hume left with “a complete draft” of what would become the first two books of the *Treatise of Human Nature*. The questions this raises cry out for asking. What did Hume read while he was there? What sorts of conversations did he have with the Jesuits? Did he borrow any of his ideas

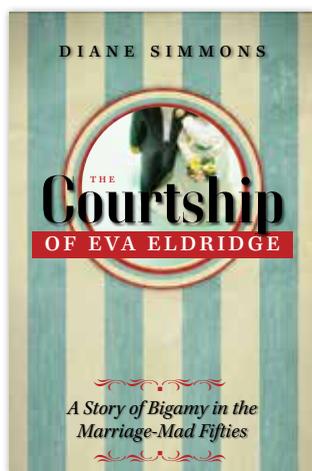
from the Scholastic sources he might have come into contact with there? Did he consider objections to his arguments that might have been found in these sources? Unfortunately, Harris does little to address such questions, and while he is correct to say that not much is known, that is not to say that *nothing* is known or that the question might not be investigated. Indeed, Harris refers in the footnotes to some work on the subject, but does not pursue it himself.

Also regrettable is the absence of any discussion of the conflicting accounts of Hume’s death. The standard story is the one alluded to above, that he faced his demise with serenity; and it may well be correct. But there is a competing account, related in a 19th-century work by Anglican church leader Alexander Haldane, according to which Hume’s death-bed cheerfulness was a pose and in which at least one person who attended to him found him to be sunk in depression and gloom. Of course, it is true that some of his religious critics would *like* to believe this. But it is no less true that some of Hume’s secular admirers would like *not* to believe it. In any event, questioning hagiography is hardly something to which Hume himself could have objected.

*Edward Feser is the author, most recently, of Neo-Scholastic Essays (St. Augustine’s Press).*

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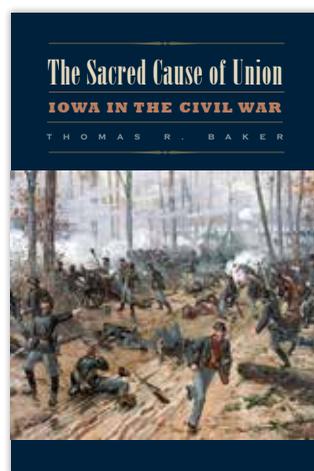
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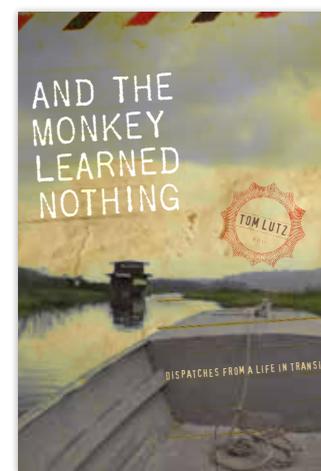
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