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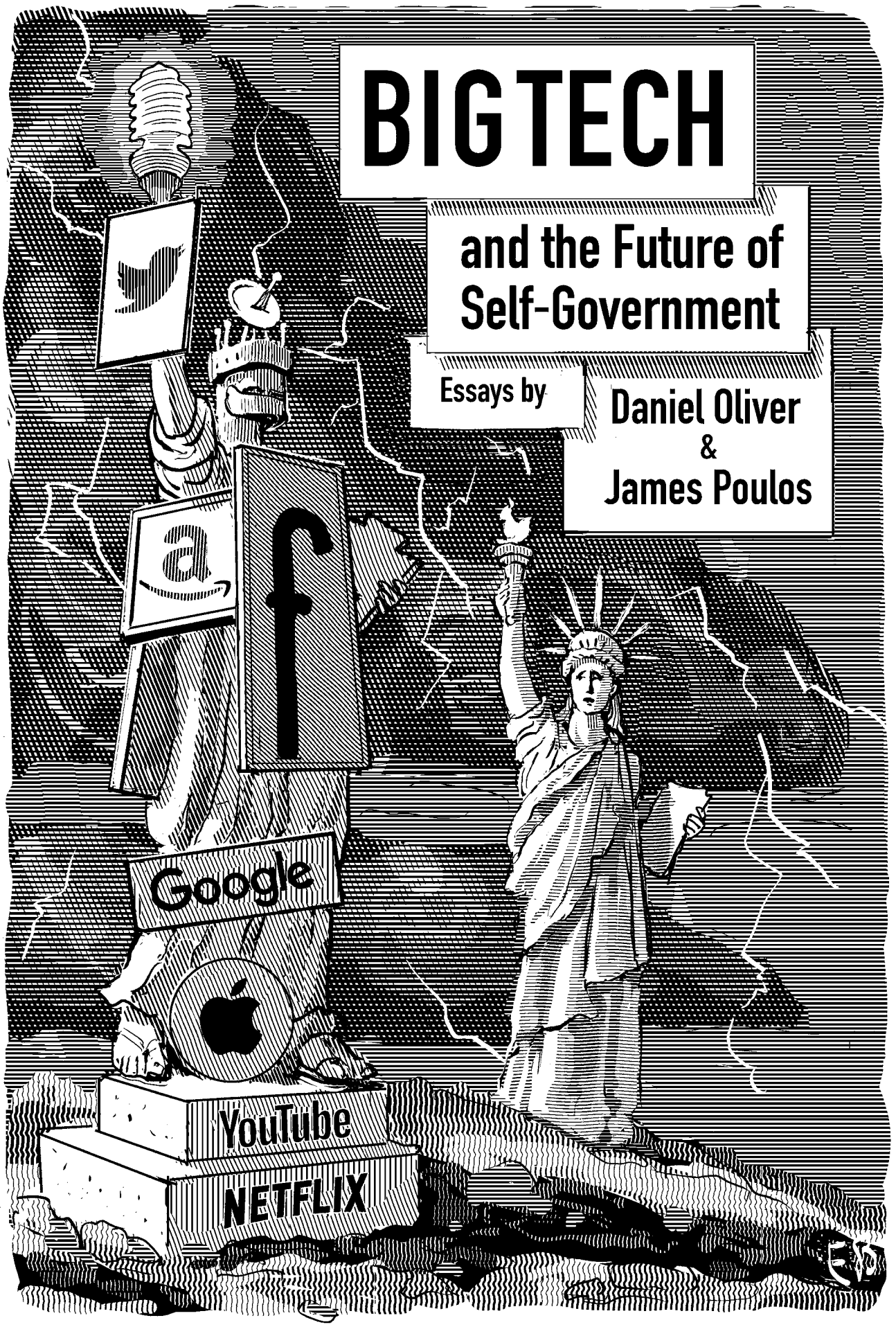

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Essay by Joseph Epstein

David Hume and the Philosophical Life

Detachment was in his DNA.

"When judging another's life, I always look to see how its end was borne," wrote Michel de Montaigne in his essay "That We Should Not Be Deemed Happy Till After Our Death." In another of his essays, "To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die," Montaigne argued that we must prepare our souls for death: "we must therefore educate and train them for their encounter with that adversary, death; for the soul can find no rest while she remains afraid of him." Montaigne himself hoped to die while tending the cabbages in his garden, but death, that consummate trickster, had him instead die of quinsy, an inflammation of the throat and tonsils that left his tongue paralyzed and him, who claimed that "the most fruitful and natural play of the mind is conversation," devoid of speech.

If one standard of judgment of a philosopher is how well he died, David Hume may well have been the philosopher of all philosophers. Adam Smith, James Boswell, and others who encountered Hume during his last days attested to his tranquility in the face of death. At 65, knowing his death near—the probable cause was a tumor on his liver—Hume instructed his physician to tell a friend, "I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I had any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire." Another physician, the one attending him at the close of his life, reporting Hume's death to his friend Adam Smith, wrote that "he died in such a happy composure of mind, that nothing could exceed it." When Boswell reported to Samuel Johnson that Hume had told him that "he was no more uneasy to think he should *not* be after this life, than he *had not been* before he began to exist," Johnson, a believing Christian who anguished over his own fate after death, refused to believe it. Smith told Hume on one of their last visits that "[y]ou have in a declining state of health, under an exhausting disease, for more than two years together, now looked at the approach, or what you at least believed was the approach of death with a steady cheerfulness such as very few men have been able to maintain for a few hours, tho' otherwise in perfect health." Edward Gibbon described Hume's as "the death of a philosopher."

If David Hume died as a philosopher ought to die, he appears to have lived no less philosophically. He had the gift, the grand philosophical gift, of temperament. He longed for the world's approbation, but was unwilling to go much out of his way to attain it. Detachment, as we should say today, was in his DNA. He never married. (Friedrich Nietzsche remarked that a married philosopher, a figure who belongs in a comedy, is a joke.) Hume was denied professorships at the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh, owing to what were thought his heretical views, especially those on religion. This may have been a good thing: barred from the academy, Hume was thrust out into the world. In need of money, he worked as a tutor and as a secretary to English political figures, and achieved financial independence with the publication of the final volumes of his *History of England* (1761) and his government

pensions. He wrote: "Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be a man."

Hume also felt that the most fortunate of men were those born to what he called the "middle-station of life":

> These form the most numerous rank of men that can be supposed susceptible of philosophy; and therefore all discourses of morality ought principally to be addressed to them. The great are too much immersed in pleasure, and the poor too much occupied in providing for the necessities of life, to harken to the calm voice of reason. The middle-station as it is most happy in many respects, so particularly in this, that a man placed in it can, with the greatest leisure, consider his own happiness, and reap a new enjoyment, from comparing his situation with persons above or below him.

His own position in the middle-station in life may well have endowed Hume with that strong strain of common sense possessed by all too few philosophers. Attacking the Stoics, who taught their pupils "that those ills under which they labored were, in reality, goods to the universe; and that to an enlarged view, which could comprehend the whole system of nature, every event became an object of joy," Hume suggested telling this to the "man lying under the racking pain of gout" or to "the man who is robbed of a considerable sum" and who is unlikely to "find his vexation for the loss anywhere diminished by these sublime reflections."

Skeptic

Born in 1711 to a family of landed Scottish gentry, Hume never really knew his father, who died when he, David, was two years old. He had an older brother and sister and his mother was, as he would later describe her, "a woman of singular Merit, who, though young and handsome, devoted herself entirely to the rearing of her children." After successful student years at Edinburgh University, a career in law seemed the sensible next step for him, a second-born son. "My studious disposition, my sobriety, and my industry, gave my family a notion that the law was a proper profession for me," Hume wrote in his essay "My Own Life," "but I found an unsurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning; and while they fancied I was pouring upon Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors I was secretly devouring." At the age of 23, he went off to the commercial city of Bristol, but found commerce, too, alien to him, and thence departed for France where he "laid the plan of life which I have steadily and successfully pursued."

That plan entailed "to make a very rigid frugality supply my deficiency in fortune, to maintain unimpaired my independency, and to regard every object as contemptible, except the improvement of my talents in literature." The line between literature and philosophy was less clearly drawn in the 18th century than now. In France, Diderot, Montesquieu, and other of the *philosophes* easily shifted from one to the other. An interest, even a high competence, in philosophy was part of the intellectual equipage of the 18th-century man of letters. "Hume always regarded philosophy," as E.C. Mossner, his best biographer, writes in *The Life of David Hume* (1954), "as part-and-parcel of literature."

Outwardly the most genial, even charming, of men, Hume early in life suffered depression and psychosomatic illness. In his 18th year he suffered a mental collapse from pushing himself too hard in his studies. As a young man his depression may have been deepened by his ambitiousness, which was one of what, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume classified among the indirect passions along with "pride, humility,…vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity, with their dependents." (The direct passions he designated "desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security.") Hume began the *Treatise* at the age of 21 and completed it at 25. He later claimed that the book "fell *dead-born* from the press; without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur from the zealots." Not quite so, but the book did not bring him the acclaim that he, like every youthful author, fantasized about.

In an *Abstract* published a year after his *Treatise*, Hume claimed the book was written to "explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty and the nature of our ideas." He also allowed that the philosophy underlying his *Treatise* "is very skeptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding." Later, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), he would write that "in general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner." A skeptic David Hume would remain all his days, skeptical even of the doctrine of skepticism. While skepticism may not add to the bulk of knowledge, he held, it remains the best guard against false conviction. Skepticism also suited Hume's distrust of philosophical system-builders and his antipathy to the fog thrown off by much metaphysics.

Hume had no interest in debunking or debasing human nature—only to show how it worked. He thought himself less a painter than an anatomist of human nature. In the *Treatise* he argued that human nature was not played out between those two goalposts of virtue and vice, and that reason had a lot less to do with human conduct than most human beings would care to acknowledge. Rather, contending passions, modified more or less by sympathy, were the motor-force behind much human behavior.

The *Treatise* doesn't always make for easy reading, as Hume himself came to recognize. The book can seem sprawling, contradictory, exhibiting a perhaps too-great fondness for paradox and abstraction occasionally lapsing into the abstruse. P.H. Nidditch, the editor of Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, writes of the *Treatise* that its pages "are so full of matter, he says so many different things in so many different ways and different connections, and with so much indifference to what he has said before, that it is very hard to say positively that he taught, or did not teach, this or that particular doctrine." Yet Nidditch goes on to note that "Bk I of the *Treatise* is beyond doubt a work of first-rate philosophical importance, and in some ways the most important work of philosophy in the English language."

In his excellent *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (2015), James A. Harris notes that Hume in his *Treatise* wanted nothing less than to demonstrate what lay behind "the pervasiveness of human error" by setting out the limitations of standard reasoning and the unreliability of experience. In the *Treatise* Hume argued that ideas were little more than impressions organized; not all effects, he held, had causes. Radical in its purport, the *Treatise* questioned standard knowledge of time and space, existence, being itself. Much human thought, he argued, is based on "a reasoning that is not in itself different from, nor founded on different principles, from that which appears" in ani-

Books mentioned in this essay:

The Life of David Hume,
by Ernest Campbell Mossner.
Thomas Nelson & Sons, 693 pages,
out-of-print

Hume: An Intellectual Biography,
by James A. Harris.
Cambridge University Press,
633 pages, $34.99 (paper)

mals. Subtitled *Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, the *Treatise of Human Nature* was also an attack on conventional reasoning, not least religious reasoning. Hume, Mossner reports, lost his own religious belief "slowly and reluctantly, even against his will, as it were, in the face of what he regarded as ineluctable logic." Based on his reading of Isaac Newton and John Locke, as Mossner puts it, "he reasoned himself out of religion."

Hume was never a strong atheist, holding that atheists have too much "confidence in human reason," while he, as his opponents claimed, had too little. But he later wrote against the belief in miracles and in extreme cases he was in favor of suicide, or self-murder, and denied the probability of the existence of the soul, once telling a friend that the notion of the soul "is so pretty and so comfortable a Theory, that I wish I could be convinced of its Truth—But I cannot help doubting." Nor could he resist taking the occasional jab at the clergy of all religions, with a stab or two reserved for Catholics. In his essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul," he argued that concern about the afterlife induces terrors into life that

> would quickly vanish were they not artificially fostered by precept and education. And those who foster them, what is their motive? Only to gain a livelihood, and to acquire power and riches in this world. Their very zeal and industry, therefore, are an argument against them.

Radical stuff, this, which did not find ready acceptance, especially not in Calvinist Scotland. But not there alone: after 1761, Hume's work was put on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books.

Stylist

The older he grew the more Hume became conscious of style. He knew that in good part the failure of his *Treatise of Human Nature* was owed to its failure of style, and in his later years he reworked and reduced much of the book in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. His works are studded with interesting aphorisms: "Nature is always too strong for principle." "Generally speaking, the errors of religion are dangerous, those in philosophy only ridiculous." "Truth is disputable, not taste." A scrupulous stylist, he became part of that too-thin line of philosophers—Plato, Augustine, Arthur Schopenhauer, Adam Smith, William James, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, George Santayana, F.H. Bradley—who took pains to write well.

Hume the prose stylist is on best display in his essays and in his six-volume *History of England*. In his "Of Essay Writing," Hume saw his role as an essayist

> as a kind of resident or ambassador from the dominions of Learning to those of conversation; and shall think it my constant duty to promote a good correspondence betwixt these two states, which have so great a dependence on each other. I shall give Intelligence to the Learned of whatever passes in company, and shall endeavor to import into company whatever commodities I find in my native country proper for their Use and Entertainment.

He took a good portion of the audience for his essays to be women. "To be serious, and to quit the allusion before it be worn threadbare, I am of opinion that women, that is, women

> David Hume would remain a skeptic all his days, skeptical even of the doctrine of skepticism.

of sense and education, (for to such alone I address myself) are much better judges of all polite writing than men of the same degree of understanding."

Hume is not among the great English essayists. Many of his essays are too brief. His subjects are not always well-chosen, some being too narrow, or specialized, others less than fully developed. As an essayist, he had not the suavity of Joseph Addison, the fervor of William Hazlitt, the winning whimsy of Charles Lamb, the flow of Thomas Macaulay, the moral earnestness of Matthew Arnold, the penetration of George Orwell. One cannot point to any single essay of Hume's that displays him at his best in the role of essayist. Rather, it is the corpus of his work, considered collectively, that establishes his place among the great English essayists—this and the fact that, in the words of James Harris, as an essayist he attempted to close "the gap between philosophical argumentation and polite letters," and did so with considerable success.

After the publication of his *History of England*, Hume worked as the secretary and later as *chargé d'affaires* for the earl of Hertford, the British ambassador to France. In France he was taken up by many of the *salonnières*, whose homes furnished the social headquarters for the *philosophes* of the mid-18th century. The French valued him more than the English or Scots. Helvétius, Mirabeau, d'Alembert, and other *philosophes* were among his admirers. Montesquieu was the first among the great thinkers of the time to recognize the genius of "*le bon David*," a recognition that was returned by Hume. Diderot wrote to him as his "well-beloved and greatly-honored David." Voltaire, who never met Hume, called him "my Saint David," though the feeling wasn't entirely mutual. Agreeable though Hume found life in Paris—at one point he thought "of settling there for life"—he never bought into the *philosophes*' belief in the inevitability of progress, let alone in the possibility of human perfection.

Perhaps because he was a foreigner, Hume, alone among intellectual figures of the period, was allowed to roam in and out of the various salons of the day, not being confined in his allegiance to one exclusively. Madame du Deffand declared him "gay, simple, and good." Madame de Lespinasse befriended him. Madame Geoffrin called him "my fat wag" and "my fat rascal." He had a continuing relationship with the Comtesse de Boufflers, a friendship that, as Mossner delicately puts it, "mellowed into something more intimate than friendship."

Hume was six feet tall, but in his thirties grew corpulent. He was a large, economy-sized Edward Gibbon. (Hume, not at all by the way, instructed the younger Gibbon to give up writing in French and instead to write in English, an act that by itself entitles him to a place in history.) In the famous portrait painted by Allan Ramsay, Hume appears becalmed and placidly heavyset. In his biography Mossner cites a description of Hume by James Caulfield, Earl of Charlemont, that suggests a greater amplitude than depicted in the painting and a striking discrepancy in Hume between his body and mind:

> Nature, I believe, never yet formed any Man more unlike his real Character than David Hume…. His face was broad and fat, his mouth wide, and without expression other than that of imbecility. His eyes, vacant and spiritless, and the corpulence of his whole person was far better fitted to communicate the idea of a turtle-eating Alderman than of a refined philosopher. His speech, in English, was rendered ridiculous by the broadest Scottish accent,

and his French was, if possible, still more laughable; so that wisdom, most certainly never disguised herself before in such uncouth garb.

Hume was not above joking about his own avoirdupois, and in a letter to a female friend, one Mrs. Matthew Dysart, he wrote: "I cannot but bless the memory of Julius Caesar, for the great esteem he exprest for Fat men, and his aversion to lean ones. All the World allows, That that Emperor was the greatest Genius that ever was; and the greatest Judge of mankind." An amusing essay could be written on fat and thin philosophers, with the fatter, my guess is, calmer, the leaner—Nietzsche, Russell, Wittgenstein are examples that come to mind—darker, more easily agitated.

Historian

Gibbon referred to himself as "the philosophic historian," but David Hume may have been the only professional philosopher to write an extended history. His *History of England*, begun soon after he took on the job of Librarian of the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh in 1752, was published between 1754 and 1761. The work was, in effect, written backwards, begun with two volumes on the history of the Stuarts, followed by two volumes on the Tudors, and ending with two further volumes beginning with Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain. "The first quality of an historian is to be true and impartial," he wrote, "the next is to be interesting." Hume's *History* not only earned him a considerable amount of money, but enlarged his reputation generally.

Among his admirers in France, Hume was known as "the English Tacitus." But the work, in its impartiality, everywhere attempting balance, is far from Tacitean in tone and execution. Hume attempted to rise above the Whig-Tory split that defined the politics of his day. He had earlier written of the non-partisan position in politics required of the philosopher, and attempted to repress partisanship in himself in the hope that this "will be acceptable to the moderates of both Parties; at the same Time that, perhaps, it may displease the Bigots of both."

Hume's *History*, like his essays, was, in the words of James Harris, "an attempt to bridge the gap between the worlds of scholarship and conversation." Much of it, apparently, was written without close inspection of documents. His aim was to bring a philosophical perspective to the study of history, "to begin to look," as Harris has it, "beneath the surface of political debate for an explanation of why politics in England took the form that it did." The work went beyond the doings of kings and courtiers to investigate the manners of the times about which he wrote, the state of its trade and learning, its religious interests and political disputes, all written in Hume's elegant and accessible style. To illustrate its impartiality, in its pages, as Harris notes, the people in England under Queen Elizabeth are described as bereft of all liberty, Oliver Cromwell as a hypocrite chiefly interested in political power, and Mary, queen of Scots, as guilty as her adversaries were in condemning her.

After the completion of his *History*, Hume wrote little more (though he never ceased revising his writing). He had 13 years to live and he spent them in reading the classics, in conversation with friends, and in practicing what he mockingly described as his "great talent for cookery, the science to which I intend to addict the remaining years of my life." (He later averred, "I'm no epicure, only a glutton.") When it was proposed that he write further volumes of his *History*, he demurred, giving as his reasons, "Because I'm too old, too fat, too lazy, and too rich." Not that he closed himself off from the world or the controversies of the time. He thought, for example, that England was mistaken in its war against its American colonies. "I am an American in my principles," Hume wrote, "and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper."

"Even in Hume's philosophical writings," Nidditch writes, "the author's personal character continually excites our interest." And so it does, for behind all Hume wrote one senses the calm and ultimately cheerful nature of a man who lived out his days with the least possible discrepancy between his life and his thought. Unlike Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre in our time, he never went politically nutty. Unlike Schopenhauer, he never turned dark, nor like Nietzsche mad. In "My Own Life" Hume claimed to be not "very irascible in my temper," and though often attacked in print he only rarely answered his critics. In the same essay he claimed to be "a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humor, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper." All this was true. It is one thing to call oneself a philosopher, quite another to live and die like one. David Hume did both.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of Gallimaufry, Essays, Reviews, Bits *(Axios Press).*