
THE DEATH of HUME

A scholar once called the late 18th century an era of "competitive dying."

The ability to die well, preferably with a few well-chosen words on one's lips, was widely seen as a measure of greatness. For the philosopher David Hume, our author writes, death provided what many considered the ultimate test of his ideas.

BY STEPHEN MILLER

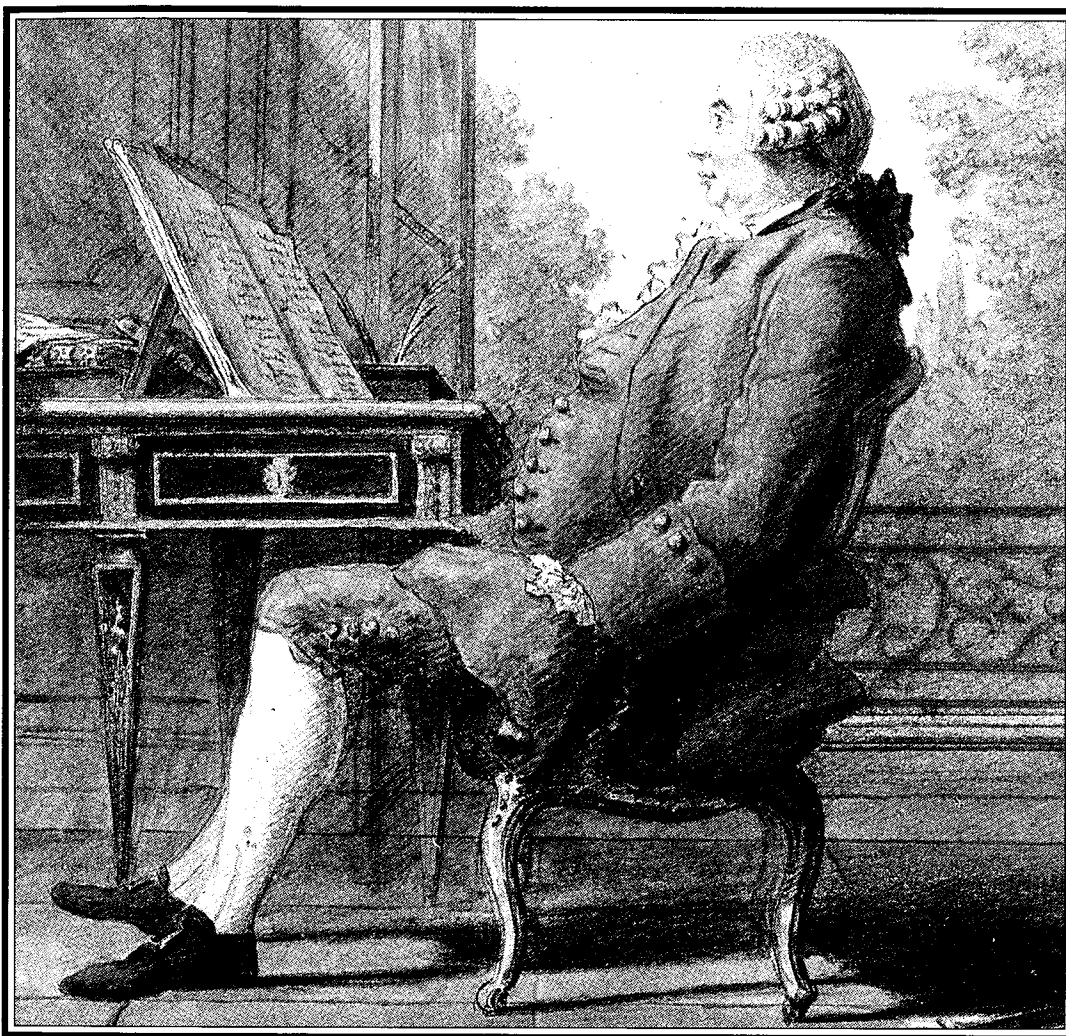
Seventeen seventy-six was a momentous year in Great Britain: Edward Gibbon published volume one of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* appeared, the American colonies declared their independence, and David Hume—called the Great Infidel because of his skeptical view of Christianity—died at the age of 65.

The death of Hume may seem a minor event in comparison with the others, but it was far from inconsequential. The circumstances surrounding Hume's tranquil and very pagan death (probably from colon cancer) on August 25, as reported by his close friend Adam Smith, occasioned a controversy that continued for at least a decade and involved many of the leading writers of the age, including Smith and Gibbon, as well as Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and James Boswell.

The controversy touched upon a question we continue to wrestle with today:

what role does religion play in promoting morality and political stability? Johnson and Burke, who thought Smith had made too much of Hume's deathbed composure, argued that religion played a major role in encouraging moral behavior, though they did not say that there was a necessary connection between the two. By contrast, Smith and Gibbon, who admired Hume intensely and thought he had died the "death of a philosopher," as Gibbon put it, downplayed religion's role in promoting the moral life. Somewhere in the middle was Boswell, who attacked Hume's infidelity—that is, his skepticism toward traditional religion—yet was haunted by the possibility that Hume was right.

The story of Hume's death properly begins in April 1776, when he composed a short autobiography, declaring that even though he now reckoned upon "a speedy dissolution," he did not fear death. "Notwithstanding the great decline of my



David Hume (1711–1776), by Louis Carrogis

person . . . [I have] never suffered a moment's abatement of my spirits. . . . I possess the same ardor as ever in study, and the same gayety in company." Hume also claimed that he had achieved a kind of serenity that came from being "detached," as he put it, from life. In mid-August, a week before he died, the philosopher continued to insist that he was cheerful. To his friend the Comtesse de Boufflers, he wrote: "My distemper is a diarrhoea, or disorder in my bowels, which has been gradually undermining me these two years; but, within

these six months, has been visibly hastening me to my end. I see death approach gradually, without any anxiety or regret."

In early May, Hume had asked his friend Smith, a dozen years his junior, to see to the publication of the autobiography as well as his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, a previously unpublished book he had written in the 1750s and lately had been busy revising. When Smith offered a noncommittal reply, Hume wrote to him again. Smith readily agreed to

publish the autobiography, promising that he would "add a few lines to your account of your own life," but he promised only to preserve the *Dialogues*. Finally, 10 days before he died, Hume amended his will to make other arrangements for getting his last philosophical work into print.

Hume was right about his fellow Scot's reluctance to be associated with the *Dialogues*. In a letter to Hume's publisher two weeks after the philosopher's death, Smith wrote: "I must, however, beg that his life and those dialogues may not be published together; as I am resolved, for many reasons, to have no concern in the publication of those dialogues." Smith wished that the book, "tho' finely written . . . had remained in Manuscript to be communicated only to a few people."

What explains Smith's reluctance? Perhaps he thought the strongly anti-Christian *Dialogues* would hurt Hume's reputation. But Hume was already widely regarded as anti-Christian. Perhaps Smith thought it would be impolitic to be associated with such a work. Or perhaps he found Hume's corrosive skepticism unpalatable. Whatever the reasons, Smith's own account of Hume's final days, published as a five-page letter to the publisher in *The Life of David Hume, Esq; Written by Himself* (1777), reveals that Smith himself did not want to be seen as anti-Christian. In his original letter, he wrote: "Poor David Hume is dying very fast, but with great cheerfulness and good humour and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God." In the published version, the reference to whining Christians disappeared.

Smith also toned down an anti-Christian remark that Hume had made to him. The older man had joked that perhaps he could persuade Charon to delay his passage to the other world in order to give him more time to rid the world of Christianity. "Good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of people; have a little patience only till I have the pleasure of seeing the churches shut up, and the Clergy sent about their business; but Charon would reply, O you loitering rogue; that wont happen these 200 years; do you fancy I will give you a lease for so long a time? Get into the boat this instant." In the published version, Smith has Hume say: "Have a little patience, good Charon: I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the Public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition."

Perhaps Smith changed Hume's remarks because he wanted the dying man to be seen as serene, as someone no longer interested in attacking Christianity. In his account of Hume's death, Smith belabored the point that Hume faced death cheerfully, mentioning it five times. To back up his account he quoted Hume's doctor, who wrote to Smith a few days before his patient's death that Hume "is quite free from anxiety, impatience, or low spirits, and passes his time very well with the assistance of amusing books." Later, the physician recalled that during those final days the philosopher "never dropped the smallest expression of impatience; but when he had occasion to speak to the people about him, always did it with affection and tenderness."

In the last paragraph of his "well au-

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thenticated account" of Hume's final days, Smith stressed that Hume was an exemplary human being. "Thus died our most excellent and never to be forgotten friend; concerning whose philosophical opinions men will, no doubt, judge variously . . . but concerning whose character and conduct there can scarce be a difference of opinion." Though Smith said that Hume possessed "the most extensive learning [and] the greatest depth of thought," his main point was that Hume should be admired as a man of virtue regardless of what one thought of his writings. He spoke of Hume's "good nature and good humour . . . without even the slightest tincture of malignity," and he ended with a remark that recalls Plato's tribute to Socrates in the last sentence of the *Phaedo*: "I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."

This effort to depict Hume as an 18th-century Socrates seems to have gone for naught. Many Christians were offended by accounts of Hume's pagan death. George Horne, president of Magdalen College, Oxford, publicly denounced the autobiography and Smith's letter in the name of "the people called Christians." The controversy continued for many years. In 1786, two years after Johnson died, William Agutter preached a sermon at Oxford entitled "On the Difference between the Deaths of the Righteous and the Wicked, Illustrated in the Instance of Dr. Samuel Johnson and David Hume, Esq." The attacks annoyed Smith, who complained to a friend that "a single, and as I thought, a very harmless Sheet of paper, which I happened to write concerning the death of our late friend, Mr. Hume, brought upon me 10 times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain [in *The Wealth of Nations*]."

One of those who found Smith's account offensive was Boswell (1740–95).

Writing to Johnson two months after Hume's autobiography was published, he was vitriolic: "Without doubt you have read what is called *The Life* of David Hume, written by himself, with the letter from Dr. Adam Smith subjoined to it. Is not this an age of daring effrontery?" Boswell said that both he and a friend—a professor of natural philosophy—thought "there was now an excellent opportunity for Dr. Johnson to step forth" and attack Hume and Smith. He urged Johnson to "knock Hume's and Smith's heads together, and make vain and ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous. Would it not be worth your while to crush such noxious weeds in the moral garden?"

Boswell had not always regarded Smith and Hume as noxious weeds. He once said that Smith, whose course in moral philosophy he had taken while studying law at the University of Glasgow, was his favorite professor. Of Hume he had once said: "Were it not for his infidel writings, every body would love him. He is a plain, obliging, kind-hearted man." In early 1776, Boswell had even considered writing a biography of Hume. (His famous biography of Johnson then lay 15 years in the future.) In his letter to Johnson, Boswell did not mention that he had visited Hume seven weeks before his death. "I asked him," Boswell wrote in his journal, "if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least." Hume also told his visitor that religion had a bad effect on morality: "He then said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad . . . [and] that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious."

Hume's skepticism even in the face of death clearly unnerved Boswell. A few days after his visit, he wrote to Johnson's close friend Mrs. Thrale that "it has shocked me to think of his persisting in infidelity." Desperately trying to explain away Hume's

beliefs, Boswell said: "My notion is that he, by long study in one view, brought a *stupor* upon his mind as to futurity. He had pored upon the earth till he could not look up to heaven." This rationalization apparently failed to bring Boswell lasting comfort. Five months later, he noted in his journal: "I saw death so staringly waiting for all the human race, and had such a cloudy and dark prospect beyond it that I was miserable as far as I had animation. . . . I absolutely was reduced to so wretched a state by my mental disease that I had right and wrong and every distinction confounded in my view."

Boswell knew that the only remedy for the acute melancholy that gripped him was a dose of Johnson. "I should like to hear Dr. Johnson upon this," he had written in his letter to Mrs. Thrale. "What a blessing is it to have constant faith in the Christian revelation!" Long before, in 1769, Boswell had asked Johnson what he thought of Hume's claim that he did not fear death. Johnson, in effect, said it was nonsense; everyone feared death. When Boswell asked him if "we might fortify our minds for the approach of death," his great interlocutor replied: "No, Sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time. . . . A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine."

In September 1777, roughly a year after Hume's death, Boswell brought up the subject again: "I told Dr. Johnson that David Hume's persisting in his infidelity, when he was dying, shocked me much." Johnson, as Boswell reported the conversation in his journal, professed puzzlement. "Why should it shock you, Sir? Hume owned he had never read the New Testament with attention. Here then was a man who had been at no pains to inquire into the truth of religion, and had continually turned his mind the other way. It was not to be expected that the prospect of death would alter his way of thinking, unless God should

send an angel to set him right." When Boswell claimed that Hume wasn't worried about his approaching end, Johnson responded: "He lied. He had a vanity in being thought easy."

Francis Bacon almost two centuries earlier had written that "men fear Death as children fear to go in the dark." He added, however, that this fear is easily mastered: "there is no passion in the mind of man so weak, but it mates and masters the fear of death." Johnson's point was similar. Hume mastered his fear of death because he was very much concerned about the world's opinion of him.

Hume's death preoccupied Boswell to such an extent that he brought up the subject again—with Burke—in April 1778. In Boswell's journal for that year, there is the following entry: "Talking of David Hume, Mr. Burke laughed at his life and at Smith's appendix, 'most virtuous,' etc." Burke told Boswell that the description of Hume's final days "is said for the credit of their church, and the members of no church use more art for its credit." Burke was referring to the era's influential deists and freethinkers, who held that morality depends not on traditional religion but on an innate moral sense. Burke, like Johnson, thought too much had been made of Hume's tranquil death. "Here was a man at a great age, who had been preparing all along to die without showing fear, does it, and rout is made about it. Men in general die easily."

Though Burke's and Johnson's responses to Hume's death were somewhat different—Burke didn't think that men always fear death—both thought Hume was not as detached as he claimed to have been. Even Gibbon, who deeply admired Hume, said that his autobiography was tainted with vanity: "there we discover a true and honorable nature, the naive vanity of a child, the independence of a philosopher, and the courage of a dying man who loved

life without pining for it." Hume himself, in the last sentence of his autobiography, admits that vanity may have played a part in "this funeral oration of myself."

But what Burke and Johnson mainly objected to in Hume was not his vain desire to appear serene as he lay dying. It was his unprincipled—to their minds—desire to strengthen the case for infidelity. Hume, they thought, had an agenda: he wanted his virtuous life and tranquil death to be proof positive that morality has nothing to do with religious faith.

Hume also wanted to brand those who attacked his writings as religious fanatics. In the autobiography, he spoke sarcastically of the "zealots [who], we may well suppose, would have been glad to invent and propagate any story to my disadvantage, but they could never find any which they thought would wear the face of probability." Such zealots, Hume thought, were chiefly to be found in the strongly Anglican English literary-intellectual world, a world he held in low regard. When Gibbon published the first volume of *Decline and Fall*, Hume wrote to Smith that "I should never have expected such an excellent Work from the Pen of an Englishman. It is lamentable to consider how much that Nation has declined in Literature during our time."

In the autobiography, Hume did not attack England directly. Rather, he pointedly observed that there is a "real satisfaction in living at Paris from the great number of sensible, knowing, and polite company with which that city abounds." Hume spent many years living in France—in part because university posts in England and Scotland were closed to him on account of his religious views. He lived there in his twenties, when he was writing *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), and in his fifties, when in 1763 he was private secretary to the British ambassador to France. During his second stay he was a famous writer, chiefly noted for his essays and his *History of England* (1754–62), so it was easy for him to

gain entry into the circle of Encyclopaedists, where he befriended Denis Diderot and others. Hume also lived in London at three different times in his life, but only for relatively short periods. He much preferred Paris and Edinburgh to the English capital, in no small part because the London literary-intellectual world was dominated by Samuel Johnson—"a man of enthusiasm and antiquated notions," he once told Boswell. (In the 18th century, *enthusiasm* was always a pejorative term, often used to describe religious fanatics. In his *Dictionary*, Johnson defined it as "a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication.")

Despite Hume's profession of detachment, then, the autobiography should be seen as his Parthian shot at the world Johnson dominated, a world where Hume was attacked in print by several well-known writers and where he was frequently attacked by Johnson, albeit only in conversation. Hume knew he was being attacked because Boswell often told him so. Boswell appeared to enjoy provoking Hume by mentioning what Johnson said about him—or provoking Johnson by bringing up Hume. "Hume I knew he [Johnson] would abuse," Boswell said in his notebook. In *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), Boswell could not bring himself to record Johnson's gibes: "He added '*something much too rough*,' both as to Mr. Hume's head and heart, which I suppress."

Johnson never apologized for his attacks, telling Boswell that "when a man voluntarily engages in an important controversy, he is to do all he can to lessen his antagonist, because authority from personal respect has much weight with most people, and often more than reasoning."

Johnson's standard line about Hume and infidels in general was that they were motivated by vanity, which prevented them from seeing the truth. Hume, he told

Boswell, was "a man who has so much conceit as to tell all mankind that they have been bubbled [i.e. deceived] for ages, and he is the wise man who sees better than they."

Johnson's reason for detesting Hume was simple: he thought anyone who promoted impiety was unprincipled, if not necessarily personally immoral. He also viewed Hume as intellectually irresponsible, claiming that he promoted impiety without ever having made a serious study of Christianity. Johnson (and Burke as well) felt, as Boswell put it in his journal, that "Hume and other infidels . . . destroyed our principles and put nothing firm in their place."

Johnson, like many 18th-century writers, often discussed morality by referring to the passions. He agreed with Hume that the passions could not be suppressed, but unlike Hume he thought that they could best be regulated with the help of traditional religion. He took a dim view of the notion advanced by Hume and other writers associated with the Scottish Enlightenment—especially Hume's mentor, Francis Hutcheson—that morality stemmed from an innate moral sense or from what Hume called the "natural virtues."

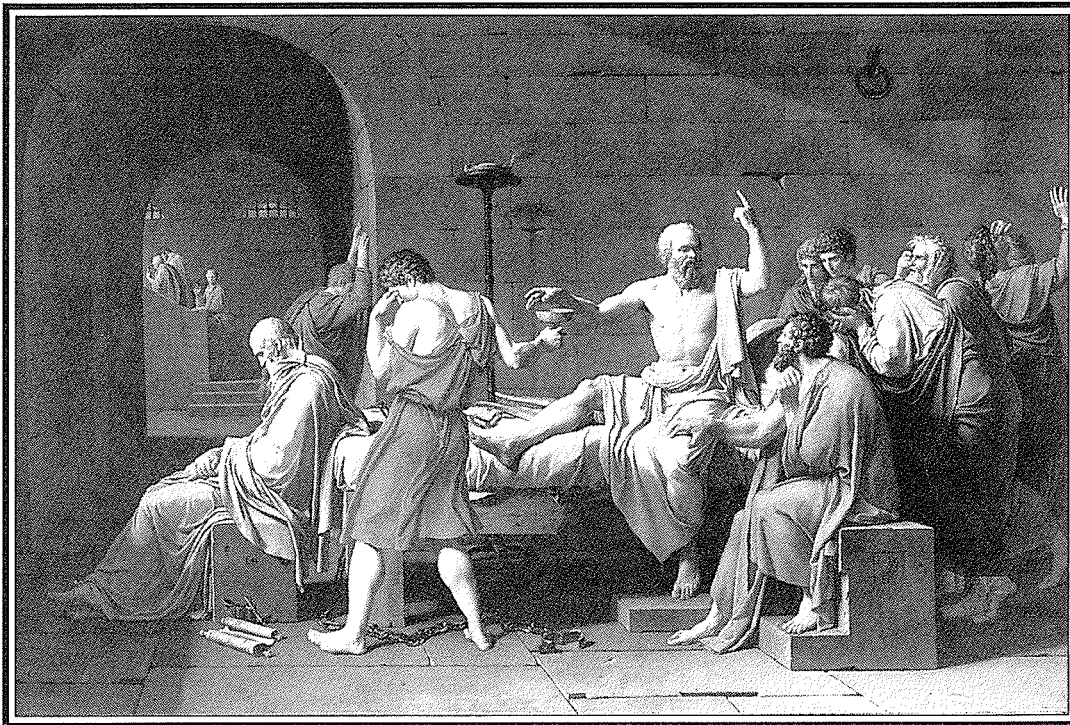
But Johnson was going against the current of an age that in various ways was seeking to build morality on a foundation other than religion. Morality, it was argued, stemmed from the "natural" passion of benevolence or sympathy. It was also argued that in some people—an uncommon few—morality stemmed from an extraordinary self-command, from a stoic ability to control one's passions, so that one could, for example, face impending death tranquilly. In mid-18th-century France, the anticlerical philosophes often sang the praises of those pagan philosophers—Socrates, Cato the Younger, and Seneca—who chose martyrdom rather than compromise their virtue and integrity. There was a veritable cult of Socrates. Diderot, who owned an intaglio

ring with a carving of Socrates' head, thought of writing a "philosophic drama" on his death, and Jacques Louis David painted *The Death of Socrates* (1787). Gibbon, who was friendly with the philosophes when he lived in Paris in the mid-1760s, was affected by this cult. In a footnote in the *Decline and Fall*, he implied that Socrates was a more heroic figure than Jesus, for "not a word of impatience or despair escaped from the mouth of the dying philosopher."

Even in England and the American colonies, where anti-Christian sentiment was much weaker among artists and intellectuals than in France, there was a vogue for paintings portraying the noble deaths of great men. The American painter Benjamin West launched his career with a depiction of the death of Socrates. After settling in London, he achieved his greatest popular success with *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), a heroic tableau showing the last moments of the British officer who fell while taking Quebec from the French in 1759. In England, the cult of heroic virtue increasingly centered on the deaths of great national figures rather than those of pagan philosophers.

The interest in heroic deaths did not mean that most of the English embraced secular explanations of morality. Indeed, there was a religious revival of sorts in the 1750s, and by the 1770s deism was probably a waning force. The Scottish poet, philosopher, and essayist James Beattie was lionized by the English literary world for his polemical tract, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1770). Johnson and Burke praised the book—Johnson saying that "Beattie has confuted Hume." The latter was irritated by all the praise heaped on Beattie, whom he called "that bigotted silly Fellow." The English, Hume said, were "relapsing into the deepest Stupidity, Christianity, and ignorance."

Thus, Hume was an angry man in the mid-1770s—angry, above all, with English



The Death of Socrates (1787), by Jacques Louis David.

"zealots" such as Johnson and other members of the London literary-intellectual world. The celebration of Beattie and the attacks on his own work were proof to Hume that religion was not only false but harmful; it ruined one's mind because it soured the "natural" affections and inflamed the passions. In 1768, he had told Boswell that "it required great goodness of disposition to withstand the baleful effects of Christianity." Hume hoped that both his autobiography and the testimony of those who saw him during his final days might at least persuade some people that virtue had no connection with religious faith.

If religious faith did not help Hume become a man of virtue—and Hume, by all accounts, was a virtuous man—what did? What gave him such self-command? Hume spent a lifetime pondering the springs of morality, noting in the *Enquiry Con-*

cerning the Principles of Morals (1751) that while many scientific questions had been resolved, "men still dispute concerning the foundation of their moral duties." In the autobiography Hume ruminated about his character, but the autobiography of course is not a work of moral philosophy. Moreover, in the autobiography Hume said he achieved a certain detachment, but the central point of Hume's moral philosophy is that such detachment is impossible. One cannot escape the passions—and trying to do so is a mistake. In the *Enquiry* Hume criticized "the perpetual cant of *Stoics* and *Cynics* concerning *virtue*"—meaning their pretension to be "above" the passions. He also attacked "the whole train of monkish virtues," such as celibacy, fasting, penance, and mortification. These misguided efforts to suppress the natural passions have, according to Hume, a terrible effect: "they stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and

sour the temper."

Yet, aside from the question of detachment, the ideas about morality in Hume's autobiography are roughly similar to the ideas he advanced in the *Enquiry*—the main one being that virtue is "natural." To be sure, Hume was aware that "natural" is a very difficult word to define, yet he used it frequently in the *Enquiry* and the autobiography. In the latter, he said that his conduct stemmed mainly from his "natural temper," a phrase he used twice. Hume also said he was "a man of mild disposition, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humor, capable of attachment . . . and of great moderation in all my passions." Hume's ability to regulate his passions, it seems, depended heavily on the luck of having been born with the right "natural" qualities. He was, as many 18th-century writers would have put it, a "good-natured" man.

Johnson never attacked Hume in print, yet he took issue with the idea that morality is somehow "natural." He once said that "man's chief merit consists in resisting the impulses of his nature." Disputing Rousseau's assertion that pity is a natural passion, for example, Johnson argued that "Children are always cruel. . . . Pity is acquired and improved by the cultivation of reason."

Johnson believed that in a world where religious principles were considered a smaller component of morality than "natural" feelings and tempers, an increasing number of people would find it difficult to govern their passions. Indeed, many would end up persuading themselves that they were prisoners of their passions and that there was nothing they could do to control them. Johnson did not deny that people possessed different tempers or dispositions, but he thought that making so much of one's temper or disposition eroded free will. Being moral was hard work. Those who underestimated this struggle to control the

passions, who argued that good-natured people had no trouble being moral, were misguided. "We can have no dependence upon that instinctive, that constitutional goodness which is not founded upon principle," he instructed Boswell.

Thus the controversy surrounding the death of Hume was not about whether Hume could be tranquil in the face of death—only Boswell was preoccupied with this question. The controversy was about Hume's ideas: the idea that morality was not tied to religion and the idea that religion inflamed the passions, turning people into zealots who formed violent factions that threatened political stability. Johnson and Burke agreed that religion could be a politically destabilizing force. Johnson's description of the Puritan revolution in his *Life of Butler* (1781) is as negative as Hume's description in his *History of England*. Yet he thought that on balance Christianity was a positive force.

Smith, much as he admired Hume, thought his elder was wrong to attack traditional religion so violently. He hoped that in the long run most people would embrace deism, or what he called "rational religion," but he was willing to give traditional religion the benefit of the doubt. It "affords . . . strong motives to the practice of virtue, and guards us by . . . powerful restraints from the temptations of vice," he observed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).

Smith recognized that religion could be a politically destabilizing force, but he was hopeful that religious zealotry could be contained through a kind of free market approach. "The interested and active zeal of religious teachers can be dangerous and troublesome only where there is either but one sect tolerated in the society, or where the whole of a large society is divided into two or three great sects," he wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*. "But that zeal must be altogether innocent where the society is divided into two or three hundred or perhaps

as many as a thousand small sects, of which no one could be considerable enough to disturb the publick tranquillity."

Late in his life, Gibbon also decided that the good aspects of traditional religion outweighed the bad. He was so shocked by the excesses of the French Revolution that he sided with Burke, its most profound critic. "I can almost excuse his reverence for church establishments," Gibbon wrote in his autobiography. The situation in France, Gibbon thought, revealed that anticlericalism could breed a fanaticism that was more dangerous than religious zealotry.

Hume's failure to persuade even Smith and Gibbon, however, was not exactly Johnson's triumph, since Johnson's skepticism about "natural" morality fell upon deaf ears. In the late 18th century, traditional religion was powerfully influenced by what many historians have called "the sentimental revolution"—a loose cluster of ideas advanced by the Scottish moral-sense theorists, as well as by Rousseau, especially in *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761). Man was naturally good, in the new view, and the passion of benevolence was a strong force in human beings. Morality was a function of strong feeling—a feeling that was pleasurable.

In the *Sentimental Magazine*, a journal published in the mid-1770s, a writer argued that "moralists . . . must be sensible that

precept will never prevail against sentiment; writing that edifies should arouse 'the tear of compassion.'" Oliver Goldsmith wrote of one character in his *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) that his "greatest pleasure was in doing good." A contemporary reviewer of Goldsmith's novel praised "the exemplary manner in which it enforces the great obligations of universal BENEVOLENCE: the most amiable quality that can possibly distinguish and adorn the WORTHY MAN and the GOOD CHRISTIAN!" A person's sensibility—that is, his ability to feel strongly—often became the chief criterion in judging his character.

Thus Johnson and Hume—the reigning men of letters in late 18th-century England and Scotland and the main protagonists in the great debate about religion, morality, and political stability—were odd men out. Their views were rejected by the mainstream of British thought: Johnson's because he opposed the age of sentiment, Hume's because he rejected traditional religion. Yet their ideas speak powerfully to questions we loudly debate today: What are the foundations of morality? Does religion inflame the passions or help to regulate them? More than 200 years later we are still seeking answers to the questions that were raised by the death of David Hume.

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