



Hume and the Enlightenment

13 & 14 July 2009

The Historian Hume And The Rewriting Of History

Friedrich von Petersdorff (Germany)

There is more than one reason to read Hume's historical writings anew – despite the fact that they do not represent the actual and newest findings regarding the events and developments described. Some of today's readers may, for example, be interested to see how the events in question were viewed more than two centuries ago and how perspective and emphasis have changed since then. Others may wish to read Hume's histories to gain a better understanding of the common ground of both his philosophy and his historical research – the question of how to relate Hume's philosophical beliefs and his method of historical writing still being a matter of discussion. In my paper, however, I do not attempt to explore these aspects and, therefore, do not present an analysis of his historical findings in comparison to the results of earlier or later historians. Nor is it my intention to propose an additional analysis of the relation of Hume's thoughts and writings as a philosopher and as a historian. Rather, I am interested in analysing some epistemological and methodological aspects of Hume's historical writings.

In his historical publications Hume seeks to provide an impartial account of past events. Furthermore, he attempts to abbreviate and to summarise previously historical publications as it would take too long for his contemporaries to reread all the relevant sources. Hume achieves these goals by presenting the past as viewed from the perspective of a spectator. Having carefully examined previous accounts he gives voice to the various persons involved in the historic actions. It follows that Hume, in his historical writings, not only meticulously takes into account the available sources but, furthermore, rewrites the past. He rearranges the stories to be found in documents and historiographical accounts in such an order that the various aspects of the specific story are presented within a new perspective. Hume's historiography, therefore, can be considered to be one of many steps leading to modern historical scholarship.

Among the various aspects to be taken into account when discussing epistemological questions of historiography is the unavoidable necessity to rewrite history now and again. Since the times when Hume himself was rewriting history it has become apparent within historical scholarship that history is, among other things, also a process of constantly rewriting previous findings. The specific causes for rewriting are numerous, such as known sources

being reevaluated, additional documents becoming available, or new questions being asked. This rewriting of previous historical accounts leads, however, to important implications regarding the desired objectivity of historical scholarship: the necessity to rewrite history does indeed result in epistemological problems such as the questions of truthfulness and of the temporal validity of historical research.

For Hume, however, living at a time when historiography (as we know it today) began to develop, these epistemological questions were not yet apparent. It appears to be, therefore, worthwhile to reread Hume in order to assess the scope and limit of Hume's method of writing history and, thereby, to achieve a better understanding of the steps leading to the current level of historical scholarship. Comparing and contrasting the role and the epistemological problems of today's historiography with the one more than two-hundred years ago enables not only a better understanding of the development of historiography but also of the importance of Hume's contribution to historiography.

The purpose of my paper is to describe the problems and aspects concerning the rewriting of history and then to present a reassessment of Hume's work as a historian and as a philosopher of the Enlightenment. I intend to underline the continuing importance and relevance of Hume's contribution as a historian with regard to the development of historical thought. Furthermore, by reflecting on Hume's view on the rewriting of history it is possible to compare Hume's historiography and current historical scholarship. A new light can then be shed on Hume's historical writings by re-evaluating his work from the perspective of historical epistemology and methodology, i.e. not by analysing the specific results of his research. In my paper I shall come to the conclusion that the historical writings by Hume are not yet to be forgotten as reassessing the historical work of Hume will result in a new understanding not only of Hume but also of the ties between the project of Enlightenment and later thoughts on historical change and development.