



Hume and the Enlightenment

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Was David Hume a satirist?

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If by this one means ‘Did Hume write texts that can be definitively labelled satires?’ then the answer is straightforwardly no. However, satire is better understood as a rhetorical mode rather than a formal genre. In other words, very few texts are generically satires (perhaps only formal verse satires in the manner of Horace and Juvenal, by the narrowest and most defensible definition). Yet vastly more texts have satirical dimensions. For example, Dickens’ *Bleak House* is a novel that contains within it a satirical attack on the English legal system. Current scholarship on satire suggests that it is more meaningfully pursued as an adjective, ‘satirical’, than as an abstract noun, ‘satire’.

It is this modal and adjectival use of satire that might be discernible in some of Hume’s works. There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that it is worth looking:

- The broad prevalence of satire as a rhetorical norm in early eighteenth-century British (the Scriblerians, Fielding, Hogarth, Gibbon) and continental (Voltaire, the encyclopédistes) culture.
- Hume’s general reputation as an ironist, irony being a rhetorical trope often employed in satire.
- The fact that Hume identified Jonathan Swift as the author of ‘the first polite prose we have.’ (‘Of Civil Liberty’, *Selected Essays*, ed. Copley and Edgar, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; 52)

I propose to look in some of the more likely places – the *Essays* and the writings on religion – to attempt to discern if Hume’s prose is ever or often satirical. My preliminary observation, to be tested more thoroughly in writing the paper, is that satirical moments do occur, and that they tend to be in tension with Hume’s deeper philosophical purposes. Though satire claims to be a rhetoric of truth, it is too impatient, too inclined to appeal to the emotions and common conviction rather than careful ratiocination, to sit comfortably within a philosophical project as philosophy was coming to be understood at this stage in the British Enlightenment.