

# Maybe it's time to reconsider Hume

## Books by University Staff

BY DALE BARBOUR  
The Bulletin

There's more to David Hume than *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

In fact, as philosophy professor Neil McArthur finds in his new book *David Hume's Political Theory: Law, Commerce, and the Constitution of Government*, there's plenty to be found in some of Hume's less philosophically intense books than meets the eye.

"David Hume was a Scottish philosopher in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote what we would call proper philosophical works on the existence of the external world and how the mind works," McArthur said. "But they didn't make a big splash when they were released. With the *Treatise*, he took a decade writing it and had a nervous break down along the way. But when he published it nobody read it."

In fact, when Hume was alive it was his popular press works that garnered him more attention and more income – works such as the six volume *History of England* along with a series of essays he wrote on everything from political thought to economics.

"They were best sellers, which I think shocked him," McArthur said.

There have been a couple of schools of thoughts about his other works.

"People thought they were a bit fluffy and not tied into his deeper philosophical enquiries and they've thought that the ideas found in them are conservative and tell people to defend the status quo or accept the status quo," McArthur said.

The twin set of viewpoints were held by Hume's contemporaries in the philosophy field and by people in academia reviewing his work today. As a result, the essays and other writings are often dismissed as unimportant compared to Hume's signature works such as the *Treatise* and *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.

McArthur said his initial interest in Hume's essays and writings was created by the same thing that

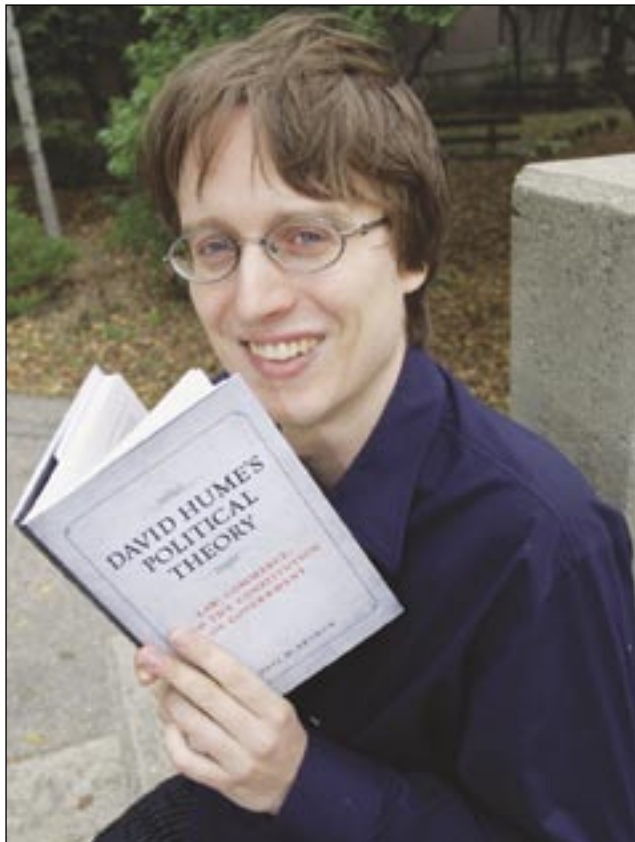


Photo by Dale Barbour

Philosophy professor Neil McArthur offers a new view on David Hume in his book *David Hume's Political Theory: Law, Commerce, and the Constitution of Government*.

made them appeal to people at the time – they were accessible.

"You could pick up these books that were rarely studied and they were enjoyable to read. They spoke to people in a way that they could immediately understand," McArthur said. The essays cover whatever topic jumped into Hume's mind when he was writing.

But when McArthur sat down and worked through the full collection, certain themes started to reoccur and they weren't always viewpoints that had been ascribed

to Hume's more casual writings before.

"I found they were tied back to his more philosophical writings and that there was a program here," McArthur said. "And that was something that scholars had denied before."

Big mistake, says McArthur.

"This book shows that there is an interesting and profound political theory that underlies all Hume's writing and that he has a lot of interesting and liberal things to say about government and views on reforming the society we live in."

In fact, what people have mistaken for conservatism in Hume should rather be taken as caution, McArthur argues.

"His view was, if we try to reform and get carried away things will fall apart," McArthur said. "But the whole reason he's worried about warning people of progress going too far is because he's trying to convince them of the need for progress and reform."

The kinds of reform Hume advocates would probably seem familiar to today's readers. He argued for commerce and trade as an approach to raising the wealth and happiness of the general population.

"It seems banal now, but at the time many people felt money corrupted society and made a bad person," McArthur said. "They looked at people in abject poverty and said, 'Well, that's good.'"

Hume said we should have a society where people can improve themselves. He also weighed in on governance, arguing that people shouldn't get lost in debates about the power of parliament or the monarchy – a focus at the time – but should rather focus on creating equality under the law.

"Hume said let's focus on how government touches on people's lives," McArthur said.

Hume's overall objective was to see society reflect what he considered the best aspects of his own life – a life where he could work during the day and then go off in the evenings to debate and exchange views with his contemporaries.

"He took that as a model for society. He thought it was very important that people be able to meet other people of different backgrounds, talk and develop their moral capacity together."



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## Researchers win support

University of Manitoba astrophysicist Samar Safi-Harb has been awarded a prestigious Canada Research Chair in recognition of her research achievements, and world-renowned mineralogist Frank Hawthorne has had his existing Canada Research Chair renewed for another five years.

The new awards bring the total number of Canada Research Chairs at the University of Manitoba to 49.

The University of Manitoba awards were part of a national announcement made on Sept. 10 in Calgary.

"Building a larger base of scientific expertise and enhancing Canada's international reputation for research excellence are key elements of Mobilizing Science and Technology to Canada's Advantage, our government's new Science and Technology Strategy," said Diane Ablonczy, Secretary of State (Small Business and Tourism), on behalf of Jim Prentice, Minister of Industry and Minister responsible for the Canada Research Chairs Program.

"Our government recognizes the importance of doing more to help transform and commercialize scientific and technological innovations. This in turn will help create better jobs, increase economic growth and improve our quality of life," she added.

The two awards represent an investment of more than \$2 million for the University of Manitoba. The Canada Research Chairs program will contribute \$1.9 million, and the Canada Foundation for Innovation will provide an additional \$125,000 for infrastructure support.

Joanne Keselman, vice-president (research) at the University of Manitoba, said the latest awards are further proof that University of Manitoba researchers are among the very best in the country.

"Drs. Safi-Harb and Hawthorne are both

outstanding scientists, and they are addressing some incredibly complex questions," she said. "The new award for Dr. Safi-Harb is a very significant achievement, and the renewal of Dr. Hawthorne's chair is a clear vote of confidence in his innovative work."

Safi-Harb, physics and astronomy, was awarded a Canada Research Chair in Supernova Astrophysics. She is an expert on Supernova Remnants (SNRs) – the parts that remain after a supernova explodes. Her research is focused on understanding how the remnants of exploding stars evolve and contribute to our galaxy's dynamics, evolution and chemical enrichment.

Hawthorne, a distinguished professor of geological sciences, holds a Canada Research Chair in Crystallography and Mineralogy. He is an expert on the crystal structures in complex rock-forming minerals, and the chemical reactions involved in a wide range of processes that have a significant impact on the environment, including the disposal of nuclear waste, and acid mine drainage.

In August 2007, Hawthorne was named by Thomson Scientific as the most-cited geoscientist in the world.



Samar Safi-Harb



Frank Hawthorne



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