



Hume: A Very Short Introduction

A.J. Ayer

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Hume's "naturalist" approach to a wide variety of philosophical topics resulted in highly original theories about perception, self-identity, causation, morality, politics, and religion, all of which are discussed in this stimulating introduction by A.J. Ayer, himself one of the twentieth century's most important philosophers. Ayer also gives an account of Hume's fascinating life and character, and includes generous quotations from Hume's lucid and often witty writings.

Hume: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Ivars Neiders says

This is not your usual "A very short intriduction" and I would not suggest it as a first book on Hume to a general reader, but if you know some quite general things about Hume's philosophy, the this might be one of the best things to turn next. Ayer's prose is a pleasure to read.

Steve Mitchell says

Not the best of the series as it is a transcript of three lectures rather than a proper book

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Hume: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #33), A.J. Ayer

Hume's "naturalist" approach to a wide variety of philosophical topics resulted in highly original theories about perception, self-identity, causation, morality, politics, and religion, all of which are discussed in this stimulating introduction by A.J. Ayer, himself one of the twentieth century's most important philosophers. Ayer also gives an account of Hume's fascinating life and character, and includes generous quotations from Hume's lucid and often witty writings.

Daniel Wright says

From what I knew of both Ayer and Hume, I was expecting this to be a work of slavish adulation. In fact, it was fairly well-balanced, although Ayer does agree with Hume rather a lot. Where they disagree, Ayer tries to claim that really they agree but Hume just didn't realize it (e.g. arguing that Hume was an atheist rather than a deist). At any rate, the result is a technical work of analytic philosophy rather than introductory-level, so it does not come recommended. The best that can be said of it is that it contains a great number of quotes from Hume himself.

Chapter 1: Life and Character

Chapter 2: Aims and Methods

Chapter 3: Bodies and Selves

Chapter 4: Cause and Effect

Chapter 5: Morals, Politics, and Religion

Steve says

Another fairly demanding read from Oxford's Past Masters series repackaged and reissued as a Very Short Introduction. Here it's Ayer's 1980 treatment of David Hume. It's worth noting this because any complaint from beginners about the use of the word 'introduction' should be directed at the publisher rather than the author who I think has done a magnificent job with this beautifully precise study.

Following a short biographical first chapter, Ayer quickly delves into an exposition of Hume's philosophy, focusing on his aims and methods, his assessment of bodies and selves, his analysis of cause and effect, and his thoughts on morals, politics and of course religion. Rather than focusing on a single work at a time, he switches back and forth between the Treatise, the Enquiry, and so on, extracting and assimilating passages seamlessly into his own examination.

Some have complained that Ayer intrudes too heavily with his analysis, shoehorning in too many of his own thoughts and ideas. Personally I didn't have a problem with it. Ayer was an important philosopher in his own right, and it was inevitable that any scholarly treatment of Hume's ideas would include their vulnerabilities and demand interpretation and critique. On balance, I don't think he overstepped the mark.

This may be a short read, but it isn't a light one, and beginners (I count myself as one) should be prepared to concentrate and even make notes to get the most out of it. If you were expecting Hume for Dummies, you'll likely feel overwhelmed and disappointed. It's worth persevering though. I came away with not only a deeper understanding of Hume's own philosophy but also a capacity to actually reflect on the ideas themselves.

Maram Alshaibani says

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Casey Nicholson says

I agree with what others are saying here: this book is fairly obtuse and reads more as an elongated erudite essay from the author rather than an introduction to Hume's thought. One five-star review notes that the book was originally issued in a different format rather than a "very short introduction". That's all fine and good, but as someone who is a novice to Hume's philosophy, I was looking for somewhat more of a primer as opposed to a dissertation. Did I still glean some things along the way? Sure. But it's not what I was hoping for.

George Millo says

I find the "Very Short Introduction" series to be very hit-and-miss. Some books in the series are great, others are terrible. Here we have one of the latter.

If you're looking for a quick and accessible introduction to Hume's ideas, you won't find it here. The writing style is almost impenetrable - it reads like something meant for academic philosophers, not for a newcomer to the topic. Ayer spends far less time discussing Hume's ideas than he does butting in with his own analysis and counterarguments, often as a sub-clause within a sub-clause within a sub-clause in an unholy wreck of a sentence that takes up half the page, and by the time you reach the end you've forgotten where you started.

This doesn't read like an "Introduction" at all - and upon reading some other reviews, I've discovered why: it wasn't meant to be an introduction. Like several other books in the VSI series, this is a repackaging of a book from Oxford's previous *Past Masters* series, which I can only presume wasn't written for a general audience. After hours spent banging my head against Ayer's incomprehensible verbosity, I don't feel like I know any more about Hume than when I started. A total waste of time.

In short, this is probably the worst VSI I've read, and I've read a lot of them. Steer clear.

EDIT: Since writing this review I've found two sources on Hume which are **much** better introductions. First, the entry for Hume at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (available for free online). Second, the Oxford University Press edition of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which has an excellent 50-page introduction written by Peter Millican which gives an overview of Hume's ideas (with a particular focus on the *Enquiry*, obviously), and puts them in the historical context of the thinkers who preceded him.) I highly recommend starting with one or both of those, and skipping the VSI book.

Timothy McNeil says

Ayer is dead, so this won't offend him.

I don't think he understood Hume's philosophy. He certainly did not understand how to present it in an intelligible manner. If these were the lectures I had covering Hume (and not the portion of a course taught by James King at NIU), I would be thoroughly lost.

This is another VSI the Oxford University Press should revisit.

Napalmolita says

If you don't know anything about Hume, this is NOT the place to start. The author rambles endlessly on tangential details and Hume's own points get lost in the muddle.

M. Ashraf says

It is not a good VSI.

I think you have to have a previous knowledge of his works and ideas before starting the very short introduction and thus the book did not serve its purpose of giving you that introduction.

Maybe I will come back to it at a later time.

Jeroen Berndsens says

NBD|Biblion: [return]De gezaghebbende Britse filosoof Ayer opent met een uitgebreide opsomming van de levensloop van zijn grote voorganger Hume (1711-1776), en maakt vervolgens duidelijk dat Hume beweert dat de menselijke rede niet bij machte is om te bewijzen dat er een wereld buiten onze geest bestaat of dat er een God is. Terecht veel aandacht krijgt Humes opvatting over causaliteit: een noodzakelijke band tussen

oorzaak en gevolg is niet aan te tonen. Alles wat bestaat is opeenvolging, de rest is gewenning. In een te kort hoofdstuk worden dan Humes opvattingen over moraal besproken. Ayer voelt zich erg verwant met Humes standpunten. Dat is goed te merken. Hij verdedigt Hume, soms tegen beter weten in. Het boek is duidelijk geschreven. Bedoeld als inleiding lijkt het me toch iets te gecompliceerd. Deel uit een reeks van vijf inleidingen tot belangrijke filosofen (Plato, Marx, Hume, Montaigne, Wittgenstein), die ook als set te koop zijn*. [return] [return] Ik moet het er mee eens zijn, er zijn beter inleidingen verkrijgbaar, maar dit lijkt ook onder critici de consensus te zijn. Als je echt een beeld van Hume wil hebben zul je toch naar de iets zwaardere lectuur moeten.

Jeremy says

My low rating here has nothing to do with the content of David Hume's ideas, which are actually quite fascinating. It has entirely to do with the author's terrible exposition of them. Rather than give a truly "short introduction" to the basic tenets of Hume's writings, he tediously argues the minutia of them. He is more concerned with responding to Hume than to explaining him to the naive reader. This book is just terrible and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. You can probably get a better (and free) introduction on Wikipedia. For example, Hume is famous for asking of the Christian religion, "Which is more likely, that the whole natural order be suspended, or that a Jewish minx should tell a lie?" This book does NOT contain this quote. How do you skip over that?

I think the following two sentences epitomize what I hate about the author's style. In the first, please take a moment to count all six (SIX!) commas in this nearly unintelligible behemoth. And in the second notice how the author immediately reacts to Hume instead of simply summarizing the idea:

"This goes with the fact, which has been strangely overlooked by the many philosophers, starting with Kant, who have tried to rebut Hume by arguing for the necessity, or at least the probability, of some general principle of uniformity, that its very generality would prevent such a principle from doing the work required of it. I am not sure whether Hume believed that the adoption of the principle which he formulated would legitimize inductive arguments by making them deductive, but if he did, he was mistaken."

I mean this guy cannot take himself out of the book. He is constantly saying Hume was wrong and saying why his own modern ideas are superior. Not exactly what I thought I was getting based on the title. Skip this one, trust me.

Suzanne says

This introduction is more for the serious student of philosophy than for the lay reader who just wants to know a little more about Hume and understand his reasoning. A.J. Ayer, a renowned philosopher in his own right, not only explains but also critiques Hume's work. While undoubtedly stimulating, this risks leaving the less informed reader somewhat confused about the main tenets of Hume's thought.

Michael says

Not actually an introduction, despite what the title suggests. Those without an acquaintance with Hume's ideas or philosophy in general will find this book difficult. Concepts are introduced with sometimes only the

most rudimentary of introductions. Nor is directly about Hume; more the author's critique of Hume and where Hume might be taken further. Still a worthwhile read that rather whets the appetite for tackling Hume's Enquiry itself.
