

The Presidential Address 2007

Lord Stewart Sutherland

In his fascinating and stimulating address, Lord Sutherland, under the title "Is an enlightened society still possible? Hume and the rise of fundamentalist religion", sought to address some of the most important issues of the present day by looking at Hume's approach to problems which in principle are virtually identical to those of today. In his profusely and tellingly illustrated discourse he pointed out that Hume the historian, the man of letters and philosopher - and adornment of polite society - two and a half centuries ago was brought up and lived on the edge of horrors of wars, regicide and revolution in his own country perhaps unthinkable in the Britain of today (although one has only to think of the Balkans over the last century to catch a very similar situation still existing not far away). He himself suffered to a degree from the reaction of the dogmatic and fundamentalist establishment of his day to the rigour and candour of his analysis as a historian and as a philosopher of current thinking. That the foremost philosopher ever to have arisen in Britain was turned down for the two major chairs of philosophy in his own country in favour of nonentities who subscribed to current orthodoxy was a disgrace. For us the consolation is that we have his writings; for him the international reputation which he enjoyed. After all he it was, as Kant acknowledged, who taught that great philosopher to think properly and in France his reputation stood very high.

Lord Sutherland was at pains to stress one point; Hume the sceptic certainly, but not Hume the cynic. For too many of his time and ours the line between scepticism and cynicism is not appreciated or understood, and Hume suffered because he dared to think the unthinkable, say the unsayable and test the limits of received dogma beyond those which conventional, particularly religious, thought was prepared to tolerate. His view of the world, whether as historian, man of letters or philosopher (and it is misleading to seek to hold these as entirely separate and distinct), was founded on three general principles; moderation; empiricism; and pragmatism. Observation not theory should be the basis: the real question is what works? Absolute certainty was to be exposed as the nonsense it is. In opposition to terrorism, the goal of which is to destabilise, the Humean ideal is stability. The problem with religion (as with certain political theories) is its fanaticism, based on a sense of absolute certainty. Mistakes in philosophy are merely ridiculous, whereas mistakes in religion are dangerous. In modern times one can see that fanaticism has become the norm and that not merely in certain religions or aspects of religious belief, but in a wider field. A major consequence has been the aggression generated, arising from the absolute certainty of the fanatic. Aggression is now built into the language of politics: the world of the soundbite excludes polite and scrupulous examination of the relevant matter. Taking the recent exploitation of "human rights" by way of example, Lord Sutherland pointed out how absolutist claims for such rights lead to it becoming merely an empty phrase and so devalued for all of us.

From the pragmatic point of view, Hume had taken the position, in the political situation of his day, that the question republic versus monarchy was the wrong question. The important question was what is the point of government? And that question is as vital today as then. Hume sought to rescue us from over-preoccupation with constitutional minutiae or forms of government. The real object of government was to secure peace and stability for its people, and it was the attainment of these ends that should be the object of law.

In order to attain and secure such peace and stability, cultural change was and is now necessary. First, being polite to each other is a necessary prerequisite. This may sound trivial or simplistic but it is essential for the wellbeing of society that people treat each other with a degree of respect. It is also essential that there be a common language giving us the capacity to use speech with precision and finesse. Inarticulacy lessens the value of the common language and detracts from the attainment of Hume's ideals. Education should have as its aim the production of a society that is polite, articulate, able to discuss, and able to discriminate. If it succeeds in those aims, the power of fanaticism and the fundamentalist approach of absolute certainty will be diminished and a more stable peaceful society emerge.

In the course of the lively discussion which followed, Lord Sutherland accepted that no society had yet attained the Humean ideal and that his title would be misleading if it were taken to suggest that the society of Hume's day represented such ideal, but pointed that there had been times of progress towards the path of enlightenment. He also accepted that there were situations such that they could not but be condemned by all reasonable people. When the meeting reluctantly broke up, the most telling approach of all left with this listener was the link the speaker drew between Hume and Aristotle by reference to those two marvellous phrases "nothing in excess" and "acts form habits and habits form character". Everyone present, I am sure, left hungering for more and looking forward eagerly to the publication of the text.

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