

Ulrich Voigt, *David Hume und das Problem der Geschichte*

Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1975 (= DHPG)

A short summary and evaluation of reviews 1977 - 1979

1977

Prof. Dr. Konrad Fuchs in *Philosophy and History* vol. X (1977)
no.1, p. 123-125:

Voigt's work is an interesting and remarkable contribution
to the subject of history and the attempts to interpret it.

Fuchs remained the only person to notice that DHPG is a contribution
to historical method.

Ulrich Muhlack in *Historische Zeitschrift* Band 225 (1977) S. 104-
106

The achievement of DHPG is seen in demonstrating the unity of
Hume's philosophical and historical thinking. Voigt's arguments are
called "convincing". The arrangement of the material is called
"difficult."

Muhlack himself published a book about the transition of historical
thought from humanism and enlightenment to 19th century historicism
in 1991, which ignores DHPG and lamentably clings to traditional
views.

G.G. in *Bibliographie de la Philosophie* XXIV (1977) No. 672

A concise and excellent summary of the contents of DHPG. The main
aim of Voigt is seen in the endeavour to overcome the traditional one-
sidedness.

I do not know, who "G.G." is.

Manfred Schlenke in *Das Historisch-Politische Buch* XXV / 9
(1977) S. 270-271

A short and superficial summary. Without much sympathy:

There are no concrete facts, only Geistesgeschichte.
In the end *David Hume und das Problem der
Geschichte* presents more questions than answers.

In those years resentment against history of ideas (= Geistes-
geschichte) was strong. Fortunately, the tides have turned again.

Duncan Forbes in the *English Historical Review* (April 1977)

This was by far the most impressive critique of DHPG, and it was a
hostile one. When I read it, I decided to quit my studies. It is only
now that I can look at it with a smile.

What Forbes said, was about this: »Look, how interesting a spectacle,
a German intruder appearing to make an attempt to get into our
garden. And he is serious. And working hard. And he is well
equipped. In his superficial way, he knows the region well. But,
happily, he understands nothing. How could he? Did he live in
Scotland as we did? Go away, stranger, do not look so noisily into our
garden!«

Forbes proved that Voigt understood nothing by demonstrating, that
indeed Voigt misunderstood a detail. And then, after having shot right
dead that German intruder, this Scottish gentleman took a broom to
sweep the frontgarden clean again:

.... in some ways the very competence of a monograph like this
may be an obstacle to a more truly historical history of ideas.

Alas, poor Yorick.

Here comes Forbes' demonstration of Voigt misunderstanding
Hume:

[...] since the links are not made by Hume himself, they
belong more to criticism and literature than to history.

And:

This is a very clever piece of `construing`, but I do not think it justified;
i.e. Hume himself does not present the problem [...] in quite this way.

I quote this in detail, so you can follow my argument with more ease:
I regard these words as proof, that Forbes' historical methodology

was simply that of the scissors-and-paste-history. Here, he explicitly banned me out of his farmland because I did not use the scissors-and-paste method. I did never defend myself against this amateurish bullshit, but lost courage. It was not the first time that a mighty champion of the scissors-and-paste-history tried to struck me mouse-dead. And I am not Don Quixote. At least I had the satisfaction or rather consolation to see, that I had succeeded in scaring Scottish patriots with what they apparently felt to be some sort of German V2.

1978

Notker Hammerstein in *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* (1978) Nr.2.

A Hammerstein calls DHPG a remarkable study, which stands contrary to traditional opinions about the relation between Hume the historian and Hume the philosopher. He likes the way, Hume is continuously imbedded in the context of European historiography. He expects a positive impulse on Hume studies in the future.

B Hammerstein dislikes the form of representation. He is missing a continuous narration.

C Hammerstein is reluctant to accept a general notion like “the historian of the 18th century”, because such a thing does not exist in reality.

But look, what a difficult problem. Does there exist something like “the zebra”? I thought it legitimate to talk in that way as long as your thoughts keep clear enough.

Arno Seifert in *Historisches Jahrbuch* (1978) S.417-418.

A Seifert declares himself unable to detect, what after all is new in DHPG because Voigt does not argue against existing positions.

B Seifert accuses Ulrich Voigt of arrogance in regard to his fellow historians.

C Seifert is upset with the form of the representation.

D Seifert accuses the author of a non scientific approach.

A He was right: I just stated my position. For the non-expert, I thought, polemic would be boring. Reading on almost every page, that the author forwards some new thesis, would certainly create a strangely conceited impression; the expert, on the other hand, would just know by himself. Oh! lack of experts proved to be disastrous for DHPG.

B There was something in that, too. As I thought that I was the first scholar to investigate seriously into this Hume historian – Hume philosopher complex, I tried to explain, why this was so. After all, my claim sounded, to say the least, exaggerated. So many very keen persons did study all of Hume's work during the last 200 years! Did they? I argued (DHPG p. 149) that the historians did not study the philosophical works of Hume at all. They restricted themselves to the *History of England*, which is written in so elegant a style, that it is not easy to detect underlying philosophical assumptions or implications or even puzzles. Hume's Essays, being non-narrative, already lie quite outside their scope. Hume's *Treatise* is far behind their horizon. Worse even. Because Hume lived in the 18th century and everyone knows that scientific history started with Niebuhr and Droysen and Ranke, Hume is not a historian to be taken seriously. As it seems, this has not yet changed in the least, look, for example at Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung. Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus*, München 1991! On the other hand there are the philosophers (= the historians of philosophy) who do regard Hume with respect and who certainly are prepared for difficult problems. But their concern is with "philosophical problems" or with "philosophical notions". Their eyes are directed towards abstraction. Do they carefully study Hume's *History of England*? No, they definitely don't. But Berger, *Negative Kausalität. Soziale Welten bei Hume und Bakunin*, Augsburg 1993 S. 103 ("Hume und die Aufklärung") proves, that they should.

C Two very different points are meant.

F i r s t the arrangement of paragraphs.

Here Seifert and Hammerstein are right. Mislead by the example of Wittgenstein, and, by the way, of Collingwood himself, I used an

algebraic numbering of the form 4.1.1. / 4.1.2. etc. without giving explicit headings. The reader of DHPG must continuously think for himself and find out, what this or that paragraph is about. In 2001, I therefore decided to write an explicit table of contents.

S e c o n d l y the division in “text” – “notes” – “documents” .

This is not very usual, in fact it stands rather contrary to reading habits. But I still would like to defend it. If I had mingled notes and text together, the book would certainly have appeared much more difficult. Now the reader has the choice. The text presents a narration which you can follow step by step. The most important relations to Hume’s surroundings are already incorporated. On the other hand, he can, perhaps when reading the book a second time, look at the notes, which lead to more or less independent channels.

If I had left out the documents, the non-expert reader would be quite helpless, when he tried to understand or criticize my findings. After all, to pick out all those passages in Hume’s work is not really an easy task.

D This has two aspects (1) and (2), but neither did convince me.

(1) Seifert cites the following passage (DHPG p.9):

I am discussing the thoughts and problems of Hume insofar as they for reason of their sheer factual relevance – which means independently of the fact that perhaps other thinkers did take notice of them or came to think in the same line as he did – represent general thoughts and problems of the time.

Seifert called this the avowal of a non scientific attitude and accused Voigt of arbitrary judgment, nay, of libertinage.

Indeed, the difficult question as to how historians come to generalize, was at stake. There used to be a saying with historians of classical antiquity: “Once is never, twice is always”, which, of course, is not very convincing, nor in theory, nor in practice, the truth being that, to put it simply: “Once is always”, and that, precisely, was my point. If we found in the works of Archimede a solution of an infinitesimal problem, this would be at once a fact of general relevance for “antique mathematics”. Here we are again at Hammerstein’s concern with the abstract. I do not see, how to avoid the problem.

(2) Seifert accuses Voigt in using Collingwood as a guide to interpretation.

Unfortunately this was not substantiated by Seifert. But it clearly shows that Collingwood is known to German historians, though as a negative symbol.

1979

Reinhard Brandt in *Philosophische Rundschau* (1979) Heft ¾

Here DHPG is presented together with Duncan Forbes work. Brandt: Whereas Forbes accentuates historical concepts, Voigt stresses philosophical principles. Brandt comes to the conclusion, that “identity” is the key notion in Voigt’s *Hume the historian* and “causality” in his *Hume the philosopher*.

Brandt then misses in DHPG a clear distinction between Hume the historian and Hume the philosopher, demanding, that Hume’s Treatise and his History of England should have been analysed separately and independently before being brought together. Mixing all of Hume’s work together, as Voigt did, is called a very bad and unclear method of interpretation. Besides, Brandt has doubts if Voigt really hits the Humean point or, rather, he suspects Voigt of false extrapolation. When, for example, Voigt writes that according to Hume history is first perceived by man as a mere mass, a mere and formless aggregation, Brandt suspects him to extrapolate a notion from Max Weber into the Humean text.