



# The Unusual Sources of the Enlightenment

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This essay is adapted and edited from ***How an 18th-Century Philosopher Helped Solve My Midlife Crisis - David Hume, the Buddha, and a search for the Eastern roots of the Western Enlightenment*** by Alison Gopnik, published in The Atlantic.

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In 1734, in Scotland, a 23-year-old was falling apart. As a teenager, he'd thought he had glimpsed a new way of thinking and living, and ever since, he'd been trying to work it out and convey it to others in a great book. The effort was literally driving him mad. His heart raced and his stomach churned. He couldn't concentrate. Most of all, he just couldn't get himself to write his book. His doctors diagnosed vapors, weak spirits, and "*the Disease of the Learned.*" Today, with different terminology but no more insight, we would say he was suffering from anxiety and depression. The doctors told him not to read so much and prescribed antihysterical pills, horseback riding, and claret -the Prozac, yoga, and meditation of their day. The young man's name was David Hume. Somehow, during the next three years, he managed not only to recover but also, remarkably, to write his book. Even more remarkably, it turned out to be one of the greatest books in the history of philosophy: *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

In his *Treatise*, Hume rejected the traditional religious and philosophical accounts of human nature. Instead, he took Newton as a model and announced a new science of the mind, based on observation and experiment. That new science led him to radical new conclusions. He argued that there was no soul, no coherent self, no "I." "*When I enter most intimately into what I call myself,*" he wrote in the *Treatise*, "*I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.*"

Hume had always been one of my heroes. Until Hume, philosophers had searched for metaphysical foundations supporting our ordinary experience, an omnipotent God or a transcendent reality outside our minds. But Hume undermined all that. When you really look hard at everything, we think we know, he argued, the foundations crumble. Descartes at least had said you always know that you yourself exist ("*I think, therefore I am*"), but Hume rejected even that premise.

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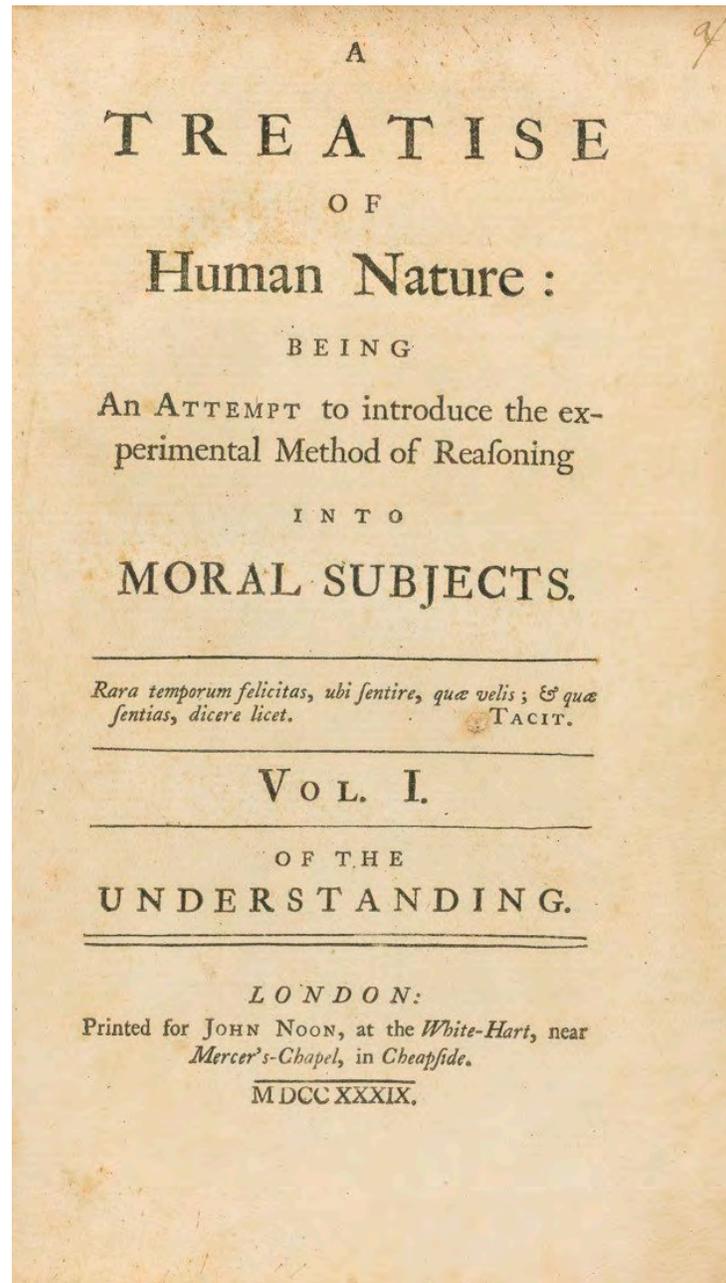


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Hume articulates a thoroughgoing, vertiginous, existential kind of doubt. In the *Treatise*, he reports that when he first confronted those doubts himself he was terrified- "*affrighted and confounded*." They made him feel like "*some strange uncouth monster*." No wonder he turned to the doctors. But here's Hume's really great idea:

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Ultimately, the metaphysical foundations don't matter. Experience is enough all by itself. What do you lose when you give up God or "reality" or even "I"? The moon is still just as bright; you can still predict that a falling glass will break, and you can still act to catch it; you can still feel compassion for the suffering of others. Science and work and morality remain intact. Go back to your backgammon game after your skeptical crisis, Hume wrote, and it will be exactly the same game. In fact, if you let yourself think this way, your life might actually get better. Give up the prospect of life after death, and you will finally really appreciate life before it. Give up metaphysics, and you can concentrate on physics. Give up the idea of your precious, unique, irreplaceable self, and you might actually be more sympathetic to other people.

How did Hume come up with these ideas, so profoundly at odds with the Western philosophy and religion of his day? What turned the neurotic Presbyterian teenager into the great founder of the European Enlightenment? In my office in Hong Kong, as I read Buddhist philosophy, I began to notice something that others had noticed before me. Some of the ideas in Buddhist philosophy sounded a lot like what I had read in Hume's *Treatise*. But this was crazy. Surely in the 1730s, few people in Europe knew about Buddhist philosophy. Still, as I read, I kept finding parallels. The Buddha doubted the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God. In his doctrine of "emptiness," he suggested that we have no real evidence for the existence of the outside world. He said that our sense of self is an illusion, too. The Buddhist sage Nagasena elaborated on this idea. The self, he said, is like a chariot. A chariot has no transcendent essence; it's just a collection of wheels and frame and handle. Similarly, the self has no transcendent essence; it's just a collection of perceptions and emotions.

*"I never can catch myself at any time without a perception."*

That sure sounded like Buddhist philosophy to me -except, of course, that Hume couldn't have known anything about Buddhist philosophy. Or could he have?

Alison Gopnik discovered that at least one person in Europe in the 1730s not only knew about Buddhism but had studied Buddhist philosophy for years. His name was Ippolito Desideri, and he had been a Jesuit missionary in Tibet. In 1728, just before Hume began the *Treatise*, Desideri finished *his* book, the most complete and accurate European account of Buddhist philosophy to be written until the 20th century. The catch was that it wasn't published. No Catholic missionary could publish anything

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without the approval of the Vatican -and officials there had declared that Desideri's book could not be printed. The manuscript disappeared into the Church's archives. She consulted Ernest Mossner's classic biography of Hume. When Hume wrote the *Treatise*, he was living in a little French town called La Flèche, 160 miles southwest of Paris. Mossner said Hume went to La Flèche to "*rusticate*," probably because it was cheap. But he also mentioned that La Flèche was home to the Jesuit Royal College. So, Hume lived near a French Jesuit college when he wrote the *Treatise*. But it didn't really connect him to Desideri, of course, who had lived in Rome and Tibet.

When Alison Gopnik searched the library databases at Berkeley, she found hundreds of books and thousands of articles she could read about David Hume, but only two about Ippolito Desideri: one article and a drastically abridged 1932 English translation of his manuscript. The article had appeared in *Indica*, an obscure journal published in Bombay, in 1986. The author, an Italian named Luciano Petech, mentioned that he had edited a 1952 collection of missionary documents, *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, and that it included some Desideri manuscripts. And he provided an interesting new detail. "*In January 1727*," Petech wrote, "*he left India, once more on a French ship, and arrived in Paris.*" Desideri had come back to Rome through France—one more intriguing coincidence.

It's a remarkable story. In his 20s, Desideri conceived his own grand project—to convert the Indies to Catholicism -and in 1716 he became one of the first Europeans to go to Lhasa, and the first to stay. He was passionate, emotional, and easily exasperated. He was also curious, brave, and unbelievably tenacious. In an early letter written on his way to Tibet, he says he feels as if he is being torn apart on the rack. "*It pleases his divine majesty to draw my whole heart away with sweet and amorous violence to where the perdition of souls is great*," he wrote, "*and at the same time with fastest bonds are my feet bound and drawn elsewhere.*" He kept up that intense pitch in everything he did. Desideri sailed from Rome to India in 1712. In 1714 he began walking from Delhi across the Himalayas to Lhasa -a trek that lasted 18 months. He slept on the ground, in the snow, and struggled with snow blindness and frostbite. At one point, he made his way over a rushing river by clinging precariously to a bridge made of two vine ropes. To get through the Ladakh desert, he joined the caravan of a Tartar princess and argued about theology with her each night in her tent.

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When he finally arrived in Lhasa, the king and the lamas welcomed him enthusiastically, and their enthusiasm didn't wane when he announced that he was a lama himself and intended to convert them all to Catholicism. In that case, the king suggested, it would be a good idea for him to study Buddhism. If he really understood Buddhism and he could still convince the Tibetans that Catholicism was better, then of course they would convert. Desideri accepted the challenge. He spent the next five years in the Buddhist monasteries tucked away in the mountains around Lhasa. The monasteries were among the largest academic institutions in the world at the time. Desideri embarked on their 12-year-long curriculum in theology and philosophy. He composed a series of Christian tracts in Tibetan verse, which he presented to the king. They were beautifully written on the scrolls used by the great Tibetan libraries, with elegant lettering and carved wooden cases.

But his project was rudely interrupted by war. An army from a nearby kingdom invaded, laid waste to Lhasa, murdered the king -and then was itself defeated by a Chinese army. Desideri retreated to an even more remote monastery. He worked on his Christian tracts and mastered the basic texts of Buddhism. He also translated the work of the great Buddhist philosopher Tsongkhapa into Italian. In his book, Desideri describes Tibetan Buddhism in great and accurate detail, especially in one volume titled *"Of the False and Peculiar Religion Observed in Tibet."* He explains emptiness, karma, reincarnation, and meditation, and he talks about the Buddhist denial of the self. It's hard to imagine how Desideri kept any sense at all of who he was. He spent all his time reading, writing, and thinking about another religion, in another language. (Thupten Jinpa, the current Dalai Lama's translator, told Alison that Desideri's Tibetan manuscripts are even more perceptive than the Italian ones, and are written in particularly beautiful Tibetan, too.)

Desideri overcame Himalayan blizzards, mountain torrents, and war. But bureaucratic infighting got him in the end. Rival missionaries, the Capuchins, were struggling bitterly with the Jesuits over evangelical turf, and they claimed Tibet for themselves. Michelangelo Tamburini, the head of the Jesuits, ordered Desideri to return to Europe immediately, until the territory dispute was settled. The letter took two years to reach Tibet, but once it arrived, in 1721, Desideri had no choice. He had to leave.

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Michelangelo Tamburini - Photo by: Wikimedia

He spent the next 11 years writing and rewriting his book and appealing desperately to the Vatican to let him return to Tibet. It had clearly become the only place where he really felt that he was himself. In 1732, the authorities finally ruled -in favor of the Capuchins. His book would not be published and he could never return. He died four months later. Almost at the end of Desideri's book, Alison Gopnik came across a sentence that brought her up short. "*I passed through La Flèche,*" he wrote, "*and on September the fourth arrived in the city of Le Mans.*" *La Flèche?* Where Hume had lived? Could there be a connection after all?

The English Desideri was abridged. Could one find out more in the Italian book of missionary documents that Petech had described in his article? The seven volumes of the 1952 "*I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal,*" never translated or reprinted,

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were delivered to Alison Gopnik from the UC Berkeley storage facility. “*On the 31st (August) around noon,*” Desideri wrote, “*I arrived at our Royal College at La Flèche. There I received the particular attention of the rector, the procurator, Père Tolu and several other of the reverend fathers. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, I left La Flèche.*” So Desideri not only had been to La Flèche but had also talked with the Jesuits at the Royal College at some length. Petech described the history of Desideri’s manuscript in detail. He explained that Desideri had actually written multiple manuscripts about his travels. He wrote the first while he was sailing from India to France, and evidence suggests that he had this manuscript with him as he made his way from France to Rome in 1727. When he got back to Rome, he revised his text considerably, and six months later he produced a new manuscript. In this version, Desideri writes, “*When I returned through France and Italy to Tuscany and Rome, I was strongly urged by many men of letters, by gentlemen and by important personages, to write down in proper order all I had told them at different times.*” The reason? The religion of Tibet was “*so entirely different from any other,*” he wrote, that it “*deserves to be known in order to be contested.*” So, it was possible that Desideri had sent the Royal College at La Flèche a copy of this revised manuscript; the Jesuits regularly circulated such unpublished reports among themselves. But Desideri visited in 1727. David Hume arrived at La Flèche eight years later, in 1735. Could anyone there have told Hume about Desideri?

Hume always described his time at La Flèche with great fondness. In the one letter of his that survives from his time there, he says he is engaged in constant study. La Flèche’s library was exceptional -reading books was a far better way to learn, he notes, than listening to professors. As for reaping all the advantages of both travel and study, he writes, “*there is no place more proper than La Flèche ... The People are extremely civil and sociable and besides the good company in the Town, there is a college of a hundred Jesuits.*” A later letter shows that Hume talked with at least one of those Jesuits at some length. He recalls walking in the cloister of the Royal College, his head “*full of the topics of my Treatise,*” with a Jesuit “*of some parts and learning.*” The Jesuit was describing a miracle, and this inspired Hume to come up with one of his cleverest skeptical arguments. A real miracle, he said, is by definition highly improbable, which means that deception or delusion is always a more likely -and therefore better- explanation. The Jesuit understood this reasoning (he was “*very much gravelled,*” Hume wrote) but said that it simply couldn’t be right, because if it were, you would have to reject not just the miracle in question but all the Gospels.

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“Which observation,” Hume the skeptic noted drily, “I thought it proper to treat as a sufficient answer.” Who was this Jesuit “of some parts and learning?” Could he have been one of the fathers who had met Desideri eight years earlier? And whoever he was, what else did he and Hume talk about?

For a long time, the conventional wisdom was that the Jesuits were retrograde enforcers of orthodoxy. But in the 17th century, the Jesuits were actually on the cutting edge of intellectual and scientific life. They were devoted to Catholic theology, of course, and the Catholic authorities strictly controlled which ideas were permitted and which were forbidden. But the Jesuit fathers at the Royal College knew a great deal about mathematics and science and contemporary philosophy -even heretical philosophy. Hume had said that Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche, and Pierre Bayle inspired the *Treatise*. Descartes graduated from the Royal College, and Malebranche’s most dedicated students had taught there, although the most-fervent Malebranchistes were eventually dismissed. Books by Descartes, Malebranche, and Bayle were in the college library -although they were on the Index, the Vatican’s list of forbidden books. (Hume’s *Treatise* would join them later.) La Flèche was also startlingly global. In the 1700s, alumni and teachers from the Royal College could be found in Paraguay, Martinique, the Dominican Republic, and Canada, and they were ubiquitous in India and China. In fact, the sleepy little town in France was one of the very few places in Europe where there were scholars who knew about both contemporary philosophy and Asian religion.

Twelve Jesuit fathers had been at La Flèche when Desideri visited and were still there when Hume arrived. So, Hume had lots of opportunities to learn about Desideri. One name stood out: P. Charles François Dolu, a missionary in the Indies. The “*Tolu*” in Petch’s book was a transcription error. Dolu not only had been particularly interested in Desideri; he was also there for all of Hume’s stay. And he had spent time in the East. Could he be the missing link?

In the 1730s not one but two Europeans had experienced Buddhism firsthand, and both of them had been at the Royal College. Desideri was the first, and the second was Dolu. He had been part of another fascinating voyage to the East: the French embassy to Buddhist Siam. In the 1680s, King Narai of Siam became interested in Christianity, and even more interested in European science, especially astronomy. Louis XIV dispatched two embassies to Siam, in 1685 and 1687, including a strong

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contingent of Jesuit scientists. Dolu was part of the 1687 group. One of the other ambassadors was another extraordinary 17th-century figure: the abbé de Choisy. The abbé was an open and famous transvestite who gave the ladies of the French court fashion tips. He wrote a very popular and entertaining account of his trip to Siam. Hume had it in his library, along with de Choisy's scandalous autobiography, *The Memoirs of the Abbé de Choisy Who Dressed as a Woman*. The abbé's sexual fluidity was a good example of the adventurous, boundary-crossing spirit of the 17th century, which often leaves the 21st looking staid by comparison.

The Jesuits in the 1687 embassy, including Dolu, stayed in Siam for a year and spent a great deal of time with the *talapoins* -the European word for the Siamese Buddhist monks. Three of them even lived in the Buddhist monastery and followed its rules. Like Desideri's mission, the Siamese embassy ended in bloodshed and chaos. In 1688 the local courtiers and priests revolted against the liberal king and his arrogant foreign advisers. They assassinated King Narai, the new bridge between the two cultures crumbled, and the Jesuits fled for their lives. Several of them died. Dolu and a few others escaped to Pondicherry, in India, where they set up a Jesuit church.

In 1723, after his extraordinarily eventful and exotic career, Dolu retired to peaceful La Flèche for the rest of his long life. He was 80 when Hume arrived, the last surviving member of the embassies, and a relic of the great age of Jesuit science. To Protestant English writers, he was a typical Catholic zealot. On the other hand, Catholic Capuchin writers, Desideri's adversaries, attacked Dolu and his fellow Jesuits for their sympathy toward Hinduism. Dolu joined two other priests to break down the doors of a Hindu temple and destroy lamps and torches. But with Jean-Venance Bouchet, the head of the Indian mission, he also designed Catholic ceremonies that integrated Hindu traditions, and the Vatican disapproved. In fact, Bouchet became a noted scholar of Hinduism and adopted Hindu dress, ascetic practices, and even vegetarianism.

*"There was never a more polite and generous man, nor one more learned about the natural world,"* reported a periodical of the time. The Jesuits brought state-of-the-art 12-foot-long telescopes to Siam and then to Pondicherry, and they made important astronomical discoveries. Dolu had a sense of humor, too, and wrote satirical squibs and plays. An aristocratic intellectual named Saint-Fonds wrote to a friend that as an amusement, back in France, he had invited Dolu to lunch with Robert Challes, an

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intensely anti-Jesuit writer -indeed, an atheist- who had also traveled in Siam and India. Saint-Fonds hoped, he said, to enjoy the furious storm of controversy that would surely result. But instead, “*I found myself in the midst of the gentlest breezes,*” he wrote. “*P. Dolu, the name of the missionary, under a wild beard, is a Jesuit per omnes casus, that is to say, polite and politic, and he understands witty repartee better than a man of the world.*” Dolu was an evangelical Catholic, and Hume was a skeptical Protestant, but they had a lot in common -endless curiosity, a love of science and conversation, and, most of all, a sense of humor. Dolu was intelligent, knowledgeable, gregarious, and witty, and certainly “*of some parts and learning.*” He was just the sort of man Hume would have liked.

Hume had said that Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was an important influence on the *Treatise* -particularly the entry on Spinoza. One of the footnotes in the Spinoza entry was about “*oriental philosophers*” who, like Spinoza, denied the existence of God and argued for “*emptiness.*” And it cross-referenced another entry about the monks of Siam, as described by the Jesuit ambassadors. Hume must have been reading about Buddhism, and Dolu’s journey, in the very building where Dolu lived. Hume could indeed have known about Buddhist philosophy. In fact, he had written the *Treatise* in one of the few places in Europe where that knowledge was available. Dolu himself had had firsthand experience of Siamese Buddhism, and had talked at some length with Desideri, who knew about Tibetan Buddhism. It’s even possible that the Jesuits at the Royal College had a copy of Desideri’s manuscript. Of course, it’s impossible to know for sure what Hume learned at the Royal College, or whether any of it influenced the *Treatise*. Philosophers like Descartes, Malebranche, and Bayle had already put Hume on the skeptical path. But simply hearing about the Buddhist argument against the self could have nudged him further in that direction. Buddhist ideas might have percolated in his mind and influenced his thoughts, even if he didn’t track their source. After all, contemporary philosophers have been known to borrow ideas without remembering exactly where they came from.

Historians have begun to think about the Enlightenment in a newly global way. Those creaky wooden ships carried ideas across the boundaries of continents, languages, and religions just as the Internet does now (although they were a lot slower and perhaps even more perilous). As part of this new global intellectual history, new bibliographies and biographies and translations of Desideri have started to appear,

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and new links between Eastern and Western philosophy keep emerging. It's easy to think of the Enlightenment as the exclusive invention of a few iconoclastic European philosophers. But in a broader sense, the spirit of the Enlightenment, the spirit that both Hume and the Buddha articulated, pervades the story I've been telling. The drive to convert and conquer the "*false and peculiar*" in the name of some metaphysical absolute was certainly there, in the West and in the East. It still is. But the characters in this story were even more strongly driven by the simple desire to know, and the simple thirst for experience. They wanted to know what had happened before and what would happen next, what was on the other shore of the ocean, the other side of the mountain, the other face of the religious or philosophical -or even sexual- divide.

This story may help explain Hume's ideas. It unquestionably exemplifies them. All the characters started out with clear, and clashing, identities -the passionate Italian missionary and the urbane French priest, the Tibetan king and lamas, the Siamese king and monks, the skeptical young Scot Both Hume and the Buddha would have nodded sagely at that thought. Although Dolu and Desideri went to Siam and Tibet to bring the wisdom of Europe to the Buddhists, they also brought back the wisdom of the Buddhists to Europe. Siam and Tibet changed them more than they changed Siam and Tibet. And his two years at La Flèche undoubtedly changed David Hume.



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## References

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