Handsomely presented in classic Oxford style, this volume contains a baker's dozen of Professor Penelhum's papers on the philosophy of David Hume, ten previously published. The good of having these articles conveniently together is enhanced by the value of newly published essays on "Hume, Identity, and Selfhood," "Hume and the Freedom of the Will," and "Religion in the Enquiry and After" (chapters 6, 8, and 11; the Enquiry in question is that concerning human understanding, not that concerning the principles of morals.) Hume scholars well know the high quality, accessible style, clarity, and insight of Professor Penelhum's writings.

Much of the work included in this book was presented at meetings of the Hume Society, a cordial and eminently successful scholarly organization which has immeasurably furthered first-rate work on Hume's philosophy. An inevitable by-product of this fact is another: once one gets much beyond such claims as that the adult Hume weighed more than three pounds and that Hume was not born and raised on the banks of the Nile, everything Humean is controversial. The temptation of a reviewer to say where she disagrees, and why, is supported by this atmosphere, at once creative and frustrating, in which no inch of logical space in possible accounts of what Hume believed is unoccupied. But having already written a book on Hume on religion — about whose contents I am little repentant — and with hopes of writing another on his metaphysics and epistemology, I will resist arguing with Professor Penelhum's readings of Hume, or his views as to where Hume is right and where he is wrong. I wish instead to underline some of the strikingly strong features of this excellent book.

One of its virtues is that it treats Hume as what he plainly was, namely a systematic philosopher. There is a fashion in Hume interpretation to see him as unsystematic, a rebel against system building and system builders such as Descartes. As Professor Penelhum notes "Even now, Hume is little appreciated as a systematic thinker" (p. 1). He records that "as time has gone by I have become increasingly convinced that Hume saw all his main philosophical positions as systematically interrelated" (p. vii). Considering Hume's views on freedom of the will, he is concerned to see "the connections these arguments have to the other parts of his system" (p. 156). The book is a strong defense of the truth that Hume is a systematic philosopher.

If Hume is a systematic philosopher, then questions especially arise as to the overall consistency of his views. Every effort is made to be fair to Hume, exploring what Hume, or a Humean, can plausibly say in response to criticism. (I suspect that some of the hesitation to grant that Hume is a systematic philosopher arises from a combination of a predilection to something like his perspective plus a lack of overall consistency among various of his core doctrines.) A central issue in this regard concerns Hume's treatment of personal identity as it concerns thought and imagination and as it concerns our passions. He seems to show the self out the front door only to welcome it in at the back. Regarding this, Professor
Penelhum perceptively remarks:

Hume may have distinguished between personal identity as it con­cerns the thought or imagination, and personal identity as it concerns our passions, merely in order to prevent the sceptical perplexities of Book I from obtruding themselves in Book II. But ... his distinction is a wise one for more than tactical reasons. For whatever the span of ‘the self’ is taken to be, our emotional life ... requires for its logical structure that the span of the self is given. ... What I take to be myself determines what I can be proud or ashamed of, and not the reverse. The personal identity that concerns the passions has to be one and the same as the personal identity that concerns the thought or imagi­nation. But it is the thought or imagination, and not the passions, that have to determine its boundaries (p. 87).

It follows that the dismissed self is basic to the reintroduced self.

Another important feature of the book is its emphasis on what is per­haps best described as the personal nature of Hume’s philosophy — the individual relevance thereof to Hume himself, and potentially to others. Professor Penelhum sees Hume as “squarely in the Socratic tradition ... because he sees philosophy as a liberating source of self-knowledge” (p. vii). [Note that being Socratic in this sense is perfectly compatible with being (perhaps unSocratically) systematic.] Hume combines a science of human nature with a scepticism regarding our ability, even in principle, to come to true or even rationally justified or evidenced common sense beliefs. Penelhum writes that:

I have tried to offer an interpretation of David Hume the philosopher which relates some of his most famous elements in the philosophy to one another and to David Hume the man ... the personality is itself a manifestation of the message of the philosophy. That message is one of acceptance of our nature as it is (p. 16).

Our nature as it is, according to Hume, is a matter of our being slaves to our passions. We are belief-producers moved by nonrational factors. The effective way of dealing with ourselves as bundles of dispositions and feelings that work their way out in beliefs we cannot escape though we’ve no reason to think them true is by giving in and going with the flow, as “nature” has largely determined that we shall do.

Professor Penelhum’s final chapter, both elegant and insightful, con­cerns two thinkers not often placed together. Pascal and Hume agree that “the non-intellectual components in our natures determine the formation of our beliefs, and the structures of our social relationships” (p. 272-273). We are offered, by both, what purport to be sufficient reasons, good enough evidence, to justify a view of ourselves as passion-driven believers. A second-order belief about belief formation says that we believe what we do not and cannot know. This is asserted to itself be a belief we can refuse even though it is said to enjoy sufficient rational, evidential support. Pascal then moves to Christian theism and Hume to secular resignation.
There are, of course, curious features of this perspective. The account of ourselves is presented as an accurate account, discernible as such in the light of considerations presented on its behalf. So while we are encouraged to an accepting scepticism regarding our beliefs in enduring persons, mind-independent material objects, and causal connections that recognizes but does not despise their groundlessness, we are offered a doctrine of human nature not itself the result of nonrational factors but of philosophical reflection for once not shackled by sceptical chains. Scepticism is tamed just long enough to lay its own foundations. How convenient that it has just these limits, neither more nor less. Penelhum aptly comments:

The very deadlock that Pascal and Hume represent, when we place them one against the other, suggests that it may be mistaken to suppose that we can understand ourselves and our needs without knowing the answers to some of those hard questions about what sort of cosmos we inhabit. If there is a God who wants to reach us, then our needs are likely to be rather different from what they would be if there is not. We seem to need to know whether or not this is so before we know what our real natures are (p. 282).

I've tried to highlight some of the virtues of this fine treatment of Hume. The real Hume appears in its pages.