

DAVID  
HUME  
**EMOTION**



**REASON**  
RENÉ  
DESCARTES

**David Hume would have been a better company spokesperson  
than René Descartes, says Brunswick's JEREMY ZELINGER**

The Enlightenment, a groundswell of scientific and philosophical thought in the 17th and 18th centuries, propelled Europe out of the Middle Ages and heralded an era of progress and innovation that arguably continues today. But what we often think of as a unified movement was in reality splintered between ideological and geographic camps. The differences between two of those camps shed light on why data-driven businesses often struggle to communicate.

The Enlightenment sought to clear away the superstition surrounding much Medieval thought and shine the light of reason and evidence on human understanding. Nowhere was this lesson more thoroughly absorbed than in France, where René Descartes instilled a ruthless emphasis on reason, logic and evidence in later thinkers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire.

Across the Channel, Scottish intellectual David Hume and Irish-born, London-based statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke were more interested in human sentiment, emotions and relationships – aspects of human nature that are impossible to quantify. Where the French saw human organizations as machines that could be taken apart and put back together, the British saw them as impossibly complex networks of human relationships – living organisms that couldn't be completely predictable or easily understood from their individual parts.

In the 21st century, most businesses operate in the tradition of those French Enlightenment philosophers, breaking complex phenomena down to quantifiable bits, working toward a rational explanation for every action. Indeed, any modern CFO might echo Descartes' statement "all things in nature occur mathematically."

The rise of Big Data reaffirms this devotion to numbers. Business leaders rely heavily on insights gleaned from the growing mountains of statistics on customers, operations and products. Voltaire, who was an important contributor to a groundbreaking 1751 encyclopedia, would be overjoyed. Descartes valued reason as the only thing that separates humans from beasts. Were he around today,

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## In communications, human relationships, sentiment and opinions matter as much as data, equations and systems

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Descartes would likely see Big Data as a modern tool for keeping humans human.

And yet, research in a growing number of fields indicates people don't think or behave as the French *philosophes* suggested. Geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists and others have painted a different picture of human behavior, as David Brooks says in his 2011 best-seller *The Social Animal*. The priorities of the British Enlightenment – sentiment, emotions and relationships – describe human behavior as we understand it today better than the French philosophers' reason, equations and data. Imagining these opposing views as armies in a war of reason against emotion, Brooks says, "The French Enlightenment, which emphasized reason, loses; the British Enlightenment, which emphasized sentiment, wins."

To be sure, the British camp acknowledged the power of reason. But they believed that reason is inadequate to explain our behavior. "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them," Hume wrote.

Likewise, Burke believed "untaught feelings" governed behavior. In 1757, he wrote that emotional responses "captivate the soul before the understanding is ready either to join with them or to oppose them." Hume thought internal notions of certainty and identity are actually masks for a far more complex set of dynamics. All of us, he wrote, "are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."

But if human nature is fickle, empathy is constant. The British philosophers recognized this and saw the importance of effective communications in shaping self-identity and purpose.

"No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments," Hume wrote. The British felt communications inspire our emotions; emotions, in turn, inspire individual and collective action.

The leaders of the French Enlightenment, meanwhile, afforded little value to human interaction or sentiment. Even Rousseau, who cared deeply about the role of sentiment, said, "Why should we build our happiness on the opinions of others, when we can find it in our own hearts?"

The British thinkers saw what the French did not: the influence of empathy in shaping not only individual identity and complex networks of relationships, but collective actions, and ultimately society as whole.

**THE DATA REVOLUTION** is making businesses faster and smarter, but it has not changed human nature. As our reliance on data grows, we risk veering too far down the path of the French Enlightenment. Certain situations, especially those where communications are of paramount importance, require an approach more akin to the British Enlightenment. During crises and major transitions, businesses need to be viewed not only as machines, as the French camp would have it, but also as living organisms, as Hume and Burke believed. In communications, human relationships, sentiment and opinions matter as much as data, equations and systems.

The French Enlightenment paved the way for innovations in science and technology. But when it comes to critical communications, the British Enlightenment had better instincts. David Hume would have made a much better company spokesperson than René Descartes.

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**JEREMY ZELINGER** is an Account Researcher in Brunswick's New York office.