

V. EVENEMENTS

REVIEW

Human Character, Hugh Elliot.

Translated by Alexandru Gafton and Adina Chirilă,
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“It is feeling, not reason, that governs the lives of men.”
(Hugh Elliot)

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Abstract:

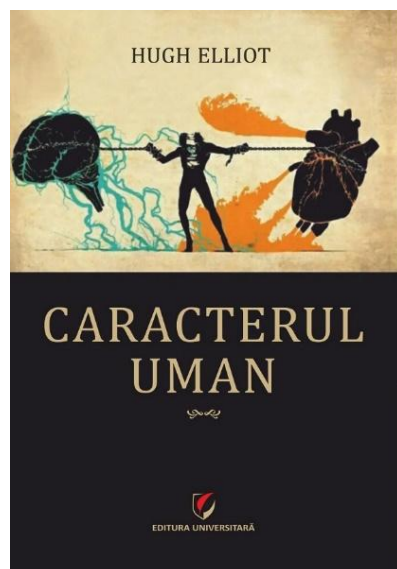
The present review examines Hugh Elliot’s *Human Character* (1922), a work whose central thesis is that feeling, rather than reason, governs human life.

In developing this argument, the British philosopher classifies affective states into major passions – *jealousy, love and the social and religious feeling* –, and minor passions, which derive from these primary emotional forces.

Keywords:

Instinct, major passion, minor emotion, action, reason.

The study written by Hugh Elliot¹, translated by the distinguished linguists



¹ The British scholar Hugh Elliot (1881-1930), renowned for his contributions to philosophy, is best known as the first English translator of Lamarck’s fundamental work *Philosophie zoologique* (published in translation as *Zoological Philosophy*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1914). Prior to the publication of *Human Character*, Elliot had authored several original

Alexandru Gafton and Adina Chirilă² and published in 2026 by Editura Universitară in Bucharest, proceeds from a thesis already advanced in ancient philosophical thought but largely neglected during the 20th century: namely, that emotions and passions govern human actions and are primary in relation to reason and intellect. In this regard, Elliot emphasises:

“(...) *the more we study character the more convinced we become that men’s activities are much less purposive and intelligent than they appear to be on the surface, and far more the mere product of blind emotion or instinct escaping along its normal channels, though outwardly refined and decorated by the veneer of reason and intellect.*” (*Translators’ Preface*, p. 5)

This study contains a wealth of carefully organised information structured around three fundamental components: (i) scientific data of the period, interpreted through an evolutionary perspective; (ii) examples drawn from various literary works concerned with human character, among which Shakespeare’s fiction occupies a prominent place; (iii) sapiential formulae (aphorisms, proverbs, sayings) that condense various aspects of human thought.

As part of the *Characters* series, Elliot’s work contributes to an understanding of science as a dynamic historical process, through which *knowledge* is acquired both by obtaining accurate information and by examining the ways in which erroneous data have been collected. In this manner, the translators note, the work also cultivates a critical spirit.

Furthermore, in their introductory remarks, the Romanian translators draw attention to the fact that the volume does not offer definitive results,

works, including *Modern Science and the Illusions of Professor Bergson* (Longmans, Green and Co., London and New York, 1912) and the critical biography *Herbert Spencer* (Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1917).

The Romanian translation of *Human Character* (originally published in 1922 by Longmans, Green and Co., with offices in London, New York, Toronto, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras) appears in the *Philology* Series of Editura Universitară, Bucharest, edited by Professor Emeritus Petre Gheorghe Bârlea.

² Produced by Professor Alexandru Gafton, a distinguished scholar of general linguistics, the history of the Romanian language and the philosophy and anthropology of language, in collaboration with Professor Habil. Adina Chirilă, a specialist in diachronic linguistics, stylistics and translation studies, this translation succeeds the Romanian translation of *Why Only Us: Language and Evolution* by Robert C. Berwick and Noam Chomsky (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2025), published in the *Interdisciplinary Studies* Series, edited by Professor Marian Preda.

encyclopaedic knowledge or solutions capable of providing a complete understanding of the world. Rather,

“(...) it shows that, generated and governed by physicochemical laws, the Universe presents itself in a myriad of forms, within which countless factors operate, whose intersections give rise to innumerable possibilities, all amplified by a multitude of contexts and concrete effects, themselves inextricably interwoven in hierarchical ways, ultimately constituting a coherent and unified Universe.” (Translators’ Preface, p. 9)

The themes addressed in the chapters are as follows: (a) *The Major Passions*; (b) *Egoism*; (c) *Love*; (d) *Social and Moral Feeling*; (e) *Jealousy*; (f) *Religion*; (g) *The Minor Emotions*; (h) *Thought*; (i) *Action*; (j) *Belief*; (k) *Bovarysm*; (l) *Suggestion*; (m) *Obsessions*; (n) *Fanaticism*; (o) *Genius*; (p) *Vice and Crime*; (q) *Disease*; (r) *Youth and Old Age*; (s) *Body and Mind*; (t) *Heredity and Environment*. These chapters are preceded by an *Introduction* and the section entitled *General Principles* and are followed by a set of conclusions.

In the *Introduction*, Hugh Elliot acknowledges that no established science of *human character* yet exists. He traces earlier attempts in this direction to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. The British scholar maintains that, until the physiological processes underlying mental phenomena are better understood, there can be little hope for the establishment of a genuine science of ethology in this domain.

At times employing a metaphorical style, the author suggests that the study of character lacks the clearly codified paths of inquiry available in the already established natural sciences. At the same time, Elliot does not claim to have founded a new science. Rather, he argues that his endeavour has identified the principal axes of investigation by assembling general scientific data that may eventually lead to the identification of particular traits within a broader whole. What is certain is that the philosopher places biology at the foundation of his study. In addition, psychology, which was acquiring a more realistic orientation during the period, constitutes an essential component of the investigation.

In the first chapter, *General Principles*, Hugh Elliot formulates five principles, beginning with the assertion that the study of character is

fundamentally the study of motives, since the primary data required for such an inquiry are the actions of the individual:

i) the existence of differences in the typology of individuals' mental life, codified through the opposition between *a vigorous and a weak mental life*;

ii) the fact that some individuals are governed by powerful and enduring affects, whereas others are ruled by fleeting emotions, meaning that some people are steadfast while others are inconstant;

iii) the manifestation of varying degrees of suggestibility, a phenomenon explained by the human capacity to adapt to the particularities of one's environment;

iv) the stream of mental life may be concentrated upon a limited number of interests or may diffuse itself, with lesser intensity, across a broader range of concerns;

v) the existence of differences in human actions according to the specific feelings constituting each individual's mental current.

In the section devoted to *the major passions*, which forms the second chapter of the work, the British philosopher challenges theories predating his study that regarded reason as the motivating force of human behaviour. Instead, he argues that human beings are governed by "*feeling*" (*The Major Passions*, p. 36), while reason functions merely as an instrument through which individuals pursue and attain their goals.

Basing his theoretical framework on the relationship between *action and affect*, Elliot incorporates into his argument the idea that human actions are directed toward three principal ends: (a) self-preservation; (b) the perpetuation of the species; (c) the maintenance of society. In response to these three fundamental needs, three basic instincts emerge, each deeply rooted in the human mind. From this premise, Elliot proceeds to describe the emotions associated with each fundamental instinct, thus identifying the major passion that characterises it. The instinct of self-preservation gives rise to various emotions – *egoism, ambition, the desire for power, vanity* etc.; among these, *egoism*, without necessarily carrying a negative connotation, governs the imperative of survival. The reproductive instinct, manifested in diverse forms, falls under the domain of *love*, while the preservation of society is associated with the social and moral feeling.

These three major passions are examined separately in individual chapters. In the chapter entitled *Egoism*, the author describes the range of emotions subsumed under this overarching category, identifying various forms of egoism – courage, industry, self-respect. At the same time, the philosopher emphasises that egoism may assume both noble and ignoble forms. Concerning *love*, Elliot maintains that it is a passion “*far simpler and easier to describe than that of egoism*” (*Love*, p. 61). The same pattern identified in the case of egoism is discernible in love, since this passion may manifest itself in a variety of forms, ranging from the most elevated expressions to the coarsest and most primitive, while remaining deeply rooted in human nature. In this context, the philosopher introduces the factor of time, which he regards as essential to the durability of love, illustrating his point with a passage from Shakespeare:

“*But that I know love is begun by time, / And that I see, in passages of proof, / Time qualifies the spark and fire of it*” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV, 7).

According to Elliot, the social and moral feeling develops later than the first two instincts discussed above. Through the gregarious instinct, he argues, are encoded the conventions that arise from the practices and customs prevailing within a community.

In the following sections of the volume, Elliot examines other forms of emotion, several of which derive from the three primary passions. *Jealousy*, for example, is described as the outcome of a process of transmutation that may affect any of the three major passions. Thus, it may be generated by egoism, by love or by the social feeling. To illustrate the direct relationship between moral feeling and jealousy, the author cites the aphorism: “*Flattery adheres to power and envy to superior merit.*” (*Jealousy*, p. 92).

Another aspect of Elliot’s study of human character is devoted to the minor passions, which themselves arise from the primary emotions. Love gives rise to such minor emotions as friendship and flirtation; the social feeling generates the less imperative prescriptions of convention; while egoism finds expression in manifestations such as greed, vanity etc.

In summary, Hugh Elliot advances the thesis that human motives and actions depend more upon instincts, or upon feelings, than upon reason. The philosopher argues that these feelings are determined, to a considerable

extent, by the individual's constitution, while nevertheless remaining directed toward specific ends.

Hugh Elliot's work presents analyses, commentaries, observations and conclusions that contribute to the deciphering of human behaviour and foster a deeper understanding of human Nature.