

## [22] HUME'S SKEPTICISM

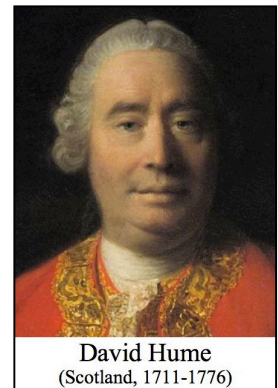
Let's suppose that everything that we've believed about ourselves and of the human situation in the world is true. We have knowledge of the world, and we have it by way of our bodies — to be exact, the sense organs that feed information to the brain by way of perceptions.

Let's now pay close attention to these perceptions, and try our best to limit ourselves just to what's happening at present, excluding any inferences drawn from past perceptions. Suppose I see what we call "a flash of lightning." While having this visual impression (and remember, it's not supposed to involve any of the language that we're using here to describe it, since that brings in past experiences), I may also be experiencing a certain sound — say, a chord from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and I might be smelling a wedge of warm cheddar cheese, and feeling sand in my shoes, and feeling irritated and impatient, etc. At any given moment, I will be aware of various impressions from all or some of my sensory modalities, and from moment to moment the aggregate of these impressions will be different — some will be longer lasting than others, but the sum-total will differ — how else could we mark the passing of time?

If this river of shifting impressions is the starting-point of all our knowledge, then just what sort of knowledge is possible for us?

### THE WELL-TEMPERED PHILOSOPHER FROM EDINBURGH

**David Hume** (1711-76) was a Scottish philosopher familiar with the writings of both Locke and Berkeley, and who advanced in certain ways their findings in epistemology and metaphysics. In traditional outlines of modern philosophy, Hume is portrayed as the third of the great trio of British Empiricists — Locke, Berkeley, and Hume — and without question he was the cleverest of the three. He left the University of Edinburgh at the age of fifteen, having declined to study law, and instead pursued his own course of independent study in philosophy and literature. Far brighter than most of his contemporaries, Hume's early writings languished for lack of readers who could understand them. His massive *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), published when he was twenty-seven years old, was almost universally ignored; in Hume's own words, it "fell dead-born from the press." Those readers who bothered with the work viewed it as the creation of an atheist, skeptic, and immoralist, thus ruining Hume's chances of obtaining the recently vacated chair of Ethics and Pneumatic Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in 1745. So Hume supported himself by working first as a private tutor, then as a secretary, and finally managing to secure the position of Head Librarian in the law library at Edinburgh — a veritable boon, since it offered him quiet and an ample supply of books for carrying out his research. Hume re-worked material in his *Treatise*, publishing this as an *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and an *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). From 1754 to 1762 he began publishing what was to become his much-celebrated *History of England*, a work that secured his reputation as one of Britain's greatest men of letters, and that also left him financially secure for the remainder of his life. His other writings include *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1778); this latter Hume held back to be published posthumously because of its controversial subject matter.



David Hume  
(Scotland, 1711-1776)

We find in Hume an amiable fellow. His friend Adam Smith — the moral philosopher and classical economist — wrote of Hume that "upon the whole, I have always considered him both in his life-time and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will admit."

### IMPRESSIONS, IDEAS, AND THE PROBLEM OF CAUSATION

According to Hume, everything in the mind (and thus, everything of which we are aware) is either an *idea* or an *impression*. Or as Hume describes this in the opening sentences of Book One of his *Treatise*:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*: and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse, excepting only those which arise from the sight and touch, and excepting the immediate pleasure or uneasiness it may occasion.

All ideas are based on impressions, which are those awarenesses in the mind delivered up to us through our senses. Impressions, therefore, are the ultimate building blocks of the universe as we know it.

All our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, in other words, that it is impossible for us to *think* of anything which we have not antecedently *felt*, either by our external or internal senses. (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §7, pt. 1)

What is striking about these impressions is that they are wholly disconnected from one another. As Hume put it in the *Enquiry* (§7, pt. 2), “All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them.” There is nothing in one impression that implies any other. We know, from experience, that flashes of lightning are followed by crashes of thunder; but there is nothing in the impression of the lightning itself that ties itself to the thunder, such that a person who has never experienced lightning and thunder would perceive the lightning and then *expect* the thunder. Indeed, anyone who has spent time with newborn infants will know that they are surprised by nothing at first — presumably because they have not yet formed any expectations of the world. Only after a few months of life can they be surprised. There is nothing in the impression of one billiard ball striking another that suggests that the second ball should fly away at a lesser speed and at a certain angle. The second ball might just as well fly away at twice the speed of the first ball, or explode, or turn into a sparrow, or melt. None of this would surprise a baby (although an explosion might well frighten it); it will surprise only those persons who have learned from repeated past experiences to associate the subsequent impression with the earlier impression. To repeat: there is nothing in the first impression that implies the second impression.

John Locke, of course, believed that the cause of impression A (lightning) is also a cause of whatever causes impression B (thunder): some material event brings about some other material event, and both of these cause their respective mental events (flash of light, peal of thunder). Hume agrees with Berkeley, however, that we know nothing of this matter. We certainly never experience it; all that we experience are impressions, which are mental events, things in the mind. So we are left with the impressions, and they remain causally unconnected. According to Hume, when we say that one thing causes another (for instance, that lightning causes thunder, or that the impact of one ball against a second causes the motion of the second ball to change), all we are saying is that, in the past, whenever we have experienced impressions of the one kind, then experiences of the second kind have followed. The causal connection is, for all we can tell, merely a habit of our mind, a learned association. We are confronted by a river of ever-shifting impressions. We notice certain patterns — impressions of type A are typically followed by impressions of type B — and so we come to say that A *causes* B. But this is only conjecture; we know none of it with certainty. All we know is that, in the past, certain sequences have occurred.

Take a close look at that river of impressions to see what there is. Here are a few things that Hume is pretty sure you won't find: You won't find material substance (you'll find hot, cold, yellow, loud, sweet, hard — but you won't find matter). You also won't find mental substance, that is, a mind or self. You'll find feelings of desire, confusion, boredom, fear, anxiety, restlessness, despair, but you won't find a self experiencing any of this. In a river of impressions, of course, what you'll find are impressions. You also won't find causal connections between impressions (or any other connection, for that matter). Nor will you find God.

## HUME'S FORK

Impressions are not items of knowledge. They are neither true nor false; they simply are. Truth and falsity are properties of propositions, and these propositions are what constitute our body of knowledge, such that it is. "Lightning always precedes thunder" is a proposition. So is "Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo" and "The square root of sixteen is four." How does the mind arrive at these propositions? And how does it decide their truth-value? Hume divides all meaningful propositions into "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact":

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. *That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the two sides*, is a proposition which expresses a relation between these figures. *That three times five is equal to the half of thirty*, expresses a relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by EUCLID would for ever retain their certainty and evidence.

Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise tomorrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind. (*Enquiry*, §4)

Hume's distinction here is roughly the same as Leibniz's distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. Analytic statements are "relations of ideas," while synthetic statements are "matters of fact," and since 'analytic' and 'synthetic' are more widely used and understood than Hume's terms, we'll continue the discussion using the former set of terms.

Analytic statements are entirely tautological and thus tell us nothing about the world. "All bachelors are unmarried men" is analytically true (it is true "by definition"); the predicate "unmarried men" is contained in the subject "bachelors." This proposition doesn't tell us (or claim) that there are indeed any bachelors in the world, or any unmarried men, or even any men. All it's doing is telling us how certain concepts (ideas) are related to certain other concepts: it is a mere "relation of ideas." All propositions of mathematics and logic are analytic.

Propositions are synthetic, on the other hand, if they are built out of impressions; that is, only if every idea in them can be traced back to some impression. Synthetic propositions make claims about the world, and as such must be grounded in our experience (either past, present, or possible future). To say that "thunder follows lightning" is to say something meaningful, because it is based on various impressions we've had. "A unicorn is turning cartwheels in the garden" is meaningful, for although it is false, it indicates what impressions would have to occur for it to be true.

"Hume's Fork" is the claim that every meaningful proposition is either analytic or synthetic; all other propositions are meaningless nonsense. When considering the truth-value of a proposition, we must first ask what kind it is. If it is an analytic claim (e.g., "Every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes"), then it will be necessarily true or necessarily false. If it is a synthetic claim, then we need to look to the world to decide its truth-value (and this truth or falsehood will be contingent, not necessary). But if it is neither analytic nor synthetic, then it has no truth-value, and should be tossed aside.

When we entertain that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. (*Enquiry*, §2)

To return to the question of causality, ask now whether, when you see one billiard ball strike a second, whether there occurs among these various impressions also an impression of the "causal connection." No careful observer can

find one; but if the idea of causal connection is not backed up by an impression, then it is groundless.<sup>16</sup> At best we can say: Events of type A tend to be followed by events of type B. And this brings us to the problem of induction.

### THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION

Inductive reasoning is a mainstay of empiricism and of science in general: we accumulate past experiences of the world and from them conclude how our future experiences will likely go. For instance, I notice over the course of many months that whenever the moon is in the west in the evening, that it is always a crescent with the round side facing west (towards the setting sun), and whenever the moon is in the east in the morning sky the round side is facing east (towards the rising sun), and that whenever the moon is full, it is directly opposite the sun, rising when the sun sets, and setting when the sun rises the next morning. From all this I begin to see a pattern to the phases of the moon, and am even now able to make predictions — for instance, that full moons in the summer will rise in the southeast sky (opposite the sun setting in the northwest sky). What I seem to be learning here is not simply a catalogue of past experiences, but rather some insight into the *nature* of the things — such as the nature of celestial motions. Discovering the true nature of things is, of course, much of what science is all about. So where is the problem with this method of induction?

Hume noticed that inductive reasoning presupposes the belief in the uniformity of nature — for example, that the future will be pretty much like the past, that this sample of water is pretty much identical to that sample of water, that Boyle's Law is true not just for our corner of the universe but for every corner, and so on. The problem, according to Hume, is that this belief in the uniformity of nature is wholly *non-rational* — reason can neither explain nor justify the belief — and that we believe it instead simply out of habit or custom. Hume notes that the only way we might justify believing in the uniformity of nature is inductively: we discover, for instance, that Boyle's Law *is* constant whenever we check it. But trying to prove the uniformity of nature inductively won't do, of course, since it brings us around into a circular argument: we justify induction with the uniformity of nature, and then attempt to justify the uniformity of nature by appealing to induction.

This argument speaks not against induction but against reason. That we quickly learn that water can drown us and that dry wood burns is helpful indeed; that reason is wholly unable to teach us any of this demonstrates just how limited a thing reason is. Hume concludes at the end of §5 of his *Enquiry*:

I shall add, for a further confirmation of the foregoing theory, that, as this operation of the mind, by which we infer like effects from like causes, and *vice versa*, is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures, it is not probable that it could be trusted to the fallacious deductions of our reason, which is slow in its operations; appears not, in any degree, during the first years of infancy; and at best is, in every age and period of human life, extremely liable to error and mistake. It is more conformable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency, which may be infallible in its operations, may discover itself at the first appearance of life and thought, and may be independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding. As nature has taught us the use of our limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves by which they are actuated; so has she implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects; though we are ignorant of those powers and forces on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends.

In raising these problems, Hume has sown the seeds of the Enlightenment's destruction. Reason's grip of authority over human affairs was beginning to loosen, making way for the eventual rise of Romanticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>16</sup> Nor can this be a relation between ideas, since there is nothing in the earlier impression — the first ball moving toward the second ball — that necessarily implies the latter impression of the second ball rolling away. It is clearly conceivable (although unlikely) that some other impression follow, or even that no impression follows (one could fall into a dead faint following the contact of the two balls, for instance).