

# Chapter 7

## Hume

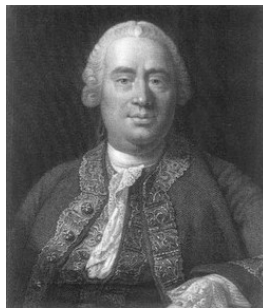


Figure 7.1: Hume

### 7.1 Introduction

#### 7.1.1 Life and works

- 1711-1776
- Calvinist family
- Goes to the university at 12
- Refuses to pursue career in Law: wants to be a scholar and philosopher
- Studies philosophy: he thinks it is his duty to open “a New Scene of Thought” in philosophy (*My Own Life* – autobiographical essay)

- First work written while in France : *Treatise of Human Nature*, from which he “castrated” the essay on miracles, in order to please Bishop Butler – this had not been enough: Hume acquire a reputation of atheist which will never leave him: HE WILL NEVER OBTAIN ANY ACADEMIC POSITION
- Military expedition with his cousin St. Clair : Quebec and Brittany
- Librarian at the Cambridge University – works on a *History of England* – has to resign due to complains against his choices (“offending volumes”)
- Diplomat in Paris
- Back to England: *Enquiries* and other works
- last years: works on the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, for which he arranged a posthumous publication

### 7.1.2 Hume’s philosophy in a nutshell

- Empiricism vs. metaphysical systems
- Method: Hume and Newton
- Empiricism and Scepticism
- Hume and Religion

## 7.2 Human Understanding

### 7.2.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, selections from sections 2 to 4, part I, LMP, pp. 75-79
- Study Questions:
  1. What is the distinction between impressions and ideas? Define both terms and explain the difference between them. Give an example.

2. What are the two arguments that Hume gives for his claim that “all our ideas [...] are copies of our impressions [...]”?
3. Explain the thought experiment about a person who has never seen a particular shade of blue. Why does it constitute an objection to Hume’s theory of ideas? What do you think of his answer?
4. What are the three principles of connexion between ideas, according to Hume? Give some example for each one.

### 7.2.2 Impressions and Ideas

All the materials of thinking consists in either Impressions or Ideas.

- Distinction between perceptions, emotions, etc. (IMPRESSIONS) and memories or reflections of perceptions (IDEAS OR THOUGHTS)
- The strength of the perceptions distinguishes them, and we would not really mistake them.
- Claim. All ideas derive from our inner (reflection) or outer sentiment (sensations).
- Argument 1. All ideas are resolved into simple ideas copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment.

This is the COPY PRINCIPLE: an empirical principle (based on experience)

Example: God’s qualities are especially like this.

- Argument 2. Defects in organs lead to defects in ideas. A blind man has no sense of color.
- The exception is perhaps a shade of color which has not been perceived before, but can be imagined. That is perhaps the sole exception.

As it stands, Hume’s answer is unsatisfactory. Two questions:

1. Is there a way to construct the idea of the missing shade of blue?
2. Could metaphysical ideas be constructed in the same way?

If Hume’s philosophy can stand, we must find a way to answer yes to

1. and no to 2. Otherwise, Hume seems to be in trouble.

- Is there a way to construct the idea of the missing shade of blue?

Yes: Mixing mental paints

Note that even if it has been constructed, the idea of the shade of blue is still simple

- Could metaphysical ideas be constructed in the same way?

This seems not plausible: would you think that you can construct the idea of monad for example in the way described above? Metaphysical ideas are far too complex.

### 7.2.3 Hume, Definition and Meaning

Hume gives a method for philosophical inquiry.

- Many philosophical dispute rely on problems of definitions, that is, on the obscurity of ideas.
- Definitions from terms to terms are unsatisfactory – circle of obscurity – we need another way to define the meanings of our words.
- The copy principle, or, more precisely *the reverse of the copy principle* give a criterion of meaning: From what impressions were the ideas derived?

Any ideas which cannot be traced back to a set of simple ideas/copies of simple impressions is meaningless!!

- Many philosophical ideas are thus rejected as meaningless, or beyond our understanding.
- Note the difference with Descartes: “all ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure” !

### 7.2.4 Connexions between ideas

- Hume is the first to elaborate the notion of ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS – he says himself that he is the “inventor” of the principles of association of ideas (in the *Abstract* of the *Treatise*)

- It is one of Hume's merits to have established rules for the construction of ideas *which do not suppose a rational mind with specific abilities*. These rules are *natural* and *empirical*:
  - natural as opposed to due to mere thinking – they are specific to humans;
  - empirical as opposed to a priori – our justification for taking them as rules is experience.

SO: Hume has an account of how ideas, even abstract ideas, are constructed, an account which does not appeal to any a priori principle or specific abilities of human reason.

#### EMPIRICISM

- Note that this also means that these rules do not necessarily conduct to truth: natural tendencies are no legitimate ground for truth. Natural rules explain but do not justify our beliefs.

So: whatever are the effects of the association of our ideas has to be assessed. In particular cause and effect!

- Three principles for the connection between ideas:
  - resemblance
  - contiguity
  - cause and effect

## 7.3 Knowledge, justification and scepticism

### 7.3.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, selections from section 4 and 5, LMP, pp. 79-90
- Study Questions:
  1. Explain the difference between relation of ideas and matters of facts. Give examples of each. What principle does Hume take to be the base of all our reasonings on matters of fact?
  2. Explain Hume's argument that our expectation that the sun will rise tomorrow cannot be grounded on any reasoning, either a priori or a posteriori. If we accept this, what are the consequences for our knowledge of the physical world? of laws of nature?
  3. If not by reasoning, by which process do we come to expect that objects of similar appearance will have similar effects?
  4. Explain why Hume considers that his explanation is satisfactory enough, even if it does not provide the "ultimate reason" for our propensity to expect that objects of similar appearance will have similar effects (bottom of p.85).
  5. According to Hume, what makes us believe in the truth of matters of facts, in comparison to fictions? What are the necessary condition for believing in something? Remember that the will was an essential part of belief for Descartes: does Hume agree on this point with Descartes? Who do you think is right on this one: do we choose to believe or not that something is true?
  6. The title of the section is: "Sceptical solution to these doubts". Why do you think Hume calls himself a sceptic? In what sense do you think he is a sceptic? In what sense do you think he is not?

### 7.3.2 Knowledge: Relations of ideas and matters of facts

- Relations of Ideas v. Matters of fact.

- Relations of ideas are a priori, their truth can be certain and discovered by thought alone, their contrary implies contradiction. Their truth is independent of what is existent in the world.

ex: the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right in Euclidian Geometry.

ex: the notion of square circle implies contradiction: we cannot even conceive it clearly

- Matters of fact are a posteriori, their truth is never provable a priori: their contrary is always possible because it never implies contradiction. Matters facts can be true or false.

ex: As Hume says: that the sun will not rise tomorrow is perfectly intelligible.

NOTE: An a priori proof against a proposition can only be that it leads to contradiction, but in that case it could not be distinctly conceived by the mind.

- What can established a matter of fact?

Observation and memory are obvious candidate. But what about matters of facts of which we do perceive actually or that we do not remember?

Claim: all our reasonings concerning matters of facts are founded on the relation of cause and effect

Claim: Only the relation of cause and effect allows us to go beyond the evidence given by our senses and our memory

Ex: classic example of irrational belief: the dorms will close next year.

- The question arises: what are the grounds of our knowledge of cause and effect? How do we know that something is the cause of something else?

*The following is a direct quote from Morris, William Edward, "David Hume", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/hume/>. Text in bold font is my addition. I also changed the page numbers*

### 7.3.3 Causation and inductive inference: the negative phase

Hume proceeds first negatively, to show that our causal inferences are not due to reason, or any operation of the understanding. Reasoning concerns either relations of ideas or matters of fact.

**Causal Relations are not provable a priori:** Hume quickly establishes that, whatever assures us that a causal relation obtains, it is not reasoning concerning relations between ideas. Effects are distinct events from their causes: we can always conceive of one such event occurring and the other not. So causal reasoning cannot be a priori reasoning.

**Causal Relations are discovered by experience :** Causes and effects are discovered, not by reason but through experience, when we find that particular objects are constantly conjoined with one another. We tend to overlook this because most ordinary causal judgments are so familiar; we have made them so many times that our judgment seems immediate. But when we consider the matter, we realize that an (absolutely) unexperienced reasoner could be no reasoner at all (EHU, 80). Even in applied mathematics, where we use abstract reasoning and geometrical methods to apply principles we regard as laws to particular cases in order to derive further principles as consequences of these laws, the discovery of the original law itself was due to experience and observation, not to a priori reasoning.

**The so-called laws of nature are discovered by experience, not a priori. But, if all our knowledge of matters of facts are based on experience, how do we extend our reasoning to future cases?**

**The problem of inductive reasoning** Even after we have experience of causal connections, our conclusions from those experiences are not based on any reasoning or on any other process of the understanding. They are based on our past experiences of similar cases, without which we could draw no conclusions at all.

But this leaves us without any link between the past and the future. How can we justify extending our conclusions from past observation and experience to the future? The connection between a proposition



that summarizes past experience and one that predicts what will occur at some future time is surely not an intuitive connection; it needs to be established by reasoning or argument. The reasoning involved must either be demonstrative, concerning relations of ideas, or probable, concerning matters of fact and existence.

**Induction is not justifiable by any a priori deductive argument:** There is no room for demonstrative reasoning here. We can always conceive of a change in the course of nature. However unlikely it may seem, such a supposition is intelligible and can be distinctly conceived. It therefore implies no contradiction, so it cannot be proven false by a priori demonstrative reasoning.

**Induction is not provable by any a posteriori probable argument** Probable reasoning cannot establish the connection, either, since it is based on the relation of cause and effect. What we understand of that relation is based on experience and any inference from experience is based on the supposition that nature is uniform that the future will be like the past.

**Assuming the uniformity of nature is question begging:** The connection could be established by adding a premise stating that nature is uniform. But how could we justify such a claim? Appeal to experience will either be circular or question-begging. For any such appeal must be founded on some version of the uniformity principle itself the very principle we need to justify.

**Conclusion: our reasonings concerning matters of facts beyond the evidence of our sense**

This argument exhausts the ways reason might establish a connection between cause and effect, and so completes the negative phase of Hume's project. The explanatory model of human nature which makes reason prominent and dominant in thought and action is indefensible. Scepticism about it is well-founded: the model must go.

Hume insists that he offers his sceptical doubts about the operations of the understanding, not as discouragement, but rather an incitement to attempt something more full and satisfactory (EHU, 80). Having cleared a space for his own account, Hume is now ready to do just that.

### 7.3.4 Causation and inductive inference: the positive phase

*I am still quoting Morris. "T" stands for Treatise.*

**What the principle of our causal reasoning can be** Hume's negative argument showed that our causal expectations are not formed on the basis of reason. But we do form them, and if the mind be not engaged by argument it must be induced by some other principle of equal weight and authority (EHU, [not in our selection]).

This principle can't be some intricate or profound metaphysical argument Hume overlooked. For all of us ordinary people, infants, even animals improve by experience, forming causal expectations and refining them in the light of experience. Hume's sceptical solution limits our inquiries to common life, where no sophisticated metaphysical arguments are available and none are required.

#### **Causal relations are grounded on the custom of constant conjunctions:**

When we examine experience to see how expectations are actually produced, we discover that they arise after we have experienced the constant conjunction of two objects; only then do we expect the one from the appearance of the other. But when repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation we always say, that this propensity is the effect of Custom (EHU, 43).

So the process that produces our causal expectations is itself causal. Custom or habit determines the mind to suppose the future conformable to the past. But if this background of experienced constant conjunctions was all that was involved, then our reasonings would be merely hypothetical. Expecting that fire will warm, however, isn't just conceiving of its warming, it is believing that it will warm.

**What makes us believe** Belief requires that there also be some fact present to the senses or memory, which gives strength and solidity to the related idea. In these circumstances, belief is as unavoidable as is the feeling of a passion; it is a species of natural instinct, the necessary result of placing the mind in this situation.

Belief is a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit that results from the manner in which ideas are conceived, and in their feeling to the mind. It is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain (EHU, 49). Belief is thus more an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures (T, 183), so that all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation (T, 103).

This should not be surprising, given that belief is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures. 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 than to trust it to the fallacious deductions of our reason (EHU, 55). Hume's sceptical solution thus gives a descriptive alternative, appropriately independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding, to philosophers' attempts to account for our causal reasonings by appeal to reason and argument. For the other notions in the definitional circle, either we have no idea of force or energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can mean nothing but that determination of the thought, acquired by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect (T, 657).

*End of quote*

**Conclusion and Discussion** - "Custom is the great guide of human life":

Hume considers that custom is one of the main principles, or law of human nature. Custom is the *natural* way in which humans go beyond immediate experience and memory. It is a natural and empirical law: it describes a natural process (by contrast to innate ideas or innate principles of logic) and it is derived from observation.

It is a sufficient explanation in the sense that no other cause can be given that would improve the explanation. Hume is following Newton here: we cannot go any further without framing hypotheses that go beyond experience, and hence, are not verifiable.

In particular, Hume will not postulate "mental powers" to explain the mechanism of custom, just Newton did not postulate any "gravity power" in the material bodies. This would be going beyond experience and hence would not have any further explanatory value.

The law of custom is:

1. a good explanation
2. supported by experience
3. the best we have – no alternative does a better job

By inference to the best explanation, we can accept it.

- Belief as a sentiment that accompanies an idea is all there is in knowledge. Such sentiment is a kind of vivacity. Now, we know that ideas are always faint, while impressions are vivid. Hence, there must be some impression that explains how an idea becomes more vivid. A necessary condition for belief is thus that we have an impression first.

So: All knowledge resolves at the end in our impressions and natural instincts.

An important consequence: will is not what makes us believe – Against Descartes, Hume denies that we could truly doubt the existence of the world.

- Notion of “mitigated scepticism”: act according to the teachings of experience, but recognize that there is no objective ground to it.