

Hume's Empiricism

David Hume (1711-1776) is a Scottish philosopher who, with the possible exception of Kant, is historically the most important philosopher of 18th Century. Oddly enough, Hume never held an academic position; he tried to gain such employment twice, once in 1744 at the University of Edinburgh (see “Letter from a Gentleman” p. 115-124) and also later in 1751 at the University of Glasgow. Both times he was rejected due to outrage by the Scottish clergy, who accused him of atheism.

Hume's epistemology is rooted in the tradition of British empiricism, with specific debts owed to Locke and Berkeley. Empiricists are opposed to the Cartesian thesis that reason (not sensation) is the truest possible way to know the world. The empiricists take the opposite position, arguing that sensation is the only way one can truly know anything.

Hume's larger book, *A Treatise of Human Nature* was published 1739, and “fell dead-born from the press” as he later put it. After writing an anonymous review of his own book to encourage interest, he then broke down the book into three short epistles. The shorter version of the *Treatise* Book I is “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,” first published 1748. The Enquiry divides into two halves: the first part of the *Enquiry* (§§2-6) outlines Hume's positive epistemology, while the second half (§§7-11) deals with applications of this outline to specific philosophical problems.

Rationalism and Empiricism (§1)

Hume begins by juxtaposing two models of the mind. The first is empiricism, which views the human mind as “chiefly as born for action.” The other, rationalism, treats us as “a reasonable rather than active being.” Throughout this introductory section his rhetoric makes clear the side which he is on, calling empiricism “easy and obvious,” and rationalism is “accurate and abstruse.” Empiricism, he says, “will always, with the generality of mankind, have preference above the accurate and abstruse.”

Recall that Descartes' system was based upon the premise that the careful use of reason can be used to understand the true nature of reality, and to formulate truths about the world. These metaphysical conclusions which Descartes discovers are scorned by Hume as “not properly a science,” which arises from “the fruitless efforts of human vanity . . . or from the craft of popular superstitions” (6). Hume's empiricism is *not* an epistemological basis for metaphysics, like Descartes' system. Indeed, speculation into most metaphysical questions Hume will avoid outright. The only way to properly settle these disputes on philosophy, he thinks, is to “enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects” (6).

Ideas (§2-3)

For empiricists in the Lockean tradition, Descartes' notion of innate ideas was considered ludicrous. For Hume, as with Locke, one is born without any content whatsoever in the mind (*tabula rasa*). Locke speaks of the mind as an “empty cabinet.”¹ Just as one can put things into the cabinet, or take inventory of what things are already in there, so too with the mind. These are its two basic functions: sensation and reflection.

Hume makes an important distinction (borrowed from Locke's *Essay*) between the perceptions or

1 Locke, *Essay* I.ii.9

impressions as he calls them, and the reflection on said sensations, *ideas* (or simply, 'concepts'). This bifurcation is justified insofar as it is readily obvious that impressions have more “force or vivacity” than do mere ideas. Thinking about or remembering an experience is not the same as being there. “The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation” (10). One of the most premises of Hume's epistemology is what is often referred to as the *copy principle*. Stated generally, it says that all ideas are copies of the impressions received by the sense-organs. It follows—as one would expect from an empiricist—that all ideas are derived from impressions for Hume.

Ideas, which include the memory of prior sensations and those created by the imagination, are all created on the basis of sensations. Although it is possible to imagine things that we have not seen, this amounts to nothing more than “the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded by the senses and experience.” (11) Take for example a golden mountain. This can be imagined since I have the idea (from having at one time the impression) of golden-things and mountains (11). He also seeks to explain our idea of God in a similar way, which just is just an augmentation without limits the idea we have of ourselves (11-2). A similar conclusion follows from the fact that those deprived of senses (for example, a blind person) cannot form ideas of certain sensory concepts (red). A possible exception is noted, Hume's rather confusing “shade of blue” argument (12-3).

Other than the creation of ideas, the mind is also responsible for associating these ideas together to make a complete whole. “It is evident,” he tells us, “that there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity” (14). The principles of connection include resemblance (appearing similarly), contiguity (being under the same type similarly) and cause and effect. He gives some examples of each at the end of §3.

Skeptical Doubts (§4)

Hume divides connections between concepts into two classes: *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact*. These two correspond to our contemporary terms *analytic* and *synthetic*, respectively. Relations of ideas are those like mathematical and conceptual truths, and are understood through the “operations of the mind” (that is, knowable *a priori*). What is distinctive about relations of ideas is that their negation implies a contradiction. Matters of fact on the other hand do not have the certainty that relations of ideas have. The negation of a matter of fact implies a possibility. Rough examples might be “the ball is round” (relation of ideas) and “the ball is red” (matter of fact).

The second part of §4 introduces Hume's famous “problem of induction.” All matters of fact, he tells us, are founded upon the relation of cause and effect. Since cause and effect are matters of fact, they are therefore not *a priori* knowable (17). There is nothing one can see in the cause (water) that will inform one of the effect (drowning), and no process of reasoning can lead one from the properties of the cause to that of the effect. “Every effect is distinct from its cause” (19). But if matters of fact are founded upon experience, then one might rightly ask what experience tells me of this? Since every cause and effect are independent events, and all knowledge is garnered from the senses, what is the impression of the “secret power” of cause and effect? Well, certainly past experience informs me that certain events will have determinate effects. But past experience only applies to itself, and gives no certainty of future happenings (21). If there is a process of reasoning here, Hume challenges the objector to state that reasoning (22). Thus, Hume is led to the conclusion that all matters of fact, including the cause-effect relation itself, cannot be certain; there is no way of knowing absolutely whether a given effect will follow from a cause (23).