Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

David Hume, 1711-1776

1. Introduction, Theory of Ideas and Conceptual Empiricism

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Hume's Most Relevant Works

- *T: A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40)
  - Book 1 is on epistemology and metaphysics; Book 2 on the passions (1739); Book 3 on morals was published with a famous Appendix (1740).
- *A: Abstract of the Treatise* (1740)
  - Summarises the *Treatise*'s "Chief Argument".
- *E: Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*
  - Many editions from 1748 to 1777. More polished than the *Treatise*, but less comprehensive.

Find all Hume's texts at www.davidhume.org …

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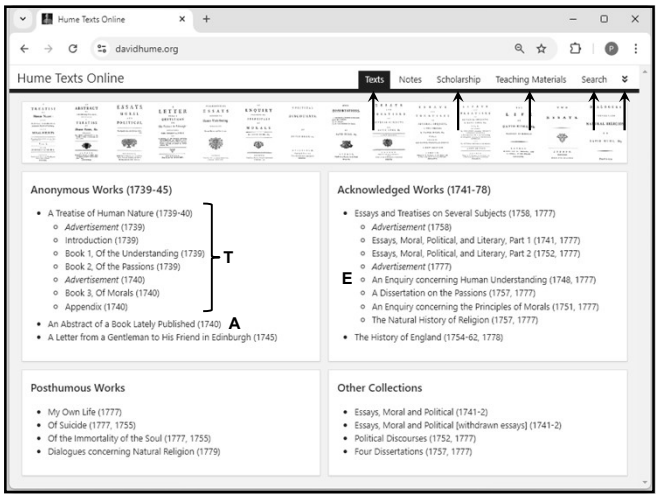

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www.davidhume.org

- Click on "Texts" to see the menu of texts as shown on the previous slide.
- Click on "Search" to search the texts:

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- Click on ⌄ to jump to a specific text reference (e.g. T 1.3.2.11, A 27, or E 4.13).
- Click on "Teaching Materials" to find links to:
  - Previous lectures on Hume (2010, 2011, 2018) together with handouts (including for 2021).
  - "Outline of Humean Texts": annotated summaries of some of the most important sections of the *Treatise*, to aid comprehension and reference.
  - "Analysis of Hume's Sceptical Texts" – as above, but focusing on sceptical topics.
  - "Notes on Particular Topics" – more opinionated discussions of other key topics.
- Click on "Scholarship" to find over 50 of my papers on Hume, and handouts from many talks.

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Aims of the Lecture Series

- The aim is to help you to understand Hume's main texts and arguments, and to complement the other resources provided, by:
  - Conveying the big picture, to appreciate the overall shape and force of Hume's theoretical philosophy;
  - Helping you to take advantage of the "outlines" and "analyses" to read and understand the texts efficiently, and to focus on their key points;
  - Highlighting and explaining the main interpretative debates, and why they matter;
  - Drawing your attention to relevant secondary literature;
  - Preparing you for the Early Modern examination.

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For More Background …

- To maximise efficiency towards these aims, we will not here be looking deeply at the *historical* or *biographical* background of Hume's ideas. But it is good to understand something about these.
  - For historical context, see the General Philosophy lecture pages at https://www.millican.org/genphil.htm (e.g. 2018 lectures 1 and 2, and lecture 3 as far as slide 26).
  - For more systematic coverage and detail, see "Introduction" under "2007" at https://davidhume.org/scholarship/millican.
  - For biographical context, see Lecture 1 in the 2018 series at https://davidhume.org/teaching/lectures.
  - For biographical philosophy, see "Hume's Chief Argument" under "2016" at https://davidhume.org/scholarship/millican.

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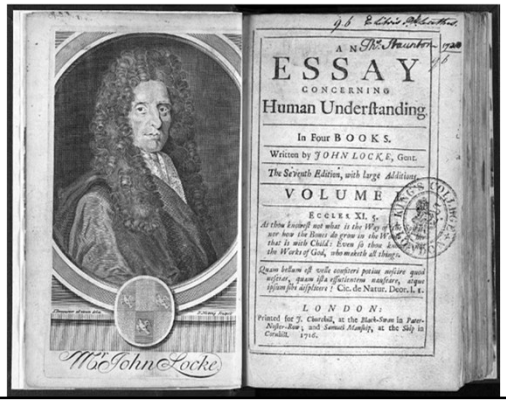
1(a) The Lockean Inheritance



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Descartes's "Way of Ideas"

- René Descartes (1596-1650) took all our understanding and knowledge to start from "ideas" in the mind – an *internalist* perspective that took hold for centuries.
- Some ideas he took to be "innate" and divinely implanted (e.g. the ideas of *God*, and of *extension* i.e. *matter* (see *M* 3 AT 7:37-8; *CCB* AT 8B:357-61).
- Other ideas come through the senses – some of these correspond to real properties of material things (e.g. shape and size); others do not (e.g. colours, sounds, odours, tastes). Locke later called these *primary* and *secondary* qualities respectively.

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Locke's Reaction to Descartes

- Locke follows Descartes by conceiving mental content in terms of "ideas" (and advocates the primary/secondary distinction), but a principal aim of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) is to deny that any of our ideas are innate.
- Book 1 – entitled "Of Innate Notions" – focuses on denying that we have innate *principles*.
- Book 2 – "Of Ideas in general, and their Original" – was probably more influential, purporting to explain how all our ideas are derived from experience, i.e. to establish *concept-empiricism*.

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Two Kinds of "Empiricism"

- Distinguish *concept-empiricism*:
  All our ideas derive from experience
  (i.e. *contra* Descartes, there are no innate ideas)
  from *knowledge-empiricism*:
  All knowledge of the world derives from experience
  (i.e. no "synthetic a priori knowledge", *contra* Kant)
- Locke is a committed concept-empiricist, but he is *not* a pure knowledge-empiricist. (Hume is strongly empiricist in *both* senses.)

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What is an "Idea"?

- Locke defines an *idea* as
  "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks"
  (*Essay* I i 8)
- This is supposed to include all types of "thinking", including perception and feeling as well as contemplation. So our *ideas* include thoughts and sensations, and also "internal" ideas that we get from *reflection*.

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"White Paper" and "Two Fountains": *Sensation* and *Reflection*

- "Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any *Ideas*; How comes it to be furnished? … To this I answer, in one word, From *Experience* … Our Observation employ'd either about *external, sensible Objects*; *or about the internal Operations of our Minds* … These two are the Fountains of Knowledge, from whence all the *Ideas* we have … do spring." (II i 2)

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Ideas on a Mental Stage?

- The theory of ideas tends to portray the mind as *passive*, with mental acts being understood in terms of the activity and qualities of "ideas":
  - *seeing* a tree involves having a visually vivid *idea* of a tree "in front of the mind";
  - *thinking* about a tree involves having a less vivid *idea* of a tree;
  - *feeling* a pain involves having an *idea* of a pain;
  - *desiring* chocolate involves having a "*positively charged" idea* of chocolate.

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Humean Ideas and Impressions

- Hume considers Locke's usage of "idea" too broad, so adopts different terminology:
  - An *impression* is a *sensation* (e.g. from seeing a blue sky, smelling a flower, or physical pain) or a *feeling* (e.g. anger, desire, disapproval, envy, fear, love, or pride);
  - An *idea* is a *thought* (e.g. about the sky, or about a pain, or about the existence of God);
  - A *perception* is either an *impression* or an *idea*. (So Hume uses the word *perception* to cover everything that Locke calls an *idea*.)

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An Obvious Distinction?

- Hume seems to think that the impression/idea distinction is a fairly obvious one, between (roughly) *feeling* – including both feelings of sensation and of reflection – and *thinking*:

  "I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking." (*T* 1.1.1.1)

- This indeed seems to be how he mainly thinks of the distinction, but as we'll soon see, he muddies the waters by seeming to define it in a different way (in terms of "force and vivacity").

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"Sensation" and "Reflection"

- Hume follows Locke in calling the two sources of ideas "sensation" and "reflection" (*T* 1.1.2.1, cf. *Essay* II i 3-4), but there are differences …
- First, whereas Locke takes for granted that we have "sensitive knowledge" of the existence of external objects (*Essay* IV xi), Hume describes the impressions of sense (e.g. perceptions of colour, taste, smell, bodily pain) as arising "in the soul originally, from unknown causes" (*T* 1.1.2.1). This suggests from the start a more sceptical attitude towards the senses.

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Humean Reflection

- Impressions of *reflection* are "deriv'd in a great measure from our ideas", particularly the ideas of pleasure or pain that arise when we feel e.g. "heat or cold, thirst or hunger" (*T* 1.1.2.1).
- *Thinking* or *reflecting* about pleasures and pains gives rise to "desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be call'd impressions of reflection because deriv'd from it". Hume also calls these *secondary* impressions (*T* 2.1.1.1-2). At *T* 1.1.6.1 Hume says that impressions of reflection are either *passions* (e.g. the desire for something) or *emotions* (e.g. happiness).

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"Reflection": A Contrast with Locke

- When Locke discussed ideas of *reflection*, his focus was very different from Hume's:

  "By *REFLECTION* ... I ... Mean, that notice which the Mind takes of its own Operations, ... by reason whereof, there come to be *Ideas* of these Operations in the Understanding."

  "... such are, *Perception*, *Thinking*, *Doubting*, *Believing*, *Reasoning*, *Knowing*, *Willing*, and all the different actings of our own Minds;" (II i 4)

- Locke seems to overlook *passions* and *emotions*; Hume is more interested in these, but seems to overlook *mental operations*!

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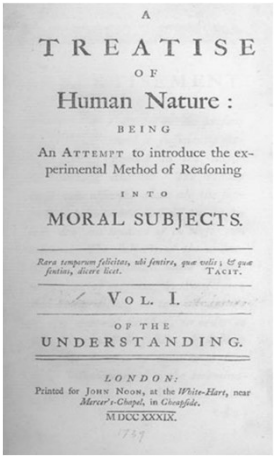
Hume's Copy Principle and the Simple/Complex Distinction


A
TREATISE
OF
Human Nature:
BEING
An ATTEMPT to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning
INTO
MORAL SUBJECTS.
Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quæ velis; & quæ sentias, dicere licet. TACIT.
VOL. I.
OF THE
UNDERSTANDING.
LONDON:
Printed for JOHN NOON, at the White-Hart, near Mercer's-Chapel, in Cheapside.
MDCCXXXIX.

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Hume's Conceptual Empiricism: A First Approximation

- To a first approximation, Hume's conceptual empiricism is the claim *that all of our ideas* (i.e. thoughts) *are derived from impressions* (i.e. sensations or feelings).
- But Hume takes conceptual empiricism more strictly than Locke, insisting (again to a first approximation) *that all of our ideas are copies of impressions, which almost exactly resemble the corresponding impressions*.

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Conceptual Empiricism: Refining the Approximation

- Obviously, some of our ideas (e.g. of a unicorn) are not copies of any single impression.
- Hume acknowledges this, but wants to insist that all of the *content* of our ideas is copied from impressions – we might say that ideas are entirely composed of *impression-copied content*.
- His way of dealing with this is to draw a distinction between *simple ideas* (which are directly copied from simple impressions) and *complex ideas* (which may be constructed from simple ideas)

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Simple and Complex Ideas

- At *Treatise* 1.1.1.2, Hume divides all ideas and impressions into *simple* and *complex*:

  "Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts."

  – Hume writes as though this distinction is really straightforward, but it isn't! Take, for example, the idea of a red circle: that seems to be a complex idea, but what exactly are the parts, and how many (maybe two: the red colour, and the circular shape, or maybe the size also)?

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Spatial Ideas and Atomism

- At *Essay* II v 1 and II viii 9, Locke describes the ideas of *space*, *extension*, and *figure* – i.e. shape – as simple (though II xiii on "the simple modes of space" complicates the story a bit.)
- Hume has a much stricter "atomist" view of spatial ideas, taking them to be formed of *minima*, in much the way that a computer image is formed of individual coloured pixels. *T* 1.2.1.4 describes how an ink spot can yield a minimal impression.

  – *Extension* and *figure* arise only when we have *multiple* minima, hence complexity (e.g. *T* 1.2.3.15).

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Hume's Copy Principle

- Hume's *concept-empiricism* is expressed in his "first principle" (*T* 1.1.1.12) which is now commonly known as his *Copy Principle*:

  "*that all our simple ideas [i.e. thoughts] in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions [i.e. sensations or feelings], which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*." (*T* 1.1.1.7)

- Hume sees this as a more precise formulation of Locke's denial of innate ideas (as he makes explicit at *Abstract* 6 and *E* 2.9 n. 1).

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Weaponising the Copy Principle?

- The 1748 *Enquiry* boldly flourishes the Copy Principle as a weapon against bogus ideas:

  "When we entertain ... any suspicion, 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." (*E* 2.9)

- But in practice, Hume almost always uses it not to *dismiss* ideas but to *clarify* them, by tracing them to their impression-source.

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Hume's First Argument for the Copy Principle

- There seem to be no counterexamples:

  "After the most accurate examination, of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exception, and that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea." (*T* 1.1.1.5)

- And since the impressions come before the ideas (*T* 1.1.1.8), they must cause the ideas rather than vice-versa.

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Hume's Second Argument for the Copy Principle

- People who lack any particular sense modality always lack also the corresponding ideas:

  "wherever by any accident the faculties, which give rise to any impressions, are obstructed in their operations, as when one is born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas; … likewise where they have never been put in action to produce a particular impression [such as] the taste of a pine-apple …" (*T* 1.1.1.9)

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Problems with Hume's Arguments

- Hume's first argument doesn't seem to fit very well with his use of the Copy Principle against opponents:
  - Suppose someone claims to have an idea which *doesn't* derive from a corresponding impression; he will simply deny Hume's generalisation and hence his argument for the Principle. Bennett (2002, pp. 100-1) presses this sort of objection.
  - Garrett (1997, pp. 46-8) mounts a defence on Hume's behalf:

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Garrett's First Defence of Hume

- "when [Hume] argues against the existence of a certain (putative) idea, he never argues *merely* that we do not find such a corresponding impression in experience; he also always argues that no impression could possibly satisfy the requirements we implicitly demand for such a perception." (1997, p. 49)
- So such an idea would not merely contradict the Copy Principle, "It would … require the admission of an entirely distinct representational faculty", in addition to our imagistic imagination.

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Responding to Garrett

- But the point that "no impression could possibly satisfy the requirements" for serving as the source of a particular idea is double-edged.
- Hume's opponent can point out that the ideas in question – *those that are not obviously imagistic and which Hume has to work so hard to explain in imagistic terms* (necessary connexion, body, the self etc.) – are precisely the ones for which the Copy Principle is least plausible to start with.
- Is it really legitimate to extend an argument which seems plausible in the case of sensory ideas to these more contentious cases?

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- Hume's second argument also has problems. It may seem very plausible that a blind man can have no idea of *red*, for example. But *how can Hume know that this is the case*? Might it not be that the man has private mental experiences that involve the colour red?
- At risk of anachronism, some authors (e.g. Bennett, Dicker) argue that Hume's point is best understood as being not about private mental experience, but about *public meaningfulness*. The blind man *cannot use the word "red" correctly*, and they take this (positivist) moral to be the real point of Hume's position.

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Garrett's Second Defence of Hume

- Garrett (1997, pp. 46-8) defends Hume more straightforwardly, arguing that although one might not be able to *demonstrate* to others that one was having a simple idea without a simple impression, the fact that blind and deaf people (etc.) don't claim to have such ideas can be taken as significant:

> "It is a fact, for example, that the blind and the deaf do *not* report mental images – that is, Humean 'ideas' – that are unrelated to any simpler elements previously experienced in sensation or feeling. … The fact that the blind and deaf can and do report aspects of their mental lives but do not report such images is surely some evidence that they do not have them." (p.46)

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- Further evidence, Garrett suggests, comes from people whose senses are repaired, who as adults become able to see for the first time. They report *new* sensations, apparently: sensations that they could not imagine prior to the repair.
- Note, however, that this second argument explicitly focuses on ideas that are acknowledged from the start to be sensory, so it doesn't help in the more contentious cases that are not obviously sensory.
- For those ideas (necessity, body, self etc.), Hume's case for empiricism – like Locke's – perhaps has to depend on the strength of his specific account of those ideas. Can he actually explain their nature in terms of impression-copy content?

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The Missing Shade of Blue

- After arguing for the Copy Principle, Hume himself strangely presents a counter-example: the famous "missing shade of blue" (*T* 1.1.1.10).
- He seems, however, to think this isn't a *serious* problem for his position, maybe because:
  - The "new" simple idea is being constructed (by something like blending) from materials that are provided by impressions, so his concept-empiricism isn't being fundamentally threatened.
  - The new idea *could* be derived from sensory experience, even if in this case it hasn't been – it's still *imagistic* (so clearly thinkable on Hume's view).

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> "Suppose … a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become … well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue, … which [he has never met] with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; 'tis plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other. [Could he], from his own imagination, … raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, tho' it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe … he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions; tho' the instance is so particular and singular, that [it] … does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim."
>
> (*T* 1.1.1.10)

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