Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

David Hume, 1711-1776

8. Hume's Sceptical Crisis, and His Second Thoughts

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So Far in *Treatise* 1.4 …

- *Treatise* 1.4.1, "Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason", and 1.4.2, "Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses", conclude that our beliefs – whether concerning the inferences we draw, or the objects we seem to perceive, – are rationally unsustainable. But in both cases, we are humanly unable to maintain such radical scepticism, and retain our beliefs through "carelessness and in-attention".
- In *Treatise* 1.4.3, "Of the Ancient Philosophy", Hume ridicules Aristotelians for following their imagination (like children and poets) in attributing purposes to objects.
  - But his own philosophy of induction and belief is founded on custom and hence "the imagination"; so isn't he being unfair?
  - At *T* 1.4.4.1, Hume sketches a defence against this objection, distinguishing between two categories of "imaginative" principle:

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"In order to justify myself, I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of. The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of conduct and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. For this reason the former are receiv'd by philosophy, and the latter rejected."

(*T* 1.4.4.1 – copied from slide 258)

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- *Treatise* 1.4.4, "Of the Modern Philosophy", then goes on to reveal yet another problem with the conventional Lockean belief in external objects, making at least three in all:
  - False attribution of temporal identity (*T* 1.4.2.31-2, 1.4.3.2-4);
  - Impossibility of inference to objects (*T* 1.4.2.47);
  - We cannot form an idea of primary qualities without relying on secondary qualities, which are acknowledged to be "nothing but impressions in the mind" (*T* 1.4.4.3). So we can form no coherent idea of a mind-independent object (*T* 1.4.4.6-9).
- *Treatise* 1.4.5-6, "Of the Immateriality of the Soul" and "Of Personal Identity", may well be radically sceptical from a traditional perspective, but Hume does not see them as leading to "such contradictions and difficulties" as he claims to have found by now "in every system concerning external objects, and in the idea of matter" (*T* 1.4.5.1).

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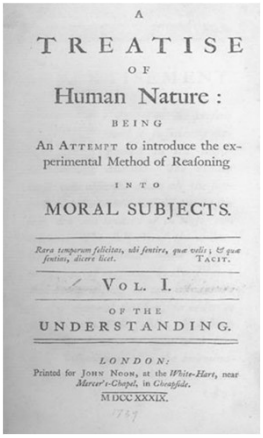
Complications Regarding the Humean "Imagination"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"Imagination" as the Faculty of Having, and Operating on, Ideas

- Hume's Copy Principle leads him to assimilate *thinking* to the having of ideas that are *imagistic*, in being literal copies of sensory (or quasi-sensory) impressions, either of "outer" sensation or "inner" reflection.
- Hume accordingly denies that we can form "pure and intellectual" ideas, e.g. in mathematics (*T* 1.3.1.7).
- This implies that the *imagination*, traditionally conceived of as the faculty we use when *imagining* things (e.g. fanciful ideas that we have created ourselves), becomes more generally where all of our thinking takes place (not counting ideas or "impressions" of *memory*).

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"Imagination" as Opposed to "Reason" or "the Understanding"

- In Lecture 3 (slides 77-84), we saw that Hume implicitly identifies "reason" with "the understanding", and two of his most famous discussions – of induction and the external world – set this faculty *in opposition to* "the imagination" (also called "the fancy").
- Moreover these discussions proceed by showing first that reason *cannot* explain the belief in question (either about the unobserved, or about the existence of body), and then concluding that the imagination must be responsible, apparently because the belief requires a *non-rational* explanation.

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Yet Custom Remains Respectable

- Although Hume consistently treats our *belief in body* as rationally dubious and even incoherent (Lecture 7, slides 268-273), he treats our *causal reasoning* with far more respect (Lecture 6, slides 213-223).
- *Moreover, he treats causal, inductive inference as an operation of reason, even after Treatise 1.3.6-7 has apparently proved that it is "determin'd by" custom, an associative principle of the imagination.*
- In the *Abstract* and first *Enquiry*, moreover, he explicitly praises custom as the guide of life:
  - "'Tis not, therefore, reason, which is the guide of life, but custom." (*A* 16)
  - "Custom, then, is the great guide of human life." (*E* 5.6)

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Causal Inference Continues to be Considered an Operation of Reason

- *T* 1.3.11.2 ("human reason" includes *proofs* and *probabilities*);
- 1.4.2.47, 1.4.4.15 ("reason" includes inference from cause and effect);
- 2.3.3.3 ("reason is nothing but the discovery of" cause and effect relations);
- 3.1.1.12 ("reason, in a strict and philosophical sense, … discovers the connexion of causes and effects");
- 3.1.1.18 ("the operations of human understanding [include] the inferring of matter of fact").

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A Distinction between Types of Principle, Not Parts of the Mind

- In *T* 1.3.15 (slides 214-15) we saw Hume formulating "general rules" that can enable us to identify the real causal factors in resembling situations, avoiding crude prejudice (of the sort illustrated at *T* 1.3.13.7, slide 162). Note what Hume says about this in faculty terms:

  "The general rule is attributed to our judgment; as being more extensive and constant. The exception to the imagination; as being more capricious and uncertain." (*T* 1.3.13.11)

  The distinction is being drawn between types of principle – apparently on the basis of their *reliability* – rather than in terms of parts of the mind.

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A Tension in "the Imagination"

- A related tension emerges in the course of *T* 1.3.9.4, given that custom itself is supposedly a principle of the imagination:

  "All this, and every thing else, which I believe, are nothing but ideas; tho' by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from the other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination."

- Thus custom is apparently *distinguished from* less reliable principles which are merely "the offspring of the imagination". This phrase occurs only one other time in Hume's writings …

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A Last-Minute Footnote

- Hume inserted a footnote at the end of Section 1.3.9 – while the *Treatise* was in press – by means of a specially printed "cancel" leaf. He trimmed the previously existing text to make space for this:

  "as our assent to all probable reasonings is founded on the vivacity of ideas, it resembles many of those whimsies and prejudices, which are rejected under the opprobrious character of being the offspring of the imagination. By this expression it appears that the word, *imagination*, is commonly us'd in two different senses; and … in the following reasonings I have often [fallen] into [this ambiguity]." (*T* 1.3.9.19 n. 22)

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An Ambiguity in "the Imagination"

- The footnote at *T* 1.3.9.19 continues:

  "When I oppose the imagination to the memory, I mean the faculty, by which we form our fainter ideas. When I oppose it to reason, I mean the same faculty, excluding only our demonstrative and probable reasonings."

- The narrower sense of "the imagination" includes "whimsies and prejudices", but excludes "probable reasonings", even though the latter are based on custom, which in *T* 1.3.6 had clearly been considered to be an associative principle of the imagination.
  - So one of Hume's "two different senses" of *imagination* includes customary inference, and one does not.

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Garrett's Account of the Ambiguity

- *Inclusive Imagination*

  "In this broad sense of the term 'imagination', in which it denotes a faculty of having any ideas that are naturally less lively or 'fainter' than memories, all of the operations that determine the ways in which the mind generates or modifies non-memory ideas qualify as operations of the imagination. This includes what he calls 'reason'."

- *Unreasoning Imagination*

  "Hume also uses the term 'imagination' in a narrower sense, … differing from the broader sense only in its exclusion of reason* from its scope." (2015, pp. 87-8)

  * Note here that Garrett takes Humean "reason" to encompass *only demonstrative and probable reasoning*.

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My Normative Account

- *Inclusive Imagination*

  Similar in scope to Garrett's interpretation: the "canvas" on which all of our (impression-copied and hence imagistic) ideas play out. Accordingly, this embraces all of our reasoning, as well as fantasies and "fictions".

- *Fanciful Imagination*

  Restricted to those imaginative operations that lack the respectability to count as "reason". In this sense, the imagination – aptly called *the fancy* – excludes not only (suitably disciplined) *demonstrative and probable reasoning – i.e. customary inference* – but also *intuition*: these count as operations of *reason* on the normative basis that they are cognitively respectable.

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Why Does This Matter?

- Understanding Hume's Faculty Structure

  There is debate over what Hume means by "reason". Garrett understands this as restricted to *inference* or *argument* (i.e. ratiocination), whereas I understand it as our general *cognitive* faculty (Lecture 3, slides 81-4).

- Understanding The Impact of *Treatise* 1.4.7

  Garrett interprets *Treatise* 1.4.7 as carefully choreographed and under control; I consider it to be a sceptical meltdown as Hume's would-be faculty structure comes tumbling down.
  - For a fairly recent skirmish within this debate, see our articles in *Hume Studies*, November 2014, where Garrett poses the following two objections to my account …

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Defending the Normative Account

1. Objection: In the footnote at *T* 1.3.9.19, Hume seems to exclude "only our demonstrative and probable reasonings" from "the imagination" in the narrower sense. This fits closely with Garrett's reading.
   - My Reply: the footnote was a last-minute insertion, fitted into a very limited space that Hume had made at the end of the section. So it's not surprisingly imprecise.
2. Objection: In *Treatise* 1.3.6 (paras 4 and 12-15), Hume repeatedly denies that inductive inference is "determin'd by reason", and treats custom as being instead an operation of the imagination.
   - My Reply: Hume's view of the reason/imagination distinction developed while he was writing the *Treatise*.

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In Favour of the Normative Account

1. The criterion Hume gives (i.e. resemblance or otherwise to "whimsies and prejudices") would clearly place *intuition* together with "our demonstrative and probable reasonings", contrary to Garrett's interpretation.
2. Since the *T* 1.3.9.19 footnote was inserted hastily at the last minute, it seems likely to involve a distinction that was *already* prominent in Hume's mind as he completed *Treatise* Book 1, but was not yet mentioned in Part 3.
3. Hume draws what looks like a similar distinction in three different places, and *always on a similar normative basis*. He also refers back to such a distinction in the Conclusion of Book 1 (as we shall see). It seems unlikely that these would be different distinctions.

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Is This The Same Distinction?

- "as our assent to all probable reasonings is founded on the vivacity of ideas, it resembles many of those whimsies and prejudices, which are rejected under the opprobrious character of being the offspring of the imagination." (*T* 1.3.9.19 n. 22)
- "The general rule is attributed to our judgment; as being more extensive and constant. The exception to the imagination; as being more capricious and uncertain." (*T* 1.3.13.11)
- "I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; …" (*T* 1.4.4.1)

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Blurring the Reason/Imagination Divide

"… the understanding or imagination can draw inferences from past experience …" (*T* 1.3.8.13)

"… the judgment, or rather the imagination …" (*T* 1.3.9.19)

"The memory, senses, and understanding are … all … founded on the imagination" (*T* 1.4.7.3)

"… the imagination or understanding, call it which you please …" (*T* 2.3.9.10, also *DOP* 1.8)

"[suppose that we resolve] to reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere [instead] to the understanding, that is, to the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (*T* 1.4.7.7)

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Principles of "the Imagination"

That last quotation, from T 1.4.7.7, seems to be alluding to the same distinction that Hume invokes at T 1.4.4.1, but this time labelled as "general" versus "trivial":

- The Respectable "General" Principles
  - These are the "permanent, irresistible, and universal" principles (e.g. customary inference) that Hume himself relies on in his experimental philosophy.
- The Disreputable "Trivial" Principles
  - These are the "changeable, weak, and irregular" principles (e.g. imaginative fancies) for which Hume criticises ancient philosophers and the superstitious.

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A Significant Identification

- But if this is indeed the case, then when Hume refers to "the understanding, that is, … the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination", he appears to be identifying "the understanding" with the "general" principles of the imagination. (As Garrett himself seems to agree in his 1997 book, p. 29).
- And as we have observed before (Lecture 3, slide 83), *Hume identifies "reason" with "the understanding" literally dozens of times*. (One highly pertinent example of this identification is implicit in the rewording of the footnote originally at *T* 2.2.7.6 to create the last-minute-inserted footnote at *T*1.3.9.19, where "the understanding" has been replaced by "reason".)

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A Humean Perspective on the Faculties

- Recall again that Hume thinks ***all*** our ideas are imagistic, as copies of impressions (either of sensation or reflection).
  - If so, then ***all*** of our reasoning must take place in the "imagination" as traditionally conceived, and *"reason" cannot be some separate part of the mind*.
- So it makes sense that Hume would be driven to draw the distinction between "reason" and "the imagination" on the basis of *the kinds of principles* that govern the processing of our ideas:
  - Rational principles are disciplined and reliable;
  - Imaginative principles are unreliable and capricious.

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The Significance of the Distinction

- Although Hume seems to have no sceptical intent when presenting his famous argument concerning induction at *T* 1.3.6, it seems that he later saw the need to draw a clear distinction between the respectable and disreputable principles that act on the imagination, considering the former (notably *customary inference*, at least when disciplined by general rules) to be part of "reason", but the latter mere fanciful "imagination".
  - This distinction seems to be potentially crucial to Hume's attempt to vindicate custom as providing a respectable basis of probable reasoning. If that's correct, but the distinction ultimately fails, then this could seriously threaten his attempt to build a rational science of human nature!

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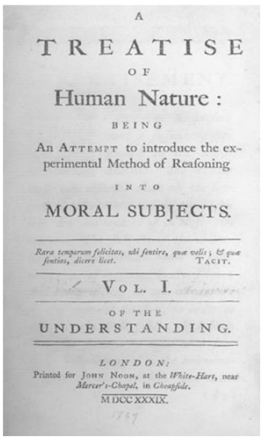
Treatise 1.4.7: "Conclusion of this Book"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"Conclusion of This Book"

- *Treatise* 1.4.7 is especially hard to interpret, partly because it is presented as a dynamic sequence of first-personal reflections on the position in which Hume has been left by his sceptical results from earlier sections.
- Most of our mental processes have been revealed as dependent on the imagination and its mechanisms, which generate "the vivacity of ideas" (*T* 1.4.7.3).
- Worse, *T* 1.4.4 has found a "manifest contradiction" between our causal reasoning and our belief in the independent existence of matter (*T* 1.4.7.4).
- The analysis of causation in *T* 1.3.14 also shows our thoughts about that to be deeply confused (*T* 1.4.7.5).

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- An even more devastating sceptical result came in *Treatise* 1.4.1, with Hume's "scepticism with regard to reason" (see slide 226, and Appendix below):
  - We are rationally obliged, whenever we make a judgment of probability, to take into account our likelihood of error in making that judgment. But that judgment of likelihood is itself liable to a similar correction, and so rationally we should be led into an infinite regress and "a total extinction of belief and evidence" (*T* 1.4.1.6).
- But our beliefs aren't actually extinguished by the argument, are they! How does Hume explain this?

  "I answer, that after the first and second decision; as the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure; tho' the principles … be the same …; yet their influence on the imagination [weakens] …" (*T* 1.4.1.10)

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The "Dangerous Dilemma"

- After reviewing various seductive "illusions of the imagination" to which we are naturally prone (as in slide 338 above), "the question is, how far we ought to yield to these illusions. This question is very difficult, and reduces us to a very dangerous dilemma, which-ever way we answer it." (*T* 1.4.7.6)
- On the one hand,

  "if we assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy; beside that these suggestions are often contrary to each other; they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham'd of our credulity." (*T* 1.4.7.6)

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- "But on the other hand,

  if [we] take a resolution to reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding, that is, to the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination; even this resolution, if steadily executed, wou'd be dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences. For I have already shewn, [note to *T* 1.4.1] that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things, and are not able to accompany them with so sensible an impression, as we do those, which are more easy and natural." (*T* 1.4.7.7)

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- Could the sceptical calamity of *T* 1.4.1 be avoided if we "establish it for a general maxim, that no refin'd or elaborate reasoning is ever to be receiv'd"? Such a principle would be hugely damaging:

  "By this means you cut off entirely all science and philosophy: You proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination, and by a parity of reason must embrace all of them: And you expresly contradict yourself; since this maxim must be built on the preceding reasoning, which will be allow'd to be sufficiently refin'd and metaphysical. What party, then, shall we choose among these difficulties? If we embrace this principle, and condemn all refin'd reasoning, we run into the most manifest absurdities. If we reject it in favour of these reasonings, we subvert entirely the human understanding. We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all." (*T* 1.4.7.7)

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"A Manifest Contradiction"

"For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. I can only observe what is commonly done; which is, that this difficulty is seldom or never thought of … Very refin'd reflections have little or no influence upon us; and yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence; which implies a manifest contradiction.

But what have I here said, that reflections very refin'd and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us? …" (*T* 1.4.7.7-8)

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In "the Deepest Darkness"

"The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? … I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty." (*T* 1.4.7.8)

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Carelessness and Inattention Again

- *Psychological* (though not *philosophical*) resolution comes from a now-familiar direction, the "carelessness and in-attention" of *T* 1.4.2.57:

  "Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, … I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and [afterwards] these speculations … appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find it in my heart to enter into them any farther." (*T* 1.4.7.9)

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A Sceptical Disposition

"Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. … I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles. Does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature … and that I must torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries … Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time?" (*T* 1.4.7.10)

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The Title Principle

- Don Garrett sees a promising *philosophical* resolution to these sceptical quandaries in what he calls Hume's "Title Principle", which seems to be proposed at *T* 1.4.7.11 (though it's unclear textually whether this represents a settled view):

  "… if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us."

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- The Title Principle is supposed to play the role of blocking the corrosively sceptical argument of *Treatise* 1.4.1 – on the ground that this leads to reasoning which is faint, unconvincing, and out of line with our propensities – while allowing customary inference (in everyday life and empirical science) to survive unscathed.
  - Hsueh Qu, *Hume's Epistemological Evolution* (2020, ch. 6, pp. 129-31) explains this clearly, suggesting that the Title Principle is indeed the best textual candidate for making sense of Hume's apparent change in manner between the dark depths of *T* 1.4.7.7-8 and the relatively sunlit uplands of *T* 1.4.7.12-13, seemingly motivated by the positive propensities of *curiosity* and *ambition* …

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Curiosity and Ambition

> "I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me. … I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries." (*T* 1.4.7.12)

- This seems to point forward to *Treatise* Books 2 and 3, on the passions and morals, plausibly fitting with the idea that the Title Principle has provided a basis on which to continue philosophy.

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Philosophy versus Superstition

- Unfortunately, "philosophy" (or what we would call *science*) is not the only kind of reasoning that is "lively and mixes itself with some propensity", for humans have a strong propensity towards lively superstitions. Hume's answer:

> "we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable. And in this respect I make bold to recommend philosophy, and … give it the preference to superstition of every kind …" (*T* 1.4.7.13)

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An Impasse

- But how, given all his sceptical arguments, can Hume claim any solid basis for saying that philosophy (which on his own account contradicts itself) is safer or more agreeable than superstition?
- He is reduced to the apparently rather lame observation that "the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous" (*T* 1.4.7.13).
- This invites the response that religious truth is crucial for the avoidance of hellfire etc., and so we should follow religion if we want to be "safest" with regard to our future prospects. Without a rational basis for discrimination, Hume seems to have no answer.

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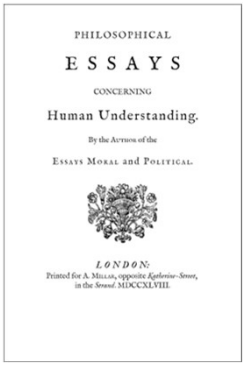
Enquiry 12: Hume's Second Thoughts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A Developmental Hypothesis

- Hume's discussion "Of the Academical of Sceptical Philosophy", Section 12 of the 1748 *Enquiry* (originally published as *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*), evinces a very different attitude to scepticism, facing up to the extreme sceptic and advocating instead a "mitigated" variety.
- One key driver of this change might have been Hume's realisation – on writing up his arguments for the new publication – that *the extreme sceptical argument of Treatise 1.4.1 cannot be coherently expounded with any practical example beyond the first couple of stages*. The "and so on" move in *T* 1.4.1.6 (and likewise in commentators' attempts to defend the argument) is really just hand-waving …

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> "we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties. … [which] must weaken still farther our first evidence, and must itself be weaken'd by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on *in infinitum*; and … must in this manner be reduc'd to nothing. … all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

- In "Hume's Pivotal Argument, and His Supposed Obligation of Reason" (*Hume Studies*, 2018), I suggest that Hume would have come to realise the failure of this argument in the 1740s if he tried to illustrate it with examples, in line with the rest of the *Enquiry* (compare: just one in *T* 1.3.6, but over 20 in *Enquiry* 4; five [very brief] examples in *T* 1.3.14, but over 15 in *Enquiry* 7).

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Implicitly Rejecting *T* 1.4.1?

- Hume's dismissal of antecedent scepticism in the *Enquiry* (at *E* 12.3) seems to involve denying that reflexive checking is a rational requirement for relying on our faculties.
  - If so, that also casts doubt on the argument of *T* 1.4.1, which functioned precisely by insisting that we should perform such checking (and indeed should do so *ad infinitum*).
- Now Hume seems to think that we should start with *trust in our faculties by default*, unless and until we find positive reason to distrust them.

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Dismissing "Antecedent" Scepticism

"There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others ... It recommends an universal doubt ... of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious ... But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others ... Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject."
(*E* 12.3)

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Rejecting the Appropriateness of High-Level Iterated Checking?

- In the following paragraph, Hume recommends a more moderate "antecedent scepticism":
  > "To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and examine accurately all their consequences" (*E* 12.4)
- This also fits well with the hypothesis that he has seen what is wrong with his argument of *T* 1.4.1: checking should be done at the bottom level (e.g. our arithmetical calculations), not by iterating to higher and higher meta-levels.

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Convergence: the Onus of Proof

- What the *Enquiry* calls *consequent* skepticism (*E* 12.5) instead puts the onus *on the sceptic* to identify problems with our faculties.
- At *E* 12.22-3, we see the same strategy deployed very effectively to answer Hume's famous "sceptical doubts" about induction (presented in Section 4).
- *Here we see a striking convergence in Hume's approach to topics that were treated quite differently in the Treatise*. He now finds a satisfactory resolution of scepticism, and a plausible criterion of respectable scientific enquiry, in *mitigated scepticism* (*E* 12.24-5) and his Fork (*E* 12.26-34).

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"Ample Matter of Triumph"

"The sceptic … seems to have ample matter of triumph; while he justly insists, that all our evidence for any matter of fact, which lies beyond the testimony of sense or memory, is derived entirely from the relation of cause and effect; that we have no other idea of this relation than that of two objects, which have been frequently *conjoined* together; that we have no argument to convince us, that objects, which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise, in other instances, be conjoined in the same manner; and that nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful. ." (*E* 12.22)

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What is the Sceptic's Point?

- Hume's response is to stress that such "Pyrrhonian" scepticism is pointless:
  > "a PYRRHONIAN cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. … It is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle." (*E* 12.23)

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Why Rely on Custom?

- As in the Treatise, Hume thinks that practical scepticism is pre-empted by our animal nature:

  [Belief arising from inference through custom] "is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought or understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent." (*E* 5.8, cf. *T* 1.4.1.7)

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The Whimsical Condition of Mankind

- The Pyrrhonian arguments, in the end,

  "can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, that may be raised against them." (*E* 12.23)

- But this can have a beneficial effect, by leading us to "a more *mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy" (*E* 12.24).

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Two Types of Mitigated Scepticism

- The first type leads to "more modesty and reserve", less confidence in our opinions and "prejudice against antagonists".
- The second type – whose basis Hume does not make entirely clear, involves:

  "the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding. … avoiding all distant and high enquiries, confin[ing] itself to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience". (*E* 12.25)

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Virtuous Bootstrapping

- If custom is indeed our primary belief-forming mechanism, is irresistible (at least in "obvious" cases), vital to our survival and daily life, and if the sceptic can give no strong *consequent* argument against it, then:
  - We can use induction to *refine* our own use of induction: to discover what more sophisticated methods actually work in practice (e.g. confining our enquiries to some subjects rather than others).
  - On the same basis we can reject methods that prove to be unreliable, such as hasty prejudice.

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Opposing Superstition

- Now Hume has an answer to "superstition":
  - Arguments from miracle reports (*Enquiry* 10) rely on the inductive strength of testimony; but if properly weighed, the evidence of induction – that such things don't actually happen in practice – points *against* miracles more than for them.
  - The Design Argument (*Enquiry* 11) relies on analogy (which is a weaker form of induction), but if properly analysed, the analogies in favour of theism are weak and others are stronger.
  - Hume's Fork rules out *a priori* metaphysics, such as the Cosmological Argument (see *E* 12.28-29).

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From the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry*

- In the first *Enquiry*, several sources of radical sceptical doubt are dropped, in particular:
  - The extreme sceptical argument of 1.4.1;
  - The claim that identity over time (either of objects or selves) is incompatible with change;
  - The Separability Principle;
  - Scepticism about personal identity.
- The *Enquiry* thus finds a coherent way of defending inductive science based on customary inference (a key *respectable* principle). For more on this and on the reconciliation between Hume's "naturalism" and "scepticism", see my "Hume's Chief Argument" (2016).

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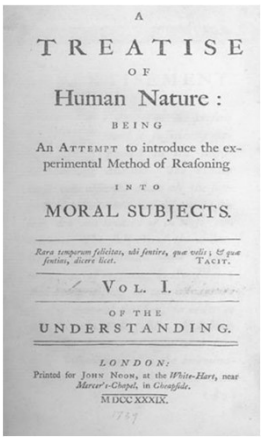
APPENDIX

Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason


A
TREATISE
OF
Human Nature:
BEING
An ATTEMPT to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning
INTO
MORAL SUBJECTS.
Rara temporum felicitate, 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 Pivotal Argument"

- Hume's argument "Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason", in *Treatise* 1.4.1, is not as commonly studied as his familiar discussions of induction, necessary connexion, the external world, and personal identity. Yet in the context of the *Treatise*, it is hugely important, bringing apparent disaster to the Conclusion of Book 1.
- However, it completely disappears from Hume's later work, and I have recently suggested that his realisation that it fails might well have been pivotal in significantly changing his attitude to scepticism, as manifested in the first *Enquiry*.

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Stage 1 – the *Uncertainty Argument*

- The *Treatise* 1.4.1 argument falls into two main stages. The first stage – which I call the *Uncertainty Argument* – argues that, even if we assume that in "demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible" (*T* 1.4.1.1), some doubt is still appropriate because our faculties are imperfect and we sometimes make mistakes.
- If we take proper account – as we should – of our *experienced frequency* of having made such mistakes in the past, "All knowledge degenerates into probability" (*T* 1.4.1.1) .

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An Arithmetical Example

- Suppose, for example, that I am trying to solve a quadratic equation, and conclude that the only positive solution is x=16. Should I believe this with *total conviction*? Hume argues that if experience suggests I sometimes go wrong, then I should not.
  - To make this question vivid, suppose that getting the answer wrong will cost me £1000, and I am given the opportunity to take out insurance against error: should I be prepared to pay to insure, and if so, how much?
  - If in practice I have got such equations right about 95% of the time, then it indeed seems prudent to pay up to £50 to insure (thus backing up Hume's argument).

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"A history of all the instances"

"We must, therefore, ... enlarge our view to comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv'd us, compar'd with those, wherein its testimony was just and true. Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. By this means all knowledge degenerates into probability; and this probability is greater or less, according to our experience of the veracity or deceitfulness of our understanding, and according to the simplicity or intricacy of the question."

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- When Hume says "Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause", he is alluding back to *Treatise* 1.3.12, "Of the Probability of Causes". There he gave an associationist account of probable reasoning from *inconstant* past experience, typically where *a mix of unknown causes* is involved, so we have to base our expectation on past statistics alone.

  "when an object is attended with contrary effects, we judge of them only by our past experience, … and that effect, which has been the most common, we always esteem the most likely." (*T* 1.3.12.8)

  "when in considering past experiments we find them … contrary … each partakes an equal share of … force and vivacity, … Any of these past events may again happen; and we judge, that when they do happen, they will be mix'd in the same proportion as in the past." (*T* 1.3.12.10)

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An Obligation to Embark on "Reflex Judgment"

- Hence when we consider what confidence to place in a mathematical calculation that we have carried out (for instance), we need to make, and take account of, a reflexive judgment about the reliability of our reason or understanding:

> "we ought always to correct the first judgment, derived from the nature of the object [e.g. the mathematical judgment that *x*=16], by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding [e.g. the experiential judgment that we tend to go wrong 5% of the time]." (*T* 1.4.1.5)

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Stage 2 – the *Regress Argument*

- Hume thinks exactly the same sort of correction is rationally required for probable judgments – which will include our reflexive judgments about our own reliability (*T* 1.4.1.5), leading to a infinite regress.
- Thus since that first reflexive judgment – e.g. that I'm 95% reliable in solving quadratic equations – is itself subject to error, I need to take this into account by making a second correction:

> "we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

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Iterative Weakening to Nothing

- This obligation iterates, repeatedly weakening the evidence left by the previous judgments:

> "this decision, tho' it should be favourable to our preceding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still farther our first evidence, and must itself be weaken'd by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on *in infinitum*; and even the vastest quantity … must in this manner be reduc'd to nothing. … all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

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Hume's Assessment of the Argument

- Hume repeatedly implies that he considers the sceptical argument to be *rationally* compelling:

> "all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

> "I have here prov'd, that the very same principles, which make us form a decision upon any subject, and correct that decision by the consideration of our genius and capacity, … when we examin'd that subject; I say, I have prov'd, that these same principles, when carry'd farther, and apply'd to every new reflex judgment, must, by continually diminishing the original evidence, at last reduce it to nothing, and utterly subvert all belief and opinion." (*T* 1.4.1.8 – see also *T* 1.4.2.57, 1.4.7.7)

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Does Hume Accept the Conclusion?

> "Shou'd it be ask'd me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument … and whether I be really one of those sceptics, who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in *any* thing possest of *any* measures of truth and falshood; I shou'd reply, that this question is entirely superfluous, and that neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion. Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; …" (*T* 1.4.1.7)

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The Irresistibility of Belief

> "… nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sunshine. Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist …" (*T* 1.4.1.7)

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Hume's Intention Here

"My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.* … I have prov'd, that … If belief … were a simple act of the thought, without any peculiar manner of conception, or the addition of a force and vivacity, it must infallibly destroy itself, and in every case terminate in a total suspence of judgment." (*T* 1.4.1.8)

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Rejecting Alternative Theories of Belief

- Hume thus attacks alternative theories of belief – based on the general notion that our beliefs (do or should) result from *rational* oversight and judgment – as inevitably leading to total absence of belief, an outcome which is clearly empirically false.
  - This attack presupposes that the sceptical argument is *rationally* correct (hence that a rational-oversight theory of belief would indeed be compelled by it).
  - By contrast, Hume's own theory is that belief arises from the causal operation of *custom* – which acts by enhancing the vivacity of ideas – in a way that "mere ideas and reflections" cannot prevent (*T* 1.4.1.8).

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How Does Hume Avoid the Regress?

- How does Hume's own account of belief escape this iterative weakening and eventual reduction to complete suspension?

  "I answer, that after the first and second decision; as the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure; tho' the principles … be the same …; yet their influence on the imagination [weakens] …" (*T* 1.4.1.10)
- As Hume remarks, this difficulty of following and being moved by abstruse arguments is very familiar to us. (*T* 1.4.1.11, cf. 1.3.13.17)

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The Significance of the Argument

- Hume anticipates *T* 1.4.1 in the previous Part:

  "we shall find afterwards, [note to *T* 1.4.1] … one very memorable exception [to iterative psychological weakening], which is of vast consequence in the present subject of the understanding." (*T* 1.3.13.5)
- He also draws on it in the conclusion of Book 1:

  "I have already shown, [note to *T* 1.4.1] that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life." (*T* 1.4.7.7)

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A Trivial Property of the Fancy

- As discussed in Lecture 8 on *Treatise* 1.4.7, this point is extremely significant: we are saved "from … total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy [i.e. the imagination], by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things".
- This ultimately raises serious doubts about the adequacy of Hume's response to scepticism in the *Treatise*: scepticism seems to be avoidable only by relying on what we would normally consider to be *trivial* and *irrational* principles of the imagination.

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Is Hume's Argument Strong?

- The *T* 1.4.1 argument seems very dubious:
  - Suppose I make a mathematical judgment.
  - Suppose experience suggests to me that I go wrong about 5% of the time in such judgments; so I adjust my credence to 95%.
  - Then it occurs to me that my estimate of 5% might be wrong … but why should this make me assume that my estimate is likely to be too *optimistic* rather than *pessimistic*? Maybe my credence should be *greater than* 95%?

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A Spreading "Margin of Error"?

- Some defenders of Hume (e.g. Bennett, Owen) admit that reduction isn't forced, but suggest that iteration implies a "spreading" of the probability estimate, so it becomes completely non-specific.
- But this doesn't fit Hume's account of belief as a vivacious idea – belief involves *a specific level of felt vivacity*, not reflective judgment over a range.
- Moreover like other defences of Hume, it has never been spelled out beyond vague hand-waving, and no such defence has achieved sufficient rigour to yield mathematical plausibility.

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Why Iterate?

- More fundamentally, *the case for repeated iteration is hopeless*. My credence in my mathematical judgment should – on the very principles explained at *T* 1.4.1.1 – depend on my reliability [and hence remembered track record] in judging *mathematics*, not on my reliability in judging my reliability in judging … (etc.).
  - Hume's argument *itself* relies on memory and records, explicitly appealing to the "history of the instances" of my past judgments (*T* 1.4.1.1), and expressing no scepticism about our memory or record-taking ability etc. These remembered/recorded statistics remain what they are, *irrespective of how good or bad I might be at iterative reflexive judgments*.

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Where is the Obligation of Reason?

- Even if there were some good reason *in principle* to iterate up lots of levels, *in practice* doing so:
  - Is psychologically impossible for us (*T* 1.4.1.10);
  - Confuses and pulls us away from the true statistics;
  - If we were able to do it, would obliterate all belief.

  So how can it possibly be *an obligation of reason* to iterate, as *T* 1.4.1.6 insists?
- On Hume's own conception of reason, reflexive checking can only make sense if it is warranted by *experience* (applying reflective rules such as those of *Treatise* 1.3.15). Hence the lack of any *a posteriori* benefit entirely undermines the supposed obligation.

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A Failed Argument

- Many other scholars have attempted to defend Hume's argument of *Treatise* 1.4.1, but I have recently argued that they all fail decisively ("Hume's Pivotal Argument, and His Supposed Obligation of Reason", *Hume Studies* 2018).
  - I argue that it is impossible *even to elucidate the argument* with any plausibility if one focuses on *examples* (rather than relying on the handwaving "and so on" of *T* 1.4.1.6). And I speculate that this makes it extremely likely that Hume himself would have come to appreciate the problem when he came to work on the *Enquiry*, which (in striking contrast to the *Treatise*) illustrates its discussions with a large number of examples.

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Examples in the *Treatise*

- "Of the inference from the impression to the idea"
  - *Treatise* 1.3.6 briefly mentions only one example (flame and heat at T 1.3.6.2).
- "Of the idea of necessary connexion"
  - *Treatise* 1.3.14 barely mentions the examples of billiard balls (T 1.3.14.18), a couple of mathematical relations (T 1.3.14.23), and a blind man's false suppositions that scarlet is like a trumpet sound, and light like solidity (T 1.3.14.27).

By contrast in the Enquiry …

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Examples in the *Enquiry*

- "Sceptical Doubts concerning … the understanding"
  - *Enquiry* 4 contains over twenty examples, some of which are developed extensively (e.g. billiard balls at *E* 4.8-10; momentum at *E* 4.13, 16; the nourishing qualities of bread at *E* 4.16, 21).
- "Of the idea of necessary connexion"
  - *Enquiry* 7 mentions billiard balls repeatedly (*E* 7.6, 21, 28, 30), heat and flame (*E* 7.8), the influence of will on our limbs and other organs (*E* 7.9, 12, 14), a man struck with palsy (*E* 7.13), our power to raise up a new idea (*E* 7.16), the effects of sickness, time of day, and food (*E* 7.19), descent of bodies, growth of plants, generation, and nourishment (*E* 7.21), and vibration of a string causing a sound (*E* 7.29).

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