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Hume

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Introduction

Born on April 26, 1711, in Edinburgh, Scotland, David Hume attended Edinburgh University from the ages of eleven to fifteen, in which city he remained to study law. Finding this not to his taste, Hume read widely in ancient and modern literature, improved his knowledge of science and languages, and devoted himself above all to philosophy. Hume returned to England in 1737 with the intention of publishing the first two books, of the Understanding and of the Passions, of the work he decided to call A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects. However, reviewers were mostly hostile and uncomprehending. Having wisely taken the precaution to publish anonymously, Hume soon recovered from his failure and decided to apply his immense literary gifts to the more widely accessible medium of the essay. Hume presented a selection of the doctrines of the Treatise with some previously unpublished material in the form of Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding in 1748. A sea change in the reception of Hume's theory of understanding occurred in 1783, when Immanuel Kant declared that Hume's treatment of cause and effect was responsible for awakening him from his dogmatic slumber.

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Hume's Science of Human Nature

Hume believed that the science of human nature affords fundamental insight not only into such domains as morals, aesthetics, and politics but even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion. Human nature is thus the 'capital or centre' of the sciences. His point is that the experimental method which has been applied with such success in natural science should be applied also in the study of man.

Elements of Science of Human Nature

Perception

Hume considered human nature always and only in terms of perceptions. Perception refers to all objects insofar as they are immediately present to one by consciousness, be it in sensation, reflexion, or thought. Reflexion is Hume's catch-all term for the objects present to internal sense or inward sentiment, including passions, emotions, desires, volitions, and mental operations generally. Hume derives all the contents of the mind from experience and he divides perceptions into impressions and ideas.

Impressions and Ideas

Impressions are the immediate data of experience, such as sensations. Ideas are the copies or faint images of impressions in thinking and reasoning. If I look at my room, I receive an impression of it. Hume describes the difference between impressions and Ideas in terms of vividness. It is under impressions that we comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions. This does not mean that impressions always make a forceful impression, for they can be as gentle as altogether to escape notice. Nor does it mean that they are vivid in the usual sense, since seeing a gray blur on an otherwise black night (visual sensation) is still more vivid than a brilliantly lit, detailed image in a day dream (visual idea).

Impressions of Sensation and Reflection

Impressions can be divided into impressions of sensation and impressions of reflection. The first kind arises in the soul originally from unknown causes. The impressions of reflections are derived in great measure from ideas. Suppose that I have an impression of cold, accompanied by pain. A 'copy' of this impression remains in the mind after the impression has ceased. This 'copy' is called an 'idea', and it can produce new impressions of aversion, for example, which are impressions of reflection. In the long run, therefore, impressions are prior to ideas.

Simple and Complex Perceptions

Hume makes a distinction between simple and complex perceptions. The perception of a red patch is a simple impression, and the thought (image) of the red patch is a simple idea. But if I stand on the hill of Montmartre and survey the city of Paris, I receive a complex impression of the city, of roofs, chimneys, towers and streets. And when I afterwards think of Paris and recall this complex impression, I have a complex idea. In this case the complex idea corresponds in some degree to the complex impression; though it does not do so exactly and adequately. But let us take another case. 'I can imagine to myself a city as the New Jerusalem, whose pavement is gold, and walls are rubies, though I never saw any such'. In this case my complex idea does not correspond to a complex impression. We cannot say, therefore, with truth that to every idea there is an exactly corresponding impression.

The Idea of Substance

Hume says that the idea of Substance cannot be derived from impressions of sensation. If it is perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by

the palate, a taste. But nobody would say that substance is a colour, or a sound or a taste. If, therefore, there is an idea of substance, it must be derived from impressions of reflection. But these can be resolved into our passions and emotions. And those who speak of substances do not mean by the word passions or emotions. Hence the idea of substance is derived, therefore, neither from impressions of sensation nor from impressions of reflection. Thus, he comes to the conclusion that we have no idea of substance apart from a collection of particular qualities. For instance, if a child comes across the word 'skyscraper', he may ask his father what it means. He can explain its meaning by definition or description. That is to say, he can explain to the child the meaning of the word 'skyscraper' by employing words such as 'house', 'tall', 'storey', and so on. But the child cannot understand the meaning of the description unless he understands the meanings of the terms employed in the descriptions. In Hume's language, the child must be given 'impressions'.

Rejection of Abstract Ideas

In the first place, abstract ideas are individual or particular in themselves. For instance, the precise length of a line is not distinguishable from the line itself. We cannot form a general idea of a line without any length at all. Nor can we form the general idea of a line possessing all possible lengths. Secondly, every impression is determinate and definite. Since an idea is an image or copy of an impression, it must itself be determinate and definite, even though it is fainter than the impression from which it is derived. Thirdly, everything which exists must be individual. No triangle, for instance, can exist, which is not a particular triangle with its particular characteristics. To postulate an existent triangle which is at the same time all and none of the

possible kinds and sizes of triangle would be an absurdity. But what is absurd in fact and reality is absurd also in idea. He thus agrees with Berkeley that there are no abstract general ideas.

Causal Relations

Causal relations are the centerpiece of Hume's theory of understanding. This is because, of all relations linking ideas to impressions, none approaches cause and effect in its power to produce belief. If I see smoke coming into the room, my belief in the reality of the unseen fire causing it is as great as in the smoke itself. It is to be noted that though causation be a philosophical relation, as implying contiguity, succession and constant conjunction, yet it is only so far as it is a natural relation and produces a union among our ideas that we are able to reason upon it or draw any inference from it.

Causation as a Natural Relation

The word 'relation' signifies the quality or qualities by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination. These qualities are resemblance, contiguity and the causal relation, and Hume calls them natural relations**.** In the case of natural relations, therefore, ideas are connected with one another by the natural force of association, so that the one tends naturally or by custom to recall the other. In causation considered as a natural relation there is, indeed, an inseparable connection between ideas.

Causation as a Philosophical Relation

There is a certain over-lapping between natural and philosophical relations and this is not due to any oversight on Hume's part. He explains, for example, that no objects can be compared unless there is some

resemblance between them. Resemblance is, therefore, a relation without which no philosophical relation can exist. Hume enumerates seven types of philosophical relation: resemblance, identity, relations of time and place, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in any quality, contrariety and causation. Causation, considered as a philosophical relation, is reducible to such relations of space and time as contiguity, temporal succession and constant conjunction or togetherness.

Contiguity

Objects considered as causes or effects are contiguous. He does not mean, of course, that the things which we consider to be causes and effects are always immediately contiguous; for there may be a chain or series of causes between thing A, which we call a cause, and thing Z, which we call an effect. But it will be found that A and B are contiguous, B and C, and so on, even though A and Z are not themselves immediately contiguous. He does not regard spatial contiguity as essential to the idea of causation.

Temporal Priority

Hume argues that the cause must be temporally prior to the effect. Experience confirms this. But if all effects were perfectly contemporary with their causes, it is plain there would be no such thing as succession, and all objects must be coexistent. This is, however, patently absurd. Therefore, an effect cannot be perfectly contemporary with its cause, and that a cause must be temporally prior to its effects.

Idea of Constant Conjunction

The idea of constant conjunction is the idea of regular recurrence of two kinds of similar events according to a

constant pattern of contiguity and succession. But we cannot, in Hume's opinion, derive the idea of necessary connection from observation of regular sequences or causal connections. We must say, therefore, either that there is no such idea or that it must be derived from some subjective source. Hume cannot adopt the first of these alternatives; for he has already laid stress on the importance of the idea of necessary connection. He must therefore adopt the second alternative; this is in fact what he does. To say that the idea of necessary connection is derived from a subjective source is to say that it is derived from some impression of reflection. Observation of the repetition does, however, produce new impression in the mind.

Fundamental Maxims

According to Hume, there are certain fundamental customary beliefs which dominate human life and condition our specific beliefs: belief in the continuous and independent existence of bodies, and the belief that everything which begins to be has a cause.

Whatever Begins to Exist must have a Cause

The maxim that whatever begins to exist must have a cause of its existence is neither intuitively certain nor demonstrable. If this principle is neither intuitively certain nor demonstrable, our belief in it must arise from experience and observation. It means that we frequently experience the conjunction of two objects, say, flame and the sensation which we call heat, and we remember that these objects have appeared in a regular recurrent order of contiguity and succession. We always tacitly presuppose the uniformity. This supposition that the future resembles the past is not founded on arguments of any kind, but is derived entirely from habit or custom.

Belief in the Independent and Continuous Existence of Bodies

According to Hume, we are confined to the world of perceptions and we cannot, therefore, ever conceive what objects would be like, or are like, apart from our perceptions. It is important to understand that Hume does not intend to deny the existence of bodies independently of our perceptions but we are unable to prove that. In the first place the senses cannot be the source of the notion that things continue to exist when they are unperceived. For in order for this to be the case, the senses would have to operate when they have ceased to operate. And this would involve a contradiction. Nor do the senses reveal to us bodies which are distinct from our perceptions. In the second place it is not reason which induces us to believe in the continuous and distinct existence of bodies. Whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief of objects independent of the mind, it is obvious these arguments are known but to very few; and that it is not by them that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induced to attribute objects to some impressions and deny them to others.

Imagination

Our belief in the continued and independent existence of bodies must be due, therefore, neither to the senses nor to the reason or understanding but to the imagination. The question thus arises, which are the features of certain impressions that work on the imagination and produce our persuasion of the continued and distinct existence of bodies? Hence we have to look elsewhere of the peculiar features of certain impressions, which work upon the imagination.

Constancy and Coherence

Hume mentions two such peculiar features, namely, constancy and coherence. Those mountains and houses and trees which lie at present under my eye have always appeared to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration. Here we have constantly recurring similar impressions. But, obviously, bodies often change not only their positions but also their qualities. However, even in their changes there is coherence. When I return to my chamber after an hour's absence, I find not my fire in the same situation in which I left it; but then I am accustomed, in other instances, to see a like alteration produced in a like time, whether I am present or absent, near or remote. This coherence, therefore, in their changes, is one of the characteristics of external objects, as well as their constancy. But though coherence may give rise to the supposition of the continuous existence of objects, the idea of constancy is needed to explain our supposition of their distinct existence; that is, of their independence of our perceptions. Reflection, however, shows us that the perceptions are not the same. Hence we can feign a continued existence of objects. Yet we do not merely feign this; we believe it.

Memory

According to Hume, belief in the continuous and independent existence of bodies, and the belief that everything which begins to be has a cause can be explained by reference to memory. Memory presents us with a great number of instances of similar perceptions which recur at different times after considerable interruptions. His point is that we have an inevitable and ineradicable propensity to believe in the continuous

and independent existence of bodies. This propensity produces belief and all attempts to give a rational justification of this belief are failures. In short, natural belief inevitably, and rightly, prevails.

Skepticism

Was Hume a skeptic? If a skeptic is one who doubts or even rejects the use of reason as a means of arriving at truth, then Hume was no skeptic. However, Hume recognized that many beliefs are pointless to doubt because one is literally incapable of disbelieving them or not taking them for granted in all one's reasoning, including such philosophically contentious topics as the existence of external objects and the self, space and time, and the necessity of a cause to every beginning of existence. What makes Hume a skeptic is that he supposed one's ineliminable beliefs skeptically unassailable not because they are founded on reasons too strong to be undermined by skeptical argument but because they are not founded on reasons at all.

The Immateriality of the Soul

Hume suggests that the question whether perceptions inhere in a material or an immaterial substance is a meaningless question, in the sense that we can attach no clear meaning to it and cannot, therefore, answer it. It may be said that we have an idea of substance because we can define it as something which may exist by itself. However the definition will not serve to distinguish substance from accident or soul from perceptions. Perceptions cannot inhere in a body. In order to do so, they would have to be present locally. But it is absurd to speak of passion, for example, being situated locally in relation to a moral reflection, as being above or below it, to the right or left of it. It does not follow, however, that perceptions can inhere in an immaterial substance.

The conclusion which he draws is that the question concerning the substance of the soul is absolutely unintelligible.

Idea of the Self

Hume is obviously compelled to deny that we have any idea of the self as distinct from our perceptions. All our perceptions are distinguishable and separable, and we can discover no self apart from or underlying these perceptions. According to Hume, we tend to confuse the two ideas of identity and of a succession of related objects. For example, an animal body is an aggregate, and its component parts are constantly changing: in the strict sense it does not remain self-identical. But the changes are normally gradual and cannot be perceived from moment to moment. Further, the parts are related to one another, enjoying a mutual dependence on and connection with one another. The mind thus tends to neglect the interruptions and to ascribe persistent self-identity to the aggregate. Now, in the case of the human mind there is a succession of related perceptions. Further, our perceptions are mutually related by means of the causal relation. It is only by memory that we are able to be aware of the causal relations between our perceptions. Hence memory is to be accounted the chief source of the idea of personal identity.

Passions

Hume used the word passion to cover all emotions and affects without confining it to unregulated bursts of emotion. The passions are divided by Hume into direct and indirect passions.

Direct Passions

Direct passions are those which arise immediately from the experience of pleasure or pain; and Hume mentions

desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair and security. The pain of gout, for instance, produces direct passions. Hume also mentions direct passions which arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable. Of this kind is the desire of punishment to our enemies and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites.

Indirect Passions

Indirect passions do not arise simply from feelings of pleasure or pain; they arise from what Hume calls a double relation of impressions and ideas. The most fundamental indirect passions are pride, humility and love, hatred, but they also include ambition, vanity, envy, pity, and malice. What differentiates love and hate from pride and humility is simply the object of the passion. For just as I take pride in my body or mind, or some object, insofar as it possesses some pleasing quality and has a strong relation to me- my looks, my brilliance, the imposing house I own, the beautiful painting I created, the coveted office to which I have been elected, and so on- so too, I love or esteem someone else from precisely the same causes. Otherwise, these passions exhibit the same double relational structure. The object of pride and humility is the self.

Will

Hume speaks of the will as one of the immediate effects of pleasure and pain. He describes it as the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body or new perception of our mind. Volitions, for Hume, are feelings, felt excitations to mental or physical action. They are full-fledged perceptions (impressions of reflexion) in their own right, distinct from all others under the separability principle, capable of existing in complete

isolation. As such, they are completely indefinable: like flavors. According to Hume, passion actuates the will. Reason can never directly oppose, curb, or in any way act as a counterweight to the actuation of the will by passions. It can do so only indirectly, by giving rise to some new passion, as when it informs one that the object of one's desire is unattainable, or attainable only by a different course of action, whereupon it will produce an aversion to counter, or a desire to override, the existing passion. Passions are therefore never rational in and of themselves; and since experience shows that only passions can actuate the will, reason is, and ought to be the slave of the passions.

Denial of Free Will

According to Hume, a free will would be one that acted blindly and randomly, unresponsive to one's desired and heedless of one's beliefs. Thus, from his standpoint, it is fortunate that experience shows one will not to be free, but instead to act only when necessitated to do so by some passion, be it calm or violent, beneficial or destructive, responsive or unresponsive to the deliverance of reason. The will is free as a cause to the extent the actions of one's body and mind are subject to its control, which is, causally necessitated by it. This is the freedom one would lose if one's body or mind became unresponsive to the will or responded only to some external control. By contrast, the will is free as an effect only if its action is not necessitated by any cause, including one's own passions and beliefs, and so acts at random. The latter is the kind of freedom no one wants and, on the evidence of experience, no one has.

Problem of freedom

Hume admits that the problem of freedom is to a certain extent a linguistic problem, in the sense that though

freedom must be denied if it is defined in such a way as to exclude necessity, it can be asserted if it is defined in another way. For instance, if freedom is identified with spontaneity, there is freedom. For it is clear that a great number of actions proceed from a man as a rational agent without any external coercion. For, Hume maintains, if so-called free actions are due to chance and are not caused by the agent, it would be unjust for God or man to hold human beings responsible for bad and vicious actions and to pass moral condemnation on the agents. Having reduced freedom to spontaneity, Hume attempts to prove the truth of two propositions. The first proposition is that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will, and the second is that reason can never oppose passion in the direction of the will. It is obvious that when any object causes pleasure or pain we feel a consequent emotion of attraction or aversion and are impelled to embrace or avoid the object in question. But the impulse which governs our actions is only directed by reason; it does not arise from it. Thus Hume concludes that if reason has no immediate influence of its own, it cannot withstand any principle, such as passion, which does possess efficacy. In asserting this view of the subordination of the reason to the passions Hume held that reason alone cannot affect conduct and that it is the passion or affections which are the fundamental springs of action.

Religion

At a fairly early age, Hume discarded the Calvinistic doctrines which he had been taught in boyhood. Once he had shed his initial Calvinism, religion was for him a purely external phenomenon and in this sense he was an irreligious man. Furthermore, he came to the conclusion that the influence of religion was far from beneficial and religion impairs morality by encouraging

people to act for motives other than love of virtue for its own sake. According to Hume, religion originated in such passions as fear of disaster and hope of advantage or betterment when these passions are directed towards some invisible and intelligent power. In the course of time men attempted to rationalize religion and to find arguments in favour of belief. Hume refused to recognize the validity of metaphysical arguments for God's existence; that is to say, he refused to allow that the existence of God is demonstrable. It is plain from the *Dialogues* that he disliked any form of the argument which is based on principally on an analogy between human artificial constructions and the world. The fact of the matter seems to be that Hume set out, as a detached observer, to examine the rational credentials of theism, maintaining in the meantime that religion rests on revelation, a revelation in which he personally certainly did not believe. The result of his investigation was to reduce the religious hypothesis to a meager a content that it is difficult to know what to call it. Its content is ambiguous, and Hume meant it to be ambiguous.

The Idea of God

Hume professed agreement with Locke that the idea of an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being has its origin in one's reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom. Nevertheless, he also maintained that the attempt to realize this definition in an idea is fraught with difficulty. Thus Hume ended up on the same side as the most pious monotheists in insisting on the incomprehensibility of the nature of the divine.

Religious Belief

Having established that one has no clear idea of God to underwrite religious discourse or any rational basis for

religious belief, Hume concluded that one believes in God and accepts the proofs of purported revelation from the same causes that lead one to form other beliefs not proportioned to experience (un-philosophical probabilities). The implication is that, however widespread a religious belief may be, it is not imposed on one by human nature, and so is not irresistible in the way that belief in causes, continued distinct existents, and the self are. Hume did not deny that religious belief can ever be agreeable or useful, either for the individual or society, but he did seem to think that, in the forms it actually takes-especially when vitiated by superstition or enthusiasm- it is neither.

Morality

In the case of moral discourse the question that was decisive for Hume regarding its objective significance is whether one's experience of good and ill is limited to passions and desires, or whether there is, in addition, a source of distinctively moral ideas. Moral ideas originate in a species of impression of reflexion that is entirely independent of imagination. The special status of the impression of reflexion source of moral ideas therefore derives not from any special authority intrinsic to these feelings themselves but from the unique circumstances of their causation and the special place in one's life they derive there from.

Virtue and Vice

Hume defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary. Hume distinguished four (nonexclusive) types of virtue:

a) Mental qualities immediately agreeable to their possessors, such as skill, greatness of mind, cheer, equanimity in the face of adversity, and courage.

b) Qualities immediately agreeable to others, such as tact, delicacy, wit, and good manners.

c) Qualities useful to their possessors, such as intelligence, industriousness, skill, patience, and perseverance.

d) Qualities useful to others, such as gratitude, faithfulness, reliability, and charity.

Justice

Justice is founded on self-interest and also on a sense of utility. Even when injustice does not affect us personally as victims, it still displeases us. We share the uneasiness of other people by sympathy. And since that which in human actions produces uneasiness arouses disapprobation and is called vice, while that which produces satisfaction is called virtue, we regard justice as a moral virtue and injustice as a moral vice. Thus self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends that virtue. Hume calls Justice an 'artificial' virtue in the sense that it is an invention of man, invented as a remedy for human selfishness and rapacity combined with the scanty provision which nature has made for his wants. Hume, therefore, will not allow that there are eternal laws of justice, independent of man's conditions and of public utility. Men establish the laws of justice out of a concern for their own and the public interest. But this concern is derived not from reasoning about the eternal and necessary relations of ideas but from our impressions and feelings.

Conclusion

Technology has changed since the eighteenth century, and the modern empiricist tries to avoid Hume's tendency to muddle up logic and psychology. But of the modern empiricist's direct or indirect debt to Hume there can be no doubt. His insight, which showed the centrality of man in the whole conspectus of the various sciences, is most welcome in a world where progress is conceived along very impersonal lines. However his reduction of the difference between what he calls impressions and ideas to a mere a question of quantity is also open to question. We cannot deny that Hume's scathing attack on principle of causality did spark of a lot of serious in depth reflection by later thinkers. In short, assessing the insightful contribution made by Hume, he deserves the epithet- the father of empiricism.

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