



David Hume

Born: 1711, Edinburgh, Scotland,
Died: 1776, Edinburgh, Scotland

Major Works: A Treatise of Human Nature (1739, 1740), An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748), An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (published posthumously, 1779)

Major Ideas:

- All our ideas are derived originally from sense impressions.
- Since our beliefs are based not on reason but imagination, they cannot be rationally justified.
- We cannot establish the existence of an external, physical world.
- Causation must be explained subjectively rather than objectively.
- There are no minds distinct from the contents of consciousness.
- Ultimately, nothing can be known.
- Our moral convictions are based on feeling rather than on reason.
- The question of God's existence is an enigma; although the chief arguments that attempt to establish that God exists are subject to telling objections, they still have a residual validity.

David Hume is regarded by many critics as the most important philosopher ever to have written in the English language. His importance results from a number of features of his thought. He discussed in a fundamental and original way issues covering a broad range of central philosophical areas: in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science and mathematics, ethics, and philosophy of religion. He pursued the implications of the empiricist theory of ideas far beyond the level of John Locke, showing that it led inevitably to skepticism. He was one of the most acute critics of orthodox opinions (in whatever field) in the Western tradition. Finally, he formulated the most sophisticated defense of skepticism, or the denial that anything can be known, in the philosophical literature.

Hume's philosophy appears primarily in four works: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which most of his main views are developed and defended in detail; *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, a relatively short work in which some of the main themes of the *Treatise* are repeated in a more popular style; *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, a discussion of some of the more practical aspects of morality; and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which is devoted mainly, but not exclusively, to the teleological or "design" argument for the existence of God.

Hume was born in Edinburgh but his childhood in the village of Chirnside, on the border between Scotland and England. He attended the University of Edinburgh for three years but never took a degree. When his family urged him to enter the legal profession, he took a position with a firm of solicitors in Edinburgh, but he soon found the study of law ill-suited to his tastes and began to devote all of his spare time to reading literature and philosophy. In doing so, he overexerted himself and suffered a nervous breakdown at the age of eighteen. On his recovery, he abandoned the intellectual life to join a merchant enterprise in Bristol. But his interest in commerce quickly faded and he departed for France, where, during the next three years, he wrote his most famous book, the *Treatise*.

Hume never held an academic position. He applied for a professorship at the University of Edinburgh but his application was rejected, probably because of opposition from the clergy, who suspected him of being an atheist. After having made his reputation as a philosopher, he shifted his interest to history, publishing a six-volume *History of Great Britain* from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688. A good friend of Benjamin Franklin, he received news of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 with great satisfaction.

Hume's philosophy was not well received in his native land. His Scottish contemporaries attacked it vigorously, and even viciously, while generally not understanding it. The only eighteenth-century philosopher to appreciate its significance was the German Immanuel Kant, who confessed that it aroused him from his "dogmatic slumbers." Hume received little attention during the nineteenth century but twentieth-century scholars have studied his thought with increasing care and sympathy, fully recognizing its originality and importance.

Epistemology and Metaphysics

Hume begins *A Treatise of Human Nature* with a statement, much like that of Locke, of an empiricist epistemology. "All the perceptions of the human mind," he writes in the first sentence of the book, "resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS." "Perceptions" is a general term; it means anything of which we are conscious. "Impressions" are the products of our five senses--colors, sounds, and so forth--as well as feelings of pleasure and pain. "Ideas" are copies of impressions, differing from them only in being less forceful or vivid. It follows from this view that we cannot have any idea that is not traceable back to some impression; thus abstract general ideas of the Platonic kind are impossible. We think by putting simple ideas together, through the employment of memory and imagination, to form complex ones. Since such ideas, however complex they may be, are made up entirely of original materials derived from impressions, the range of our possible knowledge is limited by that of our impressions. Hume draws a number of important philosophical conclusions from these epistemological assumptions.

The physical world, as philosophers and laymen alike have conceived it, has an existence independent of anyone's awareness of it. Locke and others had held that we perceive it through our senses. Hume, however, was unwilling to accept this account. All that we perceive through our senses are impressions and these are not external physical objects but contents of consciousness. They arise in our minds, he writes, "from unknown causes." Since our ideas are copies of our impressions, their ultimate causes must also be unknown. We have no way of leaping the gap between the contents of our consciousness and an external, nonconscious physical world. Although such a world may exist, we can have no knowledge of its existence.

Our inability to have any knowledge of an external world raises a question about the nature of causation. As we ordinarily think of the matter, causation is a connection between two physical objects in which one, the cause, possesses a power that it exerts on the other, the effect. For example, a moving billiard ball, when it strikes another, transfers its causal power to the other, causing it to move. But, if we can have no knowledge of billiard balls as physical objects, obviously we can have none of their causal powers. We can no more perceive this power, Hume contends, than we can perceive the balls themselves. So we need to reinterpret the notion of causation. Rather than being objective, it is subjective. After we have had perceptions that we call billiard balls repeatedly moving in certain ways after colliding with each other, our minds develop the habit of expecting to experience the same kinds of perceptions in the future. Thus when we see what we call a billiard ball moving toward another, we anticipate that the second ball will move in a certain way when it is struck. Causation is just this inward anticipation, based on past experience, that we feel.

Perceptions, Hume has said, are the contents of consciousness. But what is consciousness? Or, more generally, what is a mind that is conscious? If we are to know that minds exist, we must have some idea of them, which requires that we have some sense impression of them. But, Hume says, when he tries to discover his mind, he can find nothing but impressions and ideas, or the contents of consciousness. Since he can have no impression, hence no idea of his mind, he concludes that the mind is unknowable. Carrying his argument one step further, he asserts that minds, as realities different from the contents of consciousness, simply do not exist. As he puts it, "They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind...."

Hume adds one further dimension to his skepticism. After analyzing the process of reasoning, he comes to the conclusion that reason is self-destructive. Through a complex two-step argument he reduces all knowledge to probability and then reduces this probability to nothing. His conclusion, which he entitles "total" skepticism, eliminates the possibility of our knowing anything at all.

In his acceptance of total skepticism, Hume aligns himself with the tradition of skeptical thinkers that had its origins in Hellenistic Greek thought. He sees this tradition epitomized by the Pyrrhonists, to whom he refers in his writings. According to his understanding of them, these philosophers, after reaching the conclusion that nothing could be known, decided that they should believe nothing, therefore adopted a stance of suspension of judgment about everything. Although Hume accepted the first half of this skeptical view, he rejected the second. The fact that we can never give any reasons for what we believe, he

argued, does not mean that we believe nothing. On the contrary, we believe many things; for example, that an external physical world exists, that there are objective causal forces at work in nature, and that we have enduring minds. We believe these things, even though our beliefs have no rational basis, because we must do so. As he puts it, "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel..."

Hume's theory of natural belief is his distinctive contribution to skepticism and represents a significant improvement over the positions of most previous skeptics. For him, the destruction of reason does not lead to a debilitating suspension of judgment because he finds in human nature an overwhelming urge to judge and to believe. The fact that we cannot offer any rational support for our beliefs is simply an irrelevancy. We believe anyway, because we are and must be believing animals.

Ethics

Hume's writings on ethics appear mainly in two works, book 3 of his *Treatise* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. His views cover three areas of the subject, including metaethics, with an emphasis on the controversy between ethical objectivism and subjectivism; normative ethics, with the defense of a form of utilitarianism; and applied ethics, with the application of his normative theory to a variety of practical moral problems.

In his writings on meta-ethics, Hume expresses his most interesting, as well as controversial, ethical views. According to the standard, objectivistic position, ethical properties actually characterize states of affairs. Knowledge is considered to be good for its own sake; it is simply better to know than to be ignorant. Likewise, cruelty is wrong because of its very nature as the infliction of gratuitous pain on another sentient being. Hume rejected this objectivism. No objective state of affairs possesses any moral properties; rather all are in themselves morally neutral. Morality arises only when people react to states of affairs and develop feelings of approval or disapproval about them. Thus, when we say that knowledge is better than ignorance we mean only that knowledge is better than ignorance we mean only that we like the one and dislike the other. Or when we say that cruelty is wrong we mean only that we react negatively to it. Hume states this subjectivistic theory in a striking passage in the *Treatise*:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights....The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action....So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.

His subjectivism in meta-ethics provides Hume with the necessary foundation on which to construct his normative ethics. If the rightness of actions and the goodness of states of affairs are constituted by our feelings about them, to discover what is in fact right or good all we need to do is to find out what people feel approval of. Hume believed he had discovered what those things are. In the first place, we feel approval of whatever is immediately

agreeable, or pleasurable, both to ourselves and others. Second, we feel approval of whatever is useful, or whatever produces results that are pleasurable, either to ourselves or others.

Thus Hume's normative ethics is a form of universalistic hedonistic utilitarianism. It is utilitarian because our feelings of approval are directed to the consequences that result from actions; it is hedonistic because the consequences of which we approve are those that are pleasurable; and it is universalistic (rather than egoistic) because everyone's pleasure is taken into account. Nevertheless, it differs from standard hedonistic utilitarianism (like that defended later by John Stuart Mill) in one important respect. Whereas the standard view holds that we ought to maximize pleasure because pleasure is objectively good, Hume denied any goodness to pleasure, or anything else. For him the reason why we ought to maximize pleasure lies simply in the fact that we happen to like it.

Hume's views on practical moral problems are wide-ranging but of less philosophical interest. In various essays and in sections of the *Treatise*, he addresses a number of practical questions, including such topics as private property, justice, government, and international law, as well as many personal attributes, such as pride and humility, love and hate, beauty and deformity, benevolence and anger, malice and envy, and others. His discussions regarding these are guided by his normative theory, derived from his original ethical subjectivism.

Philosophy of Religion

Hume was interested in religious issues all of his life and wrote a number of essays concerned with specific subjects, such as miracles, human immortality, Providence, the problems of evil, and the history of religion. Although he was almost invariably quite critical of religion, the charge made by many of his contemporaries, particularly in Scotland, that he was an atheist seems a gross oversimplification of the quite complex and sophisticated views he held.

By far the most important of Hume's works in this area is his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which he apparently wrote over a period of several years but which was not published until 1779, after his death. In the *Dialogues*, three speakers discuss the question of the existence of God. The speakers are, respectively, Demea, who is a conventional believer who defends the orthodoxy of the Christian faith without giving it too much thought; Cleanthes, who is a learned theologian considerably influenced by Newtonian science and by deistic thought; and Philo, who, though a religious skeptic, is far from being scornful of the arguments that theists like Cleanthes can offer in support of their position. The discussion in the *Dialogues* is carried on chiefly by Cleanthes and Philo, with occasional pious interjections from Demea, included mainly for comic relief.

The main theme of the *Dialogues* concerns the question: Is it possible to offer any reasons capable of establishing the conclusion that God exists? Specifically, the discussion centers on the teleological or "design" argument for God's existence, which was the central argument in theological and philosophical disputes in the eighteenth century. This is an argument from analogy. It runs along the following lines: All around us we see manufactured articles, like watches and ships, which we know to have been designed and produced by human beings

possessing minds. Likewise, we see the universe in which we live, with all its incalculable size and complexity. By analogy we conclude that it must have been designed and produced by a mind. Furthermore, this mind must possess the qualities, far beyond those of any finite minds, capable of designing and creating such a product. It must, in other words, be an infinite mind, or God.

The main body of the Dialogues consists in a series of highly sophisticated arguments in which Cleanthes attempts, with considerable success, to defend the teleological argument against the objections of Philo. Most of his views are reiterations of standard arguments that had been developed by philosophers and theologians of the era and were well known in Hume's time. Philo's counterarguments, on the other hand, were not only ingenious but often original. His attack on the teleological argument was two-edged. He attempted to show that the analogy on which the argument rested was either too strong or too weak and in either case deficient. If the analogy is strong and God's mind is closely related to human minds, his infinite greatness is sacrificed. If, on the other hand, God as infinite is sharply distinguished from humans, the analogy on which the argument rests becomes too attenuated to bear the weight that is placed on it.

Since his time, Hume Scholars have perennially argued the question: Which of the characters in the Dialogues was speaking for Hume? Demea, of course, is out. Most commentators incline toward Philo, although some favor Cleanthes. Finally, some defend the view that Hume cannot be identified with any one of the three. Whatever the truth, one might say that Hume could well have been speaking for himself when at the end of the Dialogues he puts the following words in Philo's mouth: "...The cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence..."

Further Reading

Anderson, Robert F. Hume's First Principles. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966. Approaching Hume as a metaphysician, this innovative book by a leading American Hume scholar uses careful and detailed textual analysis to shed important new light on Hume's thought.

Fogelin, Robert. Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature. London, Boston, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985. The book by an eminent American philosopher concentrates on the skeptical elements in Hume's philosophy.

Laird, John. Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature. London: Methuen, 1932. A survey and analysis of Hume's writings by a distinguished Scottish philosopher, particularly valuable for its scholarly insight into influences of earlier writers on Hume's philosophy.

Passmore, John. Hume's Intentions. 3d ed. London: Duckworth, 1980. The idea of this book by a distinguished Australian philosopher is to reveal the many facets of Hume's philosophical genius by devoting a separate chapter to each of the major elements in his thought.

Smith, Norman Kemp. The Philosophy of David Hume. London: Macmillan & Co., 1941. The classical modern interpretation of Hume in which the author, a notable Scottish historian of philosophy, finds the key to Hume's thought in his ethics of feeling.

Stroud, Barry. Hume. London, Boston, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977. A balanced and judicious general introduction to the major themes in Hume's philosophy written by a major American philosopher from the University of California, Berkeley.

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