Chapter 9

Hume

Figure 9.1: Hume

9.1 Introduction

9.1.1 Life and works

- 1711-1776
- Calvinist family
- Goes to the university at 12
- Refuses to pursue career in Law: wants to be a scholar and philosopher
- Studies philosophy: he thinks it is his duty to open "a New Scene of Thought" in philosophy (*My Own Life* – autobiographical essay)

- First work written while in France : *Treatise of Human Nature*, from which he "castrated" the essay on miracles, in order to please Bishop Butler – this had not been enough: Hume acquire a reputation of atheist which will never leave him: HE WILL NEVER OBTAIN ANY ACADEMIC POSITION
- Military expedition with his cousin St. Clair : Quebec and Britanny
- Librarian at the Cambridge University – works on a *History of England* – has to resign due to complains against his choices ("offending volumes")
- Diplomat in Paris
- Back to England: *Enquiries* and other works
- last years: works on the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, for which he arranged a posthumous publication

9.1.2 Hume's philosophy in a nutshell

- Empiricism vs. metaphysical systems
- Method: Hume and Newton – naturalism
- Empiricism and Scepticism
- Hume and Religion

9.2 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, sections 1-5, 7, 12, as selected in your textbook
- Study Questions:

    1. By which mechanism are our ideas constructed according to Hume? Make sure to explain the distinctions between ideas and impressions and between sensation and reflection, as well as the copy principle.

2. Explain the thought experiment about the person who has never seen a particular shade of blue. Which difficulties does it raise for Hume's theory of ideas? How does Hume answer? Is his answer satisfactory? What other solution could you propose?

3. What are the laws which rule the ways in which our ideas come to our mind according to Hume? In what sense are these laws both natural and empirical?

4. How does Hume propose to use the Copy Principle in order to settle philosophical controversies about abstract notions like the notion of substance?

5. What is the difference between relations of ideas and matters of facts in Hume's philosophy? Give examples. What principle does Hume take to be the base of all our reasonings concerning matters of facts? Explain.

6. Explain Hume's argument that our expectation that the sun will rise tomorrow cannot be justified on any reasoning, either a priori or a posteriori.

7. If not by reasoning, explain how we come to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow?

8. How do we construct our idea of a necessary connection between causes and effect according to Hume? Explain Hume's two definitions of cause.

9. Which argument(s) in favor of Skepticism does Hume take seriously? Why does Hume reject radical forms of skepticism? What kind of skepticism does he advocate instead?

9.3 Epistemology

Hume's main aim is to give an account of human understanding and human knowledge from an empiricist and naturalist point of view. In other words, Hume aims at writing the science of the workings of the human mind.

9.3.1 Origin of our Ideas: Impressions, Ideas and the copy principle

The first question that Hume tackles is the question of how our ideas come to us. That is to say, he gives an account of the mechanisms by which our ideas are constructed. What is at stake is to give an account of the origin of ideas which allows him to dismiss metaphysical ideas as lacking true meaning.

- Hume's view:

  1. All the materials of our thinking consists in either Impressions or Ideas.
     - perceptions, emotions, etc. : IMPRESSIONS
     - memories or reflections of perceptions: IDEAS
  2. Ideas are faint images of vivid impressions
  3. All ideas derive either from our inner sentiment (reflection) or outer sentiment (sensations).

- Hume's arguments:

  1. Argument 1.
     COPY PRINCIPLE: All complex ideas are resolved into simple ideas copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment.
     Hume presents this principle as an empirical principle (based on experience), the first law of human understanding.
  2. Argument 2.
     Defects in organs lead to defects in ideas. A blind man has no idea of color.
  3. Objection and Answer: The missing shade of blue
     - Consider someone who has never seen a particular shade of blue. According to Hume's theory, such a person cannot possess the idea of this particular shade of blue. Now, imagine that we show to this person all the shades of blue except the one he is not acquainted with. Don't you think he would be able to infer the idea of the missing shade of blue, despite the fact that he never experienced it?

- Hume's answer to the objection is merely that such cases will be extremely rare and hence (?) not worth discussing.

- As it stands, Hume's answer is unsatisfactory. Two questions arise:

1. Is there a way to construct the idea of the missing shade of blue?

2. Could metaphysical ideas be constructed in the same way?

If Hume's philosophy can stand, we must find a way to answer yes to 1. and no to 2. Otherwise, Hume seems to be in trouble.

- Is there a way to construct the idea of the missing shade of blue?
  Yes: Mixing mental paints
  Note that even if it has been constructed, the idea of the shade of blue is still simple
- Could metaphysical ideas be constructed in the same way?
  This seems not plausible: would you think that you can construct the idea of monad for example in the way described above? Metaphysical ideas are far too complex.

⟶ *Hume gives a rough account of the origin of ideas. The copy principle seems to be easily falsified. Hume's goal and method – to make the working of the mind the object of science – is more interesting than his particular theory of the mind.*

9.3.2 The Links between our Ideas: The Laws of Association

The second question Hume tackles is the question of how our ideas interact. As a matter of fact, ideas come to mind in a certain order. A naive account of how this happens consists in saying that we call upon certain ideas at will. A simple observation of our mental life shows that this is not the case though. Hume is the first to give an account of our mental life without appealing to the notion of will, or reason. Instead, there are some laws which rule the ways in which our ideas are linked with one another in our stream of thought. These laws are the laws of association.

- Hume is the first to elaborate the notion of ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS – he says himself that he is the "inventor" of the principles of association of ideas (in the *Abstract* of the *Treatise*)

- Three principles for the connection between ideas:

  – resemblance

  – contiguity

  – cause and effect

- It is one of Hume's merits to have established rules for the construction of ideas *which do not suppose a rational mind with specific abilities.* These rules are *natural* and *empirical*:

  - natural: no appeal to special faculties like reason or will;

  - empirical: our justification for taking them as rules is experience.

⟶ *Hume gives an account of how our ideas come to mind from an empiricist and naturalist point of view. He provides the laws by which our ideas are linked with one another within the stream of thought. Note however that if these rules describe natural processes, then the way in which our ideas are linked to one another does not necessarily conduct to truth: natural tendencies are no legitimate ground for truth. Natural rules* explain *but do not* justify *our beliefs.*

9.3.3 The Copy Principle as a Criterion of Meaningfullness

Hume uses his account of how our ideas are constructed to dismiss as meaningless a entire realm of philosophical terms.

- Many philosophical dispute rely on problems of definitions, that is, on the obscurity of the terms, which are not clearly linked to any specific idea.

- Definitions from terms to terms are unsatisfactory – we end up in a circle – we need another way to define the meanings of our words.

- The copy principle, or, more precisely *the converse of the copy principle* give a criterion of meaning. In order to find out the meaning of a given term, just ask: from what impressions were the idea supposedly represented by the term derived?

  Any term which does not represent an idea which can be traced back to a set of simple ideas/copies of simple impressions is meaningless!!

- Many philosophical terms are thus rejected as meaningless, or beyond our understanding.

$\longrightarrow$ *Hume dismisses most philosophical controversies as meaningless. In fact, they are just disputes over empty words.*

9.3.4 Knowledge

The third question Hume tackles is the question of the ways in which we gain knowledge. Hume needs to assess whether the processes through which we form our beliefs give any guarantee of truth.

Relations of ideas and matters of facts

There are two kinds of things of which we can have some knowledge: relations of ideas and matters of facts

- **Relations of ideas** are proved a priori, their truth can be certain and discovered by thought alone, because their contrary implies contradiction. Their truth is independent of what is existent in the world.

  ex: 'the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right in Euclidian Geometry'.

  ex: 'a circle cannot be square': the notion of square circle implies contradiction: we cannot even conceive it clearly

  $\longrightarrow$ *The only way to prove a proposition a priori is to prove that its contrary implies a logical contradiction.*

- **Matters of fact** are proved a posteriori (by experience), their truth is never provable a priori: their contrary is always possible because it never implies contradiction.

ex: 'the sun will rise tomorrow' – that the sun will not rise tomorrow is perfectly intelligible.

The principle of reasoning for matters of facts

If not a priori reasoning, what can establish a matter of fact?

1. Observation and memory are obvious candidate.

2. But what about matters of facts of which we do perceive actually or that we do not remember? – e.g. 'the sun will rise tomorrow'

Hume: **all our reasonings concerning matters of facts are founded on the relation of cause and effect**

Hume claims that only the relation of cause and effect allows us to go beyond the evidence given by our senses and our memory. Hence, all our beliefs about matters of facts which are not founded on direct observation or memory are based on a reasoning in terms of causes and effects.

The question arises: what are the grounds of our knowledge of cause and effect? How do we know that something is the cause of something else?

Conclusion

According the Hume, there are two kinds of knowledge: knowledge about the relations of ideas, and knowledge about matters of facts. While our knowledge about the relations of ideas is reached a priori, our knowledge about matters of facts relies on one of the three following: direct actual experience, memory, or reasoning in terms of causes and effects.

$\longrightarrow$ *Just as when accounting for human understanding, Hume gives a naturalistic and empiricist account of human knowledge. That said, here again, Hume does not say anything about these mechanisms of knowledge being reliable or not. And indeed, he is going to spend quite a bit of time showing that our main kind of reasoning – in terms of causes and effects – is unwarranted.*

9.4 The problem of induction

9.4.1 Inductive inference: the negative phase

The following is a direct quote from Morris, William Edward, "David Hume", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/hume/>

Text in bold font is my addition.

Hume proceeds first negatively, to show that our causal inferences are not due to reason, or any operation of the understanding. Reasoning concerns either relations of ideas or matters of fact.

Causal Relations are not provable a priori: Hume quickly establishes that, whatever assures us that a causal relation obtains, it is not reasoning concerning relations between ideas. Effects are distinct events from their causes: we can always conceive of one such event occurring and the other not. So causal reasoning cannot be a priori reasoning.

Causal Relations are discovered by experience : Causes and effects are discovered, not by reason but through experience, when we find that particular objects are constantly conjoined with one another. We tend to overlook this because most ordinary causal judgments are so familiar; we have made them so many times that our judgment seems immediate. But when we consider the matter, we realize that an (absolutely) unexperienced reasoner could be no reasoner at all. (...)

The so-called laws of nature are discovered by experience, not a priori. But, if all our knowledge of matters of facts are based on experience, how do we extend our reasoning to future cases?

The problem of inductive reasoning Even after we have experience of causal connections, our conclusions from those experiences are not based on any reasoning or on any other process of the understanding. They are based on our past experiences of similar cases, without which we could draw no conclusions at all.

But this leaves us without any link between the past and the future. How can we justify extending our conclusions from past observation

and experience to the future? The connection between a proposition that summarizes past experience and one that predicts what will occur at some future time is surely not an intuitive connection; it needs to be established by reasoning or argument. The reasoning involved must either be demonstrative, concerning relations of ideas, or probable, concerning matters of fact and existence.

Induction is not justifiable by any a priori deductive argument: There is no room for demonstrative reasoning here. We can always conceive of a change in the course of nature. However unlikely it may seem, such a supposition is intelligible and can be distinctly conceived. It therefore implies no contradiction, so it cannot be proven false by a priori demonstrative reasoning.

Induction is not provable by any a posteriori probable argument Probable reasoning cannot establish the connection, either, since it is based on the relation of cause and effect. What we understand of that relation is based on experience and any inference from experience is based on the supposition that nature is uniform that the future will be like the past.

Assuming the uniformity of nature is question begging: The connection could be established by adding a premise stating that nature is uniform. But how could we justify such a claim? Appeal to experience will either be circular or question-begging. For any such appeal must be founded on some version of the uniformity principle itself the very principle we need to justify.

Conclusion: our reasonings concerning matters of facts beyond the evidence of our senses and our memory are not well grounded

This argument exhausts the ways reason might establish a connection between cause and effect, and so completes the negative phase of Hume's project. The explanatory model of human nature which makes reason prominent and dominant in thought and action is indefensible. Scepticism about it is well-founded: the model must go.

Hume insists that he offers his sceptical doubts about the operations of the understanding, not as discouragement, but rather an incitementto attempt something more full and satisfactory. Having cleared a space for his own account, Hume is now ready to do just that.

9.4.2 Inductive inference: the positive phase

I am still quoting Morris. "T" stands for Treatise.

What the principle of our causal reasoning can be Hume's negative argument showed that our causal expectations are not formed on the basis of reason. But we do form them, and if the mind be not engaged by argument it must be induced by some other principle of equal weight and authority.

This principle can't be some intricate or profound metaphysical argument Hume overlooked. For all of us ordinary people, infants, even animals improve by experience, forming causal expectations and refining them in the light of experience. Hume's sceptical solution limits our inquiries to common life, where no sophisticated metaphysical arguments are available and none are required.

Causal relations are grounded on the custom of constant conjunctions: When we examine experience to see how expectations are actually produced, we discover that they arise after we have experienced the constant conjunction of two objects; only then do we expect the one from the appearance of the other. But when repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation we always say, that this propensity is the effect of Custom.

So the process that produces our causal expectations is itself causal. Custom or habit determines the mind to suppose the future conformable to the past. But if this background of experienced constant conjunctions was all that was involved, then our reasonings would be merely hypothetical. Expecting that fire will warm, however, isn't just conceiving of its warming, it is believing that it will warm.

What makes us believe Belief requires that there also be some fact present to the senses or memory, which gives strength and solidity to the related idea. In these circumstances, belief is as unavoidable as is the feeling of a passion; it is a species of natural instinct, the necessary result of placing the mind in this situation.

Belief is a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit that results from the manner in which ideas are conceived, and in their feeling to the mind. It is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm,

steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain. Belief is thus more an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures, so that all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation.

This should not be surprising, given that belief is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures. It is more conformable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency than to trust it to the fallacious deductions of our reason. Hume's sceptical solution thus gives a descriptive alternative, appropriately independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding, to philosophers' attempts to account for our causal reasonings by appeal to reason and argument. For the other notions in the definitional circle, either we have no idea of force or energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can mean nothing but that determination of the thought, acquired by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect.

End of quote

Conclusion and Discussion - "Custom is the great guide of human life": Hume considers that custom is one of the main principles, or law of human nature. Custom is the *natural* way in which humans go beyond immediate experience and memory. It is a natural and empirical law: it describes a natural process (by contrast to innate ideas or innate principles of logic) and it is derived from observation.

It is a sufficient explanation in the sense that no other cause can be given that would improve the explanation. Hume is following Newton here: we cannot go any further without framing hypotheses that go beyond experience, and hence, are not verifiable.

In particular, Hume will not postulate "mental powers" to explain the mechanism of custom, just Newton did not postulate any "gravity power" in the material bodies. This would be going beyond experience and hence would not have any further explanatory value.

The law of custom is:

1. a good explanation

2. supported by experience

3. the best we have – no alternative does a better job

By inference to the best explanation, we can accept it.