Hume's Empiricism

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History

David Hume

- Spent most of his life (1711-1776) in Edinburgh, apart from a period at La Fleche, the Jesuit college where Descartes had studied.
- Worked as a diplomat and a librarian, but held no university position. Was turned down for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in 1744. Why? Because of his skeptical and heretical opinions.
- Wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740). Got an indifferent reception. He then wrote *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) in an attempt to produce a more accessible version of the *Treatise*. Still got lackluster reviews.
- In his life, he was better known for his six-volume *History of England*. Today, Hume is largely (widely, and favorably) known for his philosophical work.
- Hume's overarching goal is to present a comprehensive theory of human understanding. He thought such a theory is the key to providing a foundation for our conceptions of reason, the mind, and morality.

Of the *Treatise*, Hume wrote: "it fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots."

Rationalism and Empiricism

- Rationalism and empiricism are two rival theories of human understanding. The most important points of contention between rationalists and empiricists historically has been over the existence of innate ideas and the role of experience in justifying knowledge.
- Rationalists generally believe in innate ideas and think sensory experience is secondary to the intellect. The friends of rationalism include Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.
- Empiricists generally disbelieve in innate ideas and think the intellect is secondary to sensory experience. The friends of empiricism include Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, Cavendish, and Hume.
- Hume's empiricism is motivated in part by a desire to delegitimize "easy" (or popular, non-rigorous, sentimental) philosophy, abstruse philosophy (metaphysics), and superstition.

Mind

Ideas and Impressions

- The first task Hume takes up is developing an account of the origin of our ideas. He begins by intuitively motivating a distinction between ideas and impressions.

  > Everyone will readily allow that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind when a man feels the pain of excessive heat or the pleasure of moderate warmth and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation or anticipates it by his imagination (section II, p. 9-10)

- From this Hume infers that "we may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity" (p. 10):

  > **Impressions**: more forcible and lively (e.g., hear, see, feel, love, hate, desire, will)
  >
  > **Ideas**: less forcible and lively (e.g., arise from reflection on impressions)

- **The Copy Principle**: "All our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones" (p. 11)—this is a key expression of Hume's empiricism.
- Ideas can be simple or complex. Simple ideas are copies of impressions. Complex ideas are combinations of simple ideas.
- The doctrine of complex ideas is part of his two-fold argument for the Copy Principle. He thinks the principle is plausible because it appears that all ideas can be resolved into simple ideas that are copies of impressions. (God example, p. 11)
- The second argument for the Copy Principle is that those with infirmities of sensation (or emotion) lack the corresponding ideas. (Blind person example, p. 12)
- Hume briefly posits a counterexample to the uniform Copy Principle. He imagines someone who has encountered every shade of blue except one. He thinks it's plausible that the person can have an idea of the missing shade without having an impression of it.

God example: "Even ideas that at first glance seem to be the furthest removed from that origin are found on closer examination to be derived from it. The idea of God—meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being—comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds. However far we push this enquiry, we shall find that every idea that we examine is copied from a similar impression' (p. 11)'

Blind example: "If a man can't have some kind of sensation because there is something wrong with his eyes, ears etc., he will never be found to have corresponding ideas. A blind man can't form a notion of colours, or a deaf man a notion of sounds. If either is cured of his deafness or blindness, so that the sensations can get through to him, the ideas can then get through as well; and then he will find it easy to conceive these objects" (p. 12).

Questions

1. Is there a distinction between impressions and ideas? If there is, is that distinction a matter of vivacity?
2. Can you think of counterexamples to the Copy Principle?

Connections between Ideas

- After outlining the origin of ideas (simple and complex), Hume considers their relations to one another. He suggests that there are only three principles of connection among ideas:

  Resemblance—ex. "a picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original" (p. 14)

  Contiguity—ex. "the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an inquiry or discourse concerning the others" (p. 14)

  Cause and Effect—ex. "if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it" (p. 14).

- In enumerating these "principles of connection" Hume is attempting to pin down those natural propensities we have to associate ideas. He thinks these are the only three principles, but he regards the existence of additional principles as an empirical matter.

Questions

1. Are any of Hume's principles redundant?
2. Can you think of other principles of connection?

Knowledge

The Empiricist Criterion

- Toward the end of Section II, Hume expands his observation about the origin of ideas into a criterion for identifying nonsense:

  When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it is impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality (p. 12)

The empiricist criterion was picked up in the early twentieth-century by a group of philosophers known as the Logical Positivists (e.g., in A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*). They held that the only meaningful propositions are those that are either analytic (true in virtue of meaning, e.g., "All bachelors are males") or empirically verifiable (e.g., "There are 1,000 trees in Canada"). Everything else is metaphysical nonsense.

- Take some idea or bit of reasoning that we are having trouble understanding. Hume recommends looking for the source of this idea. If there is no such source, we declare the idea nonsensical or inaccurate. If the idea does have a sensory source, then we clarify the idea as well as increase of justification in having that idea.
- Notice that Hume inverts Descartes' theory of knowledge. While Descartes thinks reason serves as the foundation of knowledge, Hume thinks experience does.

Limitations

- There's an important limitation to this criterion: it only concerns matters of fact, not relations between ideas. (Section IV, part I.)
- Relations of ideas are the subject of mathematics and logic. They can be ascertained independently of experience because they concern the internal world. Their proof, when had, are certain. I know that two plus two equals four just because that is how those ideas are. This is an instance of *a priori* knowledge.
- Matters of fact are the subject of the sciences. They can only be ascertained by experience because they concern the external world. You cannot demonstrate, with certainty, that a matter of fact holds. I know the sun rises tomorrow because of experience; it is not as if the sun's failing to rise is an incoherent idea. This is an instance of *a posteriori* knowledge.

Questions

1. Are there counterexamples to the empiricist criterion?
2. Is the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact a sharp one? Are there mixed (or problem) cases?

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