

HUME'S 'A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE'

David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) presents the most important account of skepticism in the history of modern philosophy. In this lucid and thorough introduction to the work, John P. Wright examines the development of Hume's ideas in the *Treatise*, their relation to eighteenth-century theories of the imagination and passions, and the reception they received when Hume published the *Treatise*. He explains Hume's arguments concerning the inability of reason to establish the basic beliefs which underlie science and morals, as well as his arguments showing why we are nevertheless psychologically compelled to accept such beliefs. The book will be a valuable guide for those seeking to understand the nature of modern skepticism and its connection with the founding of the human sciences during the Enlightenment.

JOHN P. WRIGHT is Professor of Philosophy at Central Michigan University, and was Visiting Professor in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh from 2004 to 2007. He is the author of *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (1983), and co-editor of *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (1994) and *Psyche and Soma: Physicians and Metaphysicians on the Mind-Body Problem from Antiquity to Enlightenment* (2000).

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HUME'S 'A TREATISE OF
HUMAN NATURE'

An Introduction

JOHN P. WRIGHT

Central Michigan University



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*To the late John W. Yolton, teacher and friend,
who taught me to love both philosophy and its history,
and to appreciate the difference*

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Preface

There is no better example of the *baroque* style of writing in philosophy than David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Like the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, a Handel Oratorio, or Lord Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, it is characterized by complexity, grandeur, and expansiveness. Published in three separate volumes in 1739 and 1740, it well represents the age in which it was written. Indeed, there is a striking contrast between the *Treatise* and the core writings of Hume's later philosophy – his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, first published in 1748 and 1752 respectively – where, as he said, he cast his earlier ideas anew. By comparison with the *Treatise*, these philosophical writings are simple and elegant. There is a reason for this. Hume was profoundly disappointed by the reception of the *Treatise*, and judged that its failure lay more in the manner than the matter. He decided that “by care and art, and the avoiding of all unnecessary detail” he could throw more light on the subjects he dealt with in the earlier book.¹

Nevertheless, it is this irregular pearl, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which has come to be regarded as Hume's great philosophical masterpiece and, indeed, among the greatest philosophical books ever written. It is a book which every serious student of philosophy is expected to read, and the philosophical struggles of its author, dramatically described in the famous skeptical Conclusion to Book 1, have come to represent the philosophical enterprise itself. Yet, as might be expected from a book of its reach and complexity, it has spawned vastly differing interpretations. Very different philosophical

¹ EHU 1.17

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schools have claimed Hume as one of their own – positivism, naturalism, skepticism, empiricism, and phenomenology – to name a few. Competing interpretations of Hume's analysis of causality regard him variously as a regularity theorist, a quasi-realist, and a skeptical realist. In recent years his ethical theory has been considered a work in virtue ethics, focusing on the evaluation of human character. But in earlier years he was regarded as an emotivist or a proto-utilitarian – theories generally considered as exclusive of each other and certainly of virtue ethics. These varying interpretations are evidence, if nothing else, of the seminal nature of this famous book.

At the same time, they present a particular problem for a scholar who seeks to introduce the *Treatise* to those who are just beginning to study it. An attempt to take the reader through the scholarly literature comparing one interpretation with another one runs the risk of convincing her that the *Treatise* is so unclear that, in the words of one commentator, one can “find all philosophies in Hume, or, by setting up one statement against another, none at all.”² On the other hand, by presenting a single interpretation and disregarding all others one runs the risk of oversimplifying his doctrines and leaving the reader with little appreciation of the richness of the philosophical ideas he struggled with. In this book, I have attempted a middle course, presenting a unified interpretation of the *Treatise* while at the same time indicating how my interpretation differs from those of other commentators on his philosophy. The main lines of this interpretation were first put forward in my book *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (1983), and developed in subsequent articles. They are based, above all, on a consideration of the relation of Hume's views to the philosophers he identified as his predecessors, both in the text of the *Treatise* and in his contemporary correspondence.

I open the book with a chapter discussing Hume's intellectual development as he was writing the *Treatise* – a subject which has been the study of much careful scholarship in recent years. This scholarship challenges assumptions which are often repeated from one book on Hume's philosophy to another. In this chapter, I attempt to use this recent scholarship to throw light on the ways in which Hume's

² Editor's Introduction, David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. vii.

personal and intellectual struggles while he was writing the *Treatise* influenced his conclusions about skepticism and human nature. Throughout the book I draw links back to this biographical study.

In Chapter 2, “First principles,” I stress the centrality of the principle of association of ideas throughout the *Treatise*, and argue that it is rooted in the standard eighteenth-century theory of the imagination. I contend that Hume’s experimental method, modeled on that of natural scientists such as Bacon and Boyle, involved a careful use of mechanical hypotheses, and that the Cartesian theory of the imagination provided Hume with a hypothesis concerning the workings of the brain in associating perceptions. He presupposes this model in explaining the transfer of force and vivacity from impressions to ideas, as well as in explaining what commentators call his *copy principle*. I also argue that his account of the origin of ideas plays a *skeptical* role in his philosophy, leading him to acknowledge the limits and imperfections of our clear and distinct impression-derived ideas. Throughout this chapter I stress Hume’s engagement with Cartesian science and philosophy.

I introduce my discussion of Hume’s theory of causation in Chapter 3 by distinguishing those epistemological features of Hume’s theory about which scholars agree from those questions concerning the ontology of causation about which there is sharp disagreement. I begin my exposition by explaining his distinction between knowledge and probability, and stress the importance of the *insight ideal* of knowledge in understanding his claim that we have no knowledge of causality. In presenting his accounts of both the causal maxim and of inductive inference I argue that his aim is to show that reason and insight cannot by themselves provide a basis for our inferences, and that these inferences have their source in the mechanical processes of imagination as altered by experience. I show that Hume provides a systematic critique of Locke’s views on probability and causal inference. It is especially in Hume’s account of the causes of the *belief* in what is probable that his mechanical model of association becomes crucial. He argues that after experience the impression *determines* the mind to conceive of the idea in a certain way, and that it is this determination or new impression which then becomes the source of the idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect. Finally, I lay out and discuss the texts which have led to opposing

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interpretations of his view of the ontology of causation – the regularity theory, quasi-realism and skeptical realism. I defend the last of these interpretations: Hume's account is *skeptical* in the sense that it denies the adequacy of our actual ideas of cause and effect, and *realist* in the sense that it postulates the existence of an unknown necessary connection in which we naturally believe.

In chapter 4, "Skepticism," I discuss Hume's extensive account of this theme in Part 4 of Book 1. I lay out each of the skeptical topics which he deals with – skepticism concerning reason, the senses, material substrata, and personal identity. In relation to the first two topics Hume argues that the doubts which reason and philosophy create *in theory* cannot be maintained *in practice*. He explains the natural processes of imagination which do not allow reason to undermine our belief. I stress that Hume's skepticism with regard to the senses arises from experiments which show that our sensory perceptions are mind or brain dependent. His task is then to explain how we come to believe that they continue to exist while unperceived. His core explanation of the belief in the independent existence of the objects of our senses, as well as material substrata and personal identity is based on what I call the *identity substitution principle* – a principle of the association of ideas which causes us to mistake other relations for numerical identity. I also argue that his deepest form of skepticism is cognitive – based on the obscurity of the basic suppositions which we naturally make about reality, including the belief that the objects of our senses continue to exist while unperceived. In this way the skepticism of the *Treatise* is linked to ancient academic skepticism – though he explicitly makes that connection only in his first *Enquiry*. I also discuss the sources of the total skepticism which marks the Conclusion to Book 1 of the *Treatise*: his escape from this total skepticism is not based on reason, but on the passions – particularly those of curiosity and ambition. It is passions rather than reason which provide the motivation for us to pursue science.

In Chapter 5, I return to Hume's account of causality – this time to discuss his explanation of human action in Book 2 of the *Treatise*. In his discussion "Of liberty and necessity" he stresses that we have exactly the same basis for ascribing necessity to the human will as to external objects – namely the regularity of our experience and our natural tendency to infer effects from their causes and causes from

their effects. He argues that our actions are determined by circumstance, motive and character – and that there is no more chance or “indifference” in human action than in physical causes. In practice we all assume the truth of determinism, and yet we have a subjective feeling of liberty when reflecting on our own actions. Hume holds that whatever our philosophical principles we all naturally adopt the spectator’s point of view in ascertaining the causes of human actions. While he appeals to his “two definitions of cause” (as involving mere regularity and predictability) in order to disarm his libertarian opponents, he attributes a real ontological necessity to the human will, as well as to physical events.

Hume’s accounts of the causes of our passions and of sympathy (i.e. empathy) are discussed in Chapter 6. I begin by explaining his distinction between direct and indirect passions, and the decisive role of association of ideas in creating the latter. The parallels with the mechanisms Hume postulated in his account of inductive inference in Book 1 are explained – especially in relation to his account of sympathy. The transfer of psychic energy in all these cases is controlled by the natural relations of ideas. In the case of sympathy the *idea* of the other person’s feelings is transformed into an *impression*, which allows us to enter into her feelings, and distinguish them from our own. I discuss the limits of Hume’s mechanistic explanation of sympathy, and the puzzle as to why he does not think he must explain our belief in other minds in Book 2, as he did our belief in external objects in Book 1. I also discuss his account of the person as it relates to the passions, and also the question whether the Book 2 conception of self is consistent with that of Book 1.

Chapter 7 is focused on Hume’s theory of motivation, including his claim that reason can never motivate us, and that what is mistaken for reason by Platonic philosophers who describe morality in terms of a war between reason and passion is a *calm passion*. I return to earlier discussions in the book of just what Hume means by ‘reason’ – a central problem for interpreters of the *Treatise*. I contend that Hume’s conception of a calm passion is closely tied to his account of the development of character – a link which becomes crucial in his own account of morality in Book 3. In crucial cases calm passions are not instinctive: they are the result of custom and habit. I show that Hume follows Joseph Butler in claiming that when a passion gains

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strength through custom it also loses emotional intensity. Hume holds with Butler that what is key to moral motivation is a natural development through custom and habit of certain calm passions.

In Chapter 8, I discuss those features of Hume's moral philosophy which derive largely from the philosophy of Francis Hutcheson – his attack on moral rationalism and his view that moral judgment is based in sentiment and not reason. I begin with a caution about Hume's use of the expression "moral sense," a term he borrows from Hutcheson and Shaftesbury. I explain the conception of a moral sense in Hutcheson's philosophy and his reduction of all virtues to that of benevolence. I describe Hume's main arguments, largely based on those of Hutcheson, against the view that morality is based on reason. I comment extensively on Hume's claim, also borrowed from Hutcheson, that virtue and vice do not lie in the agent or her actions but are to be found in a feeling of the spectator in responding to them. We should take seriously Hume's analogy between moral feeling and secondary qualities – an analogy he draws out in later writings. For Hume, there is a radical distinction between fact and value. Unlike Hutcheson, who held that we have strong evidence from the design of the creation that its creator shares our judgments concerning moral value, Hume held that morality concerns "only human Nature & human Life."

In Chapter 9, I discuss Hume's own moral theory and argue that it provides a solution to the controversy between Hutcheson and Bernard Mandeville regarding the artificiality or naturalness of virtue. I argue that we can trace a development in Hume's account of moral approval from his discussion of our natural uncultivated ideas of morality at the beginning of Part 2 of Book 3 of the *Treatise* to the view that most virtues are judged on the basis of their utility in Part 3. I describe his theory of the development of the artificial virtue of justice, showing how he explains the origin of the conventions of property without any formal social contact, and the subsequent moral judgments of those who follow and fail to follow these conventions. I discuss the role of sympathy and custom in his account of moral judgment and moral motivation. Hume argues that moral judgment is based on our genuine sympathy with others and so rejects Mandeville's view that our moral judgments are based simply on indoctrination and self-interest. But he also rejects Hutcheson's

view that our moral judgments are based on an innate moral sense which approves of moral virtues apart from their consequences.

In 1776, the year of Hume's death, Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, wrote in his *Fragment on Government* that when he read Book 3 of the *Treatise*, particularly Hume's account of justice, he felt as though "scales had fallen from ... [his] eyes" and he first "learned to call the cause of the People the cause of Virtue."³ He stated that what he found there "demonstrated, after a few exceptions made, with the strongest force of evidence" that "the foundations of all *virtue* are laid in *utility*." He added that he could see no "need ... for the exceptions." Some years later, in a letter discussing the principle of utility, or greatest happiness principle, Bentham wrote that the main difference between him and Hume was that "the use he made of it, was to *account* for that which *is*, [whereas] I ... shew what *ought to be*."⁴

Hume was not a "philosophical utilitarian" – in spite of his important role in developing that philosophy.⁵ As he clearly stated in a letter to Hutcheson as he was revising Book 3 for the press, his aim was to describe and explain the principles of morals on which people operate, not to be a moralist.⁶ Hume argues that we base most moral judgments on a consideration of the utility of the characters and actions we are evaluating. However, his own study of morals is fundamentally not normative: he is *not* telling people how they *ought to act* but explaining to them how they come to make the normative moral judgments they actually make.

A similar point may be made about Hume's epistemology and metaphysics. A major goal of Book 1 of the *Treatise* is to explain the origin of our common-sense beliefs, such as the belief in the existence of an external world. Hume held that such beliefs are so firmly implanted in our nature that we cannot doubt them. Indeed, he asserts that our survival depends upon our acceptance of them, and that they must be taken for granted in our reasoning – including

³ Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, John Bowring (ed.), Vols. 1–10 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), Vol. I, p. 149, note H.

⁴ Bentham to Étienne Dumont, 6 September, 1822, in Catherine Fuller (ed.), *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), Vol. XI, p. 149.

⁵ Stephen Darwall, "Hume and the Invention of Utilitarianism," in M. A. Stewart and J. P. Wright (eds.), *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 58–82.

⁶ Chapter 1, pp. 33–4 below.

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the investigation into their causes. Some have concluded from this that Hume's philosophy is fundamentally the same as that of his successors of the Scottish School of Common Sense who argued that we are justified in accepting such common-sense beliefs.⁷ But while the *Treatise* played a decisive role in the development of the views of Thomas Reid and other writers of the Scottish School – Reid told Hume that he would “always avow my self your Disciple in Metaphysics”⁸ – Hume's aim is to explain and describe the *content* of these beliefs, not justify them. He argues that a scientific study of their sources reveals that these common sense beliefs contain a fundamental incoherence. This is precisely what Reid denied.⁹ Thus while Hume no more doubts the existence of an external world than his Scottish successors, his account of the nature of the belief is skeptical in a way that theirs is not.

I do not want to deny that Hume gives us interesting hints regarding both epistemic and moral justification – and that good scholarly work has been done drawing out those hints.¹⁰ But I do want to argue that the dominant thrust of Hume's philosophy is descriptive and not normative, and that his conclusions are fundamentally skeptical. In my earlier book on Hume I coined the expression “skeptical realism” to characterize his philosophy. This still seems to me to be the best way to describe his basic philosophical principles. He assumes that there is a world independent of us which we can but

⁷ Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 3ff. Kemp Smith writes in his Preface of Hume's “non-sceptical, realist teaching.” See esp. pp. 150–1 below for my criticism of Kemp Smith's interpretation of Hume's view on the belief in the existence of the external world.

⁸ Thomas Reid to David Hume, 18 March 1783, in Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 264–5. I have discussed the relation of Hume's philosophy to that of Reid in a number of articles listed in the bibliography.

⁹ On Reid's and Hume's different conceptions of common-sense belief see my “Reid's Answer to Hume's Scepticism: Turning Science into Common Sense,” in E. Mazza and E. Ronchetti (eds.), *Instruction and Amusement: Le ragioni dell'Illuminismo britannico* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2005), pp. 143–63.

¹⁰ See Louis Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). Loeb argues that Hume could have avoided skepticism by more consistently applying the principles he develops in Part 3 of Book 1 of the *Treatise*. On the historical background of Hume's discussion of epistemic justification in *Treatise* 1.4.2 see my *Sceptical Realism of David Hume*, (Manchester University Press and University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 74–6.

imperfectly cognize. He argues that while we naturally suppose both the existence and basic characteristics of such a world, we do not understand its nature through our cognitive faculties. Moreover, he holds that experimental science builds on these natural suppositions of common sense by way of hypotheses that are constantly open to revision by experience. I regard my own task as a historian of philosophy as one of recovering the basic principles and presuppositions of his philosophy as revealed in his most seminal writing – that is *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

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Abbreviations

WORKS BY HUME

- T David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. References are given to book, part, section, and paragraph number as recorded in the edition of David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford University Press, 2000 and Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). After a colon this is followed by the page number in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, second edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
- TI The Introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, as found in the two editions of the *Treatise* above.
- TApp The Appendix added to Book 3 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, as found in the two editions above.
- A *An Abstract of a Book lately Published, Entituled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the Chief Argument of that Book is Farther Illustrated and Explained*. This work is reprinted in both the above editions of the *Treatise*. It is referred to by paragraph number and then the page number in the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition.
- Dialogues* *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge University Press, 2007); references are to part and paragraph number.
- EHU *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 1999) or the

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- Clarendon Critical Edition by the same editor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); references are made to section and paragraph number.
- EPM *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 1998), or the Clarendon Critical Edition by the same editor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); references are made to section and paragraph number.
- Essays* *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. F. Millar (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, rev. edn., 1987).
- HL *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1932); this collection is referred to by the volume and page number.

WORKS BY OTHER WRITERS

- CSM René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, 3 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1985–1991); this collection is referred to by the volume and page number.
- Essay on the Passions* Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002).
- Inquiry into Beauty and Virtue* Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004).
- ECHU John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1975); this book is referred to by book, chapter, and section number.

- Principles* George Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, Vol. II, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Nelson, 1949).
- Search* Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge University Press, 1997).