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Edited by David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor

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DAVID FATE NORTON

1 An Introduction to Hume's Thought

Much of what David Hume said about a wide range of subjects remains of great importance today. In the first volume of his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, a work in which he articulated a new "science of human nature," Hume focused on an interrelated set of issues in theory of knowledge, metaphysics, and philosophical psychology. More particularly, he explained how it is that we form such important conceptions as space and time, cause and effect, external objects, and personal identity. At the same time, he offered an equally important account of how or why we believe in the objects of these conceptions – an account of why we believe that causes are necessarily connected to effects, that there are enduring external objects, and that there are enduring selves – even though the human mind is unable to provide a satisfactory proof that these phenomena exist. In the second volume of the *Treatise* Hume expanded his account of human psychology, focusing on the origin and role of the passions and the nature of human freedom. In the third and final volume of this work he explored the origins and nature of morality. In later works he returned to many of these philosophical issues, but he also made substantial contributions to our understanding of political theory, aesthetics, economics, and philosophy of religion. In addition, he wrote an influential, six-volume *History of England*, a work published in over 175 editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and still in print.

I. LIFE AND WRITINGS

Hume was born in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital, on 26 April 1711. The years of his youth were divided between that city and Ninewells,

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his family's small landholding at Chirnside, a village near the border with England. Little is known about Hume's childhood. His father died when David was two; his mother thereafter devoted herself to her three children. It is likely that Hume began studies at the College of Edinburgh in 1721 (when about two years younger than the typical entering student) and continued there through the spring of 1725, when he would have turned fourteen.¹ After leaving university he apparently made a desultory effort at learning law, but soon

¹ We lack a detailed account of Hume's early reading and education, but the outlines of his four years at the College of Edinburgh are known. Hume would have studied Latin during his first year, and followed this with a year studying Greek. He would have followed in his third year a course in logic and metaphysics, and in his fourth and final year a course in natural philosophy organized around the writings of Robert Boyle. The plans originally drawn up for this course in 1708 included provision for some instruction in ethics, but there is no firm evidence that ethics were included in the 1724–5 session Hume would have attended. In addition, in December 1724 Hume joined a private library (the Physiological Library) that gave him access to a wide range of books on the sciences then studied. Hume was later to report that in the three years ending about March 1734 he had read "most of the celebrated Books in Latin, French & English," and also learned Italian (KHL 6). Any list of those having a significant (although not necessarily positive) impact on his early thought would likely include not only those writers often mentioned (John Locke, George Berkeley, Isaac Newton, and Francis Hutcheson, for example), but also a great many others, including such relatively well-known figures as Virgil, Cicero, Plutarch, and Seneca from among the ancients, and Michel Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Hugo Grotius, René Descartes, Pierre Gassendi, Blaise Pascal, Samuel Pufendorf, Robert Hooke, Nicolas Malebranche, Pierre Bayle, Anthony Collins, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Samuel Clarke, Bernard Mandeville, Joseph Butler, Baron Montesquieu, and Lord Bolingbroke, as well as many other individuals now less well known, from the early modern period. Consequently, despite his obvious preference for what he called the "EXPERIMENTAL METHOD OF REASONING," no single writer or philosophical tradition can be relied on to provide a comprehensive key to Hume's thought.

To learn more about Hume's early education, see M. A. Stewart, "Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711–52," in *Impressions of Hume*, ed. M. Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 11–58, esp. 11–25; and Michael Barfoot, "Hume and the Culture of Science in the Early Eighteenth Century," in *Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy*, ed. M. A. Stewart, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990–2000) [hereafter *Oxford Studies*], 1:151–90, esp. 151–6. The latter also provides much detail about the Physiological Library. For a more general account of the curriculum at the University of Edinburgh, and of the views of those who taught it, see R. L. Emerson, "Science and Philosophy in the Scottish Enlightenment," also in *Oxford Studies* 1:11–36. Emerson argues that by as early as 1710 the experimentalism of Bacon, Boyle, and Newton was well known in Edinburgh. For extensive suggestions regarding those of his predecessors Hume may have read, see "Editors' Annotations," in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) [hereafter Norton and Norton], 2:685–978.

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enough was devoting his principal efforts to philosophy, and especially to the issues that became central to his philosophical classic, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In 1734, discouraged by his inability to present his views in satisfactory form, he tried the more active life of a merchant's assistant. Within months he abandoned this experiment and traveled to France, where he remained for three years and at last finished a draft of his long work. In September 1737 he settled in London and continued to revise the *Treatise*. In January 1739 the first two volumes of the work were published and Hume returned to Scotland, where he revised the manuscript of the third and final volume of the *Treatise*. This volume was published in late October 1740. Two volumes of his essays (*Essays, Moral and Political*) appeared in 1741–2.

To help support himself during the next fifteen years Hume took positions first as companion to a mentally unbalanced nobleman, then as aide-de-camp and later secretary to a British general, and finally as Keeper of the Advocates Library in Edinburgh. Although the many works Hume published from 1748 to 1762 made him financially independent, he accepted two further public service appointments: from 1763–5 he was at first Secretary, then chargé d'affaires to the British Embassy in Paris, and in 1767–8 he was Undersecretary of State (Northern Affairs) in the British government. He then retired to Edinburgh where he lived until his death in 1776. In his will Hume left instructions for the publication of his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

II. EXPERIENCE AND ITS LIMITS

Hume's most often cited works include the three volumes of the *Treatise of Human Nature* mentioned above; an *Abstract* of volumes 1 and 2 of the *Treatise* (1740); a collection of approximately 50 essays, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* and *Political Discourses* (most of which were first published from 1741 to 1752); *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748);² *An Enquiry*

² This work was first published as *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*; it was retitled by Hume in 1758. From that date and on through the nineteenth century, Hume's essays and *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, *Of the Passions* (retitled as *A Dissertation on the Passions*), *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, and *The Natural History of Religion* were published together as *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. For a history of

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concerning the *Principles of Morals* (1751); *Of the Passions* and *The Natural History of Religion* (1757); his six-volume *History of England* from Roman times to 1688 (1754–62); a brief autobiography, *My Own Life* (1777); and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1778).³ These works span an exceptionally wide range of topics and thus are in some ways significantly different from one another. They are nonetheless unified by at least one fundamental characteristic: their author's commitment to the experimental method, or to a form of philosophy that recognizes both the advantages and necessity of relying on experience and observation to provide the answers to intellectual questions of all kinds.⁴

The subtitle of Hume's *Treatise* describes it as "AN ATTEMPT TO INTRODUCE THE EXPERIMENTAL METHOD OF REASONING INTO MORAL SUBJECTS."⁵ In the Introduction to this work Hume traces the beginning of the use of the experimental method in natural philosophy to Francis Bacon (1561–1626).⁶ Moral philosophy, Hume argues, and especially the foundational science of human nature that he proposes to develop, must also make use of this method: "And as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation."⁷ A page later he insists that, while we must try "to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, 'tis still certain we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover

the collected editions of Hume's works published from 1753 to 1777, see Tom L. Beauchamp, "Introduction," in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd impression, corrected (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), xxv–xxxv.

³ For a chronological list of Hume's writings, see Part I of the Selected Bibliography.

⁴ For further reading showing the widely different ways in which Hume has been interpreted, see Parts III and IV of the Selected Bibliography.

⁵ The discussion that follows in Parts II–VI of this essay focuses on Hume's first and most comprehensive work, the *Treatise of Human Nature*.

⁶ In Hume's time philosophy had two distinctive branches. One, natural philosophy, included those subjects we now think of as the physical and natural sciences. The other, moral philosophy, focused on humans or human activity and included those subjects we would think of as the core of philosophy (theory of knowledge, metaphysics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion), as well as such subjects as psychology, political science, sociology, economics, and aesthetics (to use our terms).

⁷ For more on this topic, see in this volume the essay "Hume's New Science of the Mind."

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the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical" (T Intro. 7–8). Finding that moral philosophy could not, as natural philosophy can, make its experiments "purposely, with premeditation, and after such a manner as to satisfy itself concerning every particular difficulty which may arise," he tells us that

We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures. Where experiments of this kind are judiciously collected and compar'd, we may hope to establish on them a science, which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension. (T Intro. 10)

In his *Abstract* of the *Treatise* Hume describes himself as having promised "to draw no conclusions but where he is authorized by experience" (A 2). He concludes *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* with the now notorious injunction to commit to the flames any book of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, that contains neither "*any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number*" nor "*any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence*" (EHU 12.34), but not before he has subjected experimental reasoning itself to a severe, experimental scrutiny (see EHU 4.14–23). In "Of the Original Contract," an essay in political theory first published in 1748, Hume tells us that "A small degree of experience and observation suffices to teach us, that society cannot possibly be maintained without the authority of magistrates," and that, moreover, the "observation of these general and obvious interests [peace and public order] is the source of all allegiance, and of that moral obligation, which we attribute to it" (E-OC 25, 480). *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* undertakes to discover "the foundation of ethics." As this, Hume says, "is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances" (EPM 1.10). In "Of the Standard of Taste," first published in 1756, he tells us that it is obvious that the "rules of composition" are nothing more than "general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages," and that in this regard their "foundation

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is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience" (E-ST 9, 231).⁸

To appreciate fully the force of these remarks, we must keep in mind that they carry with them an unspoken but deep distrust of the a priori reasoning characteristic of much earlier philosophy, especially that of the Cartesians. At other times, however, Hume is explicit about the limitations of our faculty of reason and the shortcomings of those philosophical systems that give it priority. He pointedly notes that, although we all believe that every event or object has a cause, there are no valid *arguments* establishing this conclusion (T 1.3.3). And, although we all believe in enduring, external objects, reason cannot establish that such objects exist, and even if it could, it would be of no use to that vast population of people and animals who, without the use of a single argument, believe that such objects exist. Although reason may help us determine how to achieve some desired goal, it has by itself absolutely no motivating force. Although we all make moral distinctions – we take some acts or persons to be virtuous or good, others to be vicious or morally wrong – it is a special kind of feeling, not reason, that makes this possible. It is this distrust of reasoning, coupled with his commitment to

⁸ Hume was less explicit about his commitment to experience and observation in his primarily historical works, the *Natural History of Religion* and the *History of England*. But the former work attempts to discover "the origin of religion in human nature" by extrapolating from present facts (religion and human nature as they are presently found to be) and the historical record of the beginnings and development of religion. This exercise is a *natural* history because the explanation is constrained within the limits of observable, natural phenomena; no supernatural beings or principles are appealed to or presupposed. For more on this work and Hume's approach to religion, see in this volume the essay "Hume on Religion."

Analogous comment can be made regarding *The History of England*. Motivated to a considerable degree by the exaggerated claims of the two leading political groups in Britain, the Whigs and the Tories, each of whom insisted that the political institutions of eighteenth-century Britain reflected, or should reflect, a perfect model found either in the mists of their Anglo-Saxon beginnings (a Whig tendency) or in a timeless, sacred beginning (a Tory tendency), Hume attempted to write an impartial history of England, a history that recorded the *development* of political institutions over time, one that treated these institutions as the hard-won and still developing products of centuries of experience and observation, and not as something derived from a priori principles ingrained in the human mind. For more on these issues, see in this volume the essays "The Structure of Hume's Political Theory" and "David Hume: 'The Historian.'"

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experience and observation, that makes it not entirely inappropriate to think of Hume as an early empiricist.⁹ What is often missed, however, is the fact that Hume's commitment to experience and observation is qualified in at least five substantial ways.

1. As we have seen, Hume supposed that moral philosophy cannot make its experiments "purposely, [and] with premeditation" in the way that natural philosophy can because such artificial or laboratory-like experiments would disturb and distort the phenomena being examined. But we also saw that he was not discouraged by this limitation because moral philosophy can collect its experimental data from a careful examination of human life, and having done so, can hope to construct a useful science of human nature.

2. Experience has intrinsic limitations. In our quest to understand human nature, for example, we may follow experience as far as it will take us, but we will still remain ignorant of the most fundamental or ultimate features of our nature. As Hume puts it at the beginning of the *Treatise*, we may try to make our conclusions as general or as universal as possible by "explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes," but because we know that experience has limitations, we must remember that any theory that claims to have discovered "the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical" (T Intro. 8).

3. Hume, as much as any of the Cartesians, insists that all sensory experience is indirect. We do not experience objects themselves. We experience only, in the language of Descartes and Locke, *ideas* or what some suppose to be mental representations of objects. Hume

⁹ Hume continued his discussion at EPM 1.10 (quoted in the previous paragraph) by contrasting his experimental approach to moral philosophy with what he called the "other scientific method," that in which "a general abstract principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions." Forms of this latter method came in time to be called *rationalism*, while forms of the "experimental method" to which Hume adhered came (but not during Hume's lifetime) to be called *empiricism*. Retrospectively, then, and while recognizing that there are significantly different kinds of empiricism, it is not a mistake to call Hume an *empiricist*. For a brief discussion of kinds of empiricism, see Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "Empiricism," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. R. Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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uses different terminology, but is firmly committed to the view that our direct experience is limited to mental phenomena. Early in the *Treatise*, while discussing “*the idea of existence, and of external existence*,” he reports that it is “universally allow’d by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion” (T 1.2.6.7). Hume repeats this claim in each book of the *Treatise*, in the *Abstract*, and in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.¹⁰

4. Given the fact that we experience only “perceptions,” and further facts about the nature of our perceptions, Hume concludes that our deep and virtually ineradicable belief in the existence of external objects is not due to sense experience alone. The senses may play an essential role in the process that brings about this fundamental belief, but the senses operating alone would be unable to produce it. Moreover, the senses operating alone would be unable to account for our belief in causal connections or personal identity.

5. Experience is not the source of certain of our fundamental passions. Locke had argued that there are no innate ideas, and had made this conclusion one of the defining features of his form of empiricism. Locke, according to Hume, was both confused and mistaken. Locke used the term *idea* too broadly and thus failed to distinguish, as he ought to have done, between two kinds of perceptions, impressions (especially impressions of sensation) and the ideas that derive from them. If we make this needed distinction we see that, while it may be true to say that there are no innate *ideas*, it is false to say that there are no innate *impressions*. As Hume puts it, it is clear that some of “our stronger perceptions or impressions are innate, and that natural affection, love of virtue, resentment, and all the other passions, arise immediately from nature” (A 6; see also T 1.1.1.12, EHU 2.9 n.1).

As we will see, these perceived limitations of experience profoundly influenced Hume’s conclusions.

¹⁰ See also T 1.4.2.21 and 47, 2.2.2.22, 3.1.1.2; A 5; EHU 12.9. For more on Hume’s skeptical challenge to experimental reasoning, see in this volume Part II of the essay “Hume’s Skepticism.”

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III. THE ELEMENTS OF HUME'S PHILOSOPHY

For most of the nearly 270 years since the publication of his *Treatise*, Hume was routinely interpreted as the philosopher who advanced his form of philosophy (which has come to be called *empiricism*) to its logical and skeptical conclusion. I suggest that Hume is better understood as a *postskeptical* philosopher. By this I mean to suggest that Hume supposed (a) that earlier philosophers, and especially Nicolas Malebranche, Pierre Bayle, John Locke, and George Berkeley, had already taken traditional metaphysics and epistemology to its skeptical conclusions; (b) that these skeptical conclusions had been soundly and validly established; and (c) that the most important remaining task of philosophy, given these well-established and obvious conclusions, was to show how we manage to get on with our lives, particularly our intellectual lives, without the knowledge of ultimate causes and principles sought by his predecessors. To put this another way, I note that, prior to Hume, one or another philosopher had, perhaps unintentionally, thoroughly discredited the claim of humans to have rationally or experientially derived knowledge of the existence and true nature of space, causal relations, external objects, and mind. But as Hume put it, even the "rabble" outside the philosophical hall – even those who are not philosophers – could see that the philosophical enterprise was not going well. "The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision" (T Intro. 2). It is time, surely, to start anew, to provide moral philosophy with a new foundation, the science of human nature, on which all the other sciences will be founded.

But notice where Hume begins: The "elements of this philosophy" are, in the most literal sense, the immediate objects of thought as well as the relations between or among these "objects" of the "mental world." The elements themselves are called *perceptions*, and are divided into two kinds, *impressions* and *ideas*. Of these, impressions are the more forceful or lively, while ideas are complementary in that they are said to be "the faint images" of impressions. In addition, Hume classifies as impressions "all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul" or mind, and then divides this class into two subclasses, *impressions of sensation* and *impressions of reflection*. The latter sort,

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impressions of reflection, are “deriv’d in a great measure from our ideas.” On the other hand, impressions of sensation, he says, arise “*in the soul originally, from unknown causes*” (emphasis added). He then adds that the “examination of our sensations [our impressions of sensation] belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral; and therefore shall not at present be enter’d upon” (T 1.1.4.3, 6–7; 1.1.1.1.; 1.1.2.1). As we work through the *Treatise* we come to realize that the phrase “not at present” in fact means “not in this work,” for at no time does Hume take up the task that he has assigned to anatomists and natural philosophers.¹¹ Indeed, he begins Book 2 of the *Treatise* with much the same disclaimer:

’Tis certain, that the mind, in its perceptions, must begin somewhere; and that since the impressions precede their correspondent ideas, there must be some impressions, which without any introduction make their appearance in the soul. As these depend upon natural and physical causes, the examination of them wou’d lead me too far from my present subject, into the sciences of anatomy and natural philosophy. (T 2.1.1.2)

Between these two remarks Hume tells us clearly why he has left to others the task of explaining impressions of sensation: such an explanation is irrelevant to the philosophical enterprise in which he is engaged. As he puts it:

As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and ’twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc’d by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv’d from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses. (T 1.3.5.2)¹²

¹¹ Although Hume wanted nothing to do with a physical anatomy attempting to explain sensation, he does repeatedly describe himself as engaged in *an anatomy of human nature*. See T 1.4.6.23, 3.3.6.6, A 2; HL 1:32–3.

¹² This comment is made in the midst of Hume’s attempt to explain how we come to have the idea of, and to believe in, necessary connection. But the suggestion that the explanations of Book 1 are confined to an examination of the “coherence” of “elements” within the “mental world” is repeated in other forms in other places. See, for example, 1.4.2 (*Of scepticism with regard to the senses*), where the discussion is focused on the way in which impressions and ideas cohere to give us, not *knowledge* of, but only *belief* in, external objects; and the Appendix (published