CHAPTER I

IN DEFENCE OF THE MORAL SCIENCES

HUME is one of the most exasperating of philosophers. Each separate sentence in his writings—with very few exceptions—is admirable in its lucidity: the tangled syntax and barbarous locutions which bedevil the reader of Kant and Hegel are completely absent. And yet, although in a different way, Hume is at least as difficult as Hegel. In his editorial introduction to the *Enquiries*, Selby-Bigge summed up the Hume problem thus: 'He says so many different things in so many different ways and different connexions, and with so much indifference to what he has said before, that it is very hard to say positively that he taught or did not teach this or that particular doctrine. . . . This makes it easy to find all philosophies in Hume or, by setting up one statement against another, none at all.'

Faced with inconsistencies on this scale, the interpreter may proceed in one of a number of ways. Most boldly, he may denounce Hume's philosophy as a mere hotch-potch which has achieved its present reputation only because muddle and confusion have a fatal fascination—a conclusion which few have adopted but by which many more must have been tempted. Or, at the opposite extreme, he may argue that Hume's inconsistencies are but peccadillos, deriving in part from the tendency of innovators to fall back, in careless moments, upon the doctrines they have elsewhere demolished, in part from Hume's youthfulness; he had not acquired that mature cunning which teaches men to conceal their hesitations and to gloss over inconvenient facts. Neither of these methods of interpretation ought to be dismissed as merely absurd; the first reminds us that Hume was sometimes a very bad philosopher, whom no amount of piety can extenuate; the second, that in the writings of a youthful innovator accidental inconsistencies will be unusually frequent and blatant.

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Yet neither interpretation is finally satisfactory. Hume's influence on the history of philosophy has not been entirely calamitous; if he is sometimes a bad philosopher, on other occasions he is a remarkably good one. And, on the other side, the inconsistencies in his philosophy cut too deep to be dismissed as unimportant. If we try to show that Hume is really a phenomenalist, or a sceptic, or a naturalist, and that those sections of his work which will not fit into such a single philosophical system are no more than slips of the pen, we shall have to admit that his 'slips' are of gigantic proportions; and we shall be quite baffled by the way in which he not merely falls into, but goes out of his way to develop and extol, views quite incompatible with whatever systematic doctrine we care to ascribe to him.

To avoid such general problems of interpretation, we might prefer to select from Hume's work whatever we choose to regard as philosophically important, perhaps his theory of causality or his theory of the external world, leaving aside as of merely historical interest the question what, in general, Hume was trying to do. On the face of it, this is a reasonable enough procedure; but whenever it has been attempted it has given rise to 'replies to Hume' which quite miss the force of his argument, or to 'developments of his view' along precisely those lines which Hume has shown to be impossible. There are organic connexions which we sever at the cost of misunderstanding between the different segments of Hume's theory.

The interpretation now to be embarked upon tries to bring out the nature of these connexions, while at the same time not attempting to describe Hume's work by any single philosophical epithet. To call him a naturalist, a phenomenalist or a sceptic would be seriously misleading; we should add that he is an anti-naturalist, an anti-phenomenalist and an anti-sceptic. Yet for all that, there is a unity in his work; it is dominated by a single over-riding intention.

Humes's intentions, according to a familiar legend, were of a distinctly dishonourable kind. He tells us himself that his ruling passion was a 'love of literary fame'[1]; but that, according

[1] *My Own Life* (reprinted in *Letters*, Vol. 1).

to his detractors, is too favourable a description of his motives. 'Hume exhibits no small share of the craving after mere notoriety and vulgar success as distinct from the pardonable, if not honourable, ambition for solid and enduring fame, which would have harmonized better with his philosophy.' These are the magisterial words of T. H. Huxley, but this same interpretation of Hume's intentions was the delight of his more bigoted contemporaries and still persists in our own time.[1]

It is particularly invoked to explain why, as the charge is commonly formulated, Hume 'abandoned philosophy' after the *Treatise*, 'turning to those political and historical topics which were likely to yield, and did in fact yield a much better return of that sort of success which his soul loved'.[2] The *Treatise* had not the stuff of notoriety in it, and so he turned his attention away from philosophy to theology and moral science. 'Since he couldn't shock men by a new theory of science, he would try politics and religion.'[3]

We are not now concerned to defend Hume's personal character; the importance of the legend, to us, is that it rests upon a misapprehension of Hume's intentions in the *Treatise*, a misapprehension which extends beyond the ranks of his denigrators. Hume, it is supposed, set out to write a 'critical philosophy'; his intention, if we may so express the matter, was to be a precursor to Kant. He came to recognize that his philosophy was in certain respects defective; as a good philosopher, he should have busied himself with the removal of these defects. Instead, in the *Enquiries* he is content to leave out what he should be reconsidering; and in the rest of his writings he abandons even this mitigated and vulgarized philosophy for history, politics and economics. No one concerned for the truth, the presumption is, could so lightly abandon philosophy for the frivolities of the social sciences.

Now, even the sub-title of the *Treatise* is enough to rule out

[1] The Huxley quotation is from his *Hume*, p. 11. For a thorough and decisive criticism of the Hume legend, see E. C. Mossner, 'Philosophy and Biography: The Case of David Hume' (*Philosophical Review*, April 1950).

[2] Huxley, *loc. cit.*

[3] J. H. Randall Jnr. on 'David Hume: Radical Empiricist and Pragmatist' in *Freedom and Experience* (ed. S. Hook and M. R. Konvitz), p. 294.

this misinterpretation; the *Treatise* is there described as 'an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects'. This is a clear indication that Hume's major interest, from the very beginning, was in 'moral subjects'. ('The moral subjects'—in contrast with *physical* subjects—are those which together make up what Hume calls 'the science of man', i.e. the science which concerns itself with the human mind and with human relationships in society. The subjects Hume used as defining examples are ethics, politics, criticism and logic—the latter conceived as the 'art of reasoning'. He does not use the word 'psychology', which was introduced into English by Hartley.) Hume's choice of examples is equally significant. In Book I of the *Treatise*, he exemplifies a causal chain thus: 'cousins in the fourth degree are connected by causation . . . but not so closely as brothers, much less as child and parent' (T, 11). And he goes on to illustrate the metaphysical distinction between power and its exercise by referring to the relationship between a political authority and its subjects. A passage in the *Dissertation* is even more revealing. 'Property', he there writes, 'is a species of causation. . . . It is indeed the relation the most interesting of any, and occurs the most frequently to the mind'.[1] Almost certainly, this is not an example which would naturally be employed by the ordinary philosopher; if examples of this sort are 'the most interesting', this is only because Hume himself was most interested in them.

But we need not have recourse to psychological analysis; he tells us himself, plainly enough, that the moral sciences are the only ones worth studying. 'In these four sciences of Logic, Morals, Criticism and Politics', he writes in the Preface of the *Treatise*, 'is comprehended almost every thing, which it can any way import us to be acquainted with' (T, xix). At the very end of Book I, after all his philosophical vicissitudes, he insists on the same point. His intention, as he there expresses it, is to give 'in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers' by 'pointing out to them more distinctly those

[1] G.G., IV, 151n. This note was not added until the 1760 edition, but the doctrine that property is a species of causation was already taught in the *Treatise* (T, 310).

subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction' (T, 273), those subjects, namely, which are incorporated in 'the science of man'. He mentions his predecessors—'Mr. Locke, my Lord Shaftesbury, Dr. Mandeville, Mr. Hutchinson (*sic*), Dr. Butler etc.' (T, xxi)—not, be it observed, Bishop Berkeley. There can be no doubt that (like many another philosopher) Hume came to be more interested in politics and less in philosophy, in the modern sense of that word, as he grew older but the moral sciences had always been his principal concern even when he was writing Book I of the *Treatise*.

In this respect, Hume was a child of his age. We now think of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a period peculiarly rich in physicists and philosophers. But it must not be forgotten that Wollaston was read, when Berkeley and Hume were spurned as 'eccentrics', and that Locke's reputation depended on his psychology rather than on his logic (as we can see clearly enough in *Tristram Shandy*). Even those who most admired the genius of Newton still deprecated any emphasis on physical science. Pope's attitude is typical. In his *Epitaph on Sir Isaac Newton* he could write:

> Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in night;
> God said, Let Newton be! and all was light

but the lesson of the *Essay on Man* is that

> . . . all our knowledge is, Ourselves to know

and Newton is put in his place:

> Could he, whose rules the rapid comet bind,
> Describe or fix one movement of his mind?[1]

The same lesson was taught by Malebranche, so often Hume's teacher. 'La plus belle, la plus agréable et la plus nécessaire de toutes nos connaissances est sans doute la connaissance de nous-mêmes. De toutes les sciences humaines, la science de l'homme est la plus digne de l'homme. Cependant, cette science n'est pas la plus cultivée ni la plus achevée que nous ayons; le commun des hommes la neglige entièrement.'[2]

[1] The first quotation from the *Essay on Man* is Epistle IV, line 398, the second is Epistle I, lines 35-6.

[2] *Recherche*, Vol. I, p. xiii.

Why, then, did Hume write Book I of the *Treatise*? Why did he not embark immediately on 'the moral subjects'? Even if, as he says, he 'cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me' (T, 271), it is not immediately clear how this curiosity can be, as he says it is, 'the origin of (his) philosophy', a philosophy so much concerned with topics of a purely logical kind.

The moral sciences, Hume thought, stood in need of a new logic : to supply that logic is the main intention behind Book I of the *Treatise*. Without anachronism, we can think of it as Hume's methodology of the social sciences. Hume shared the Cartesian attitude to syllogism; the old logic would not do. He fully sympathized with Descartes' attempt to state a few simple rules of method, which would 'comprise the advantages' of the traditional logic, while being 'exempt from its faults'.[1] However, the Cartesian logic would not do either; understood 'in a reasonable sense', it could be a distinct aid to enquiry, but it relied upon self-evident premises, which are entirely lacking, Hume argues, in any empirical science (E, 150). On this point, Hartley was the Cartesian; he looked forward to a day when 'future generations shall put all kinds of evidence and enquiries into mathematical forms . . . so as to make mathematics and logic, natural history and civil history, natural philosophy and philosophy of all other kinds, coincide *omni ex parte*'.[2] Much impressed by de Moivre's theory of chances, Hartley concluded that all reasoning could be mathematized by the use of the logic of chances. This is precisely what Hume took to be impossible.

Hume thought he could show that the certainty attaching to mathematics (concerned as it was with 'relations of ideas') could never be extended to the 'matters of fact' of the social and physical sciences. It is true that in one essay, *That Politics May be Reduced to a Science*, he suggested that 'so great is the force of laws and of particular forms of government . . . that

[1] *Discourse on Method* (Vol. I, p. 92).
[2] *Observations on Man*, Proposition LXXXVII.

consequences almost as certain and general may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us.'[1] But this must be a rhetorical gesture: and even in the full flow of his rhetoric Hume could not bring himself to omit the restrictive 'almost'. Supposing now that the moral sciences do not possess the certainty of mathematics, the question is how they can have any 'foundations' whatsoever. Descartes had argued that there was no third way between recognizing the 'certainty' of science and falling into absolute scepticism. Locke, however, had already embarked, somewhat unsteadily, on a theory of 'judgment', defined as a 'twilight state' between ignorance and 'clear and certain knowledge';[2] and Butler (whose opinion of the *Treatise* Hume so anxiously sought) had drawn attention to the need for a logic of analogy.[3] But Hume refers us specifically to Leibniz, who, he says, 'has observed it to be a common defect in the common systems of logic that they are very copious when they explain the operations of the understanding in the forming of demonstrations, but are too concise when they treat of probabilities, and those other measures of evidence on which life and action entirely depend, and which are our guides even in most of our philosophical speculations' (A, 7). Hume makes it perfectly clear in the *Abstract* that he thought he had remedied this defect in traditional logic. In his methodological moods, then, he thinks of himself as establishing the possibility of a *via media* between Cartesianism and scepticism by laying down rules for deciding what is probable; these rules are needed, because the social sciences cannot hope to achieve absolute certainty, and must work, therefore, with a logic of probability.

The moral sciences were defective, then, because they lacked a satisfactory 'art of reasoning'; this defect they shared with every empirical science. In certain other respects, they lagged behind physics. Hobbes had already complained that men wrote about ethics as rhetoricians rather than as scientists.[4] When he was a young man of twenty-three, Hume wrote to his

[1] G.G., III, 99. [2] *Essay*, Bk. IV, Ch. xiv.
[3] *Analogy of Religion*, Introduction. For Hume's anxiety, see *Letters*, Vol. I, p. 27. [4] *De Corpore*, Book I, Ch. i, 7.

physician, in an equally critical spirit, that 'the moral philosophy transmitted to us by antiquity laboured under the same inconvenience that has been found in their natural philosophy, of being entirely hypothetical, and depending more upon invention than experience' (L, 1, 16). In short, moral science had yet to experience its Newtonian revolution.

Thus Hume's second task as a methodologist was to show that the Newtonian 'methods of philosophizing' are as applicable in the moral as they are in the physical sciences. Hypotheses could be dispensed with, in so far, at least, as hypotheses are occult qualities; experience must be the arbiter. Let us ask, always, whether an expression refers to an idea or an impression; if the answer is 'an idea', we must seek the impression from which it is derived. 'This', he says, 'will immediately cut off all loose discourses and declamations, and reduce us to something precise and exact on the present subject' (T, 456). General laws must be propounded, on the model of the Newtonian laws of gravitation; Hume thought he could point to such laws in the form of associative principles, which 'are really to *us* the cement of the universe' (A, 32). In the end, perhaps, his enthusiasm for the Newtonian method somewhat diminished,[1] but it is a most important thread in the *Treatise*.

It was, of course, a serious question whether the methods of science could properly be applied to moral subjects. Beattie was to argue, in a manner still familiar, that if we seek a 'moral writer of true genius' we should look amongst the poets rather than amongst the philosophers; that 'a metaphysician, exploring the recesses of the human heart, has just such a chance for finding the truth, as a man with microscopic eyes would have for finding the road'.[2] And Beattie can be relied upon to express the commonplace view. Thus Hume had to show not only how the moral sciences should be conducted, but even that they could be conducted at all.

Paradoxically, it is his defence of the moral sciences which

[1] cf. N. Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, *passim*; although I shall be suggesting that Kemp Smith somewhat underrates the vitality, in Hume's thinking, of the Newtonian approach.

[2] *Essay on Truth*, p. 401 (Seventh Edition).

leads Hume most deeply into scepticism. He begins from the common objection to the moral sciences that, to use modern language, they 'involve judgments of value', and hence that we cannot expect, within them, the objectivity which we rightly demand of physical science. Hutcheson had particularly insisted that moral and aesthetic judgments rest on 'feeling' rather than on pure observation or rational deduction; Hume, as Kemp Smith has pointed out,[1] tries to show that Hutcheson's analysis can be applied to every judgment, to natural philosophy no less than to ethics and aesthetics. Thus the supposed superior objectivity of the physical sciences completely vanishes; every judgment is equally 'subjective', every belief rests on taste and sentiment. "Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy' (T, 103).[2] When this intention is dominant, Hume's philosophy drops to its most sceptical level: 'after the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason

[1] *Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 43.

[2] The word 'philosophy' is used by seventeenth and eighteenth century writers in three different although closely connected ways (cf. E. Gilson's edition of Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*, p. 275). First, as meaning enquiry in general, what Descartes calls 'l'étude de la Sagesse' and Berkeley, 'the study of wisdom and truth' (*Principles*, Introduction § 1). This is a translation of Cicero's 'studium sapientiae' (*De Officiis*, II, ii, 5). Cicero's definition, according to the O.E.D., 'was considered authoritative'. Secondly, as meaning the theory which concerns itself with first principles (the scholastic *philosophia prima*). Thirdly, as meaning any one of what we now call the sciences, sometimes with a prefix ('natural philosophy', 'moral philosophy'), sometimes with no such prefix. Hume calls Locke and Malebranche 'philosophers' (E, 7), but equally it is a 'philosopher' (without the appendage of 'natural') who 'determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed' (E, 14). As early as 1661, Joseph Glanvill in *The Vanity of Dogmatising* (p. 236) had suggested the word 'science' as a name for 'that part of philosophy which concerns itself with Nature', but the distinction between science and philosophy had no point until the doctrine had gained ground that science gave a complete account of phenomena but left ultimates, or reasons why, or Reality, to philosophy. In the present instance, Hume seems to be using 'philosophy' to mean 'enquiry into matters of fact', including therefore the physical sciences, but also the moral sciences and therefore those parts of metaphysics which are not totally void of content. And this is his ordinary use of the word. We must never read 'philosophy', in the contemporary manner, as 'non-scientific'. Malebranche and Cudworth, Newton and Harvey, in so far as they are not talking nonsense or mathematics, are 'philosophers'.

why I should assent to it; and feel nothing but a *strong* propensity to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear to me' (T, 265).

Yet to this conclusion he never for long adheres. There is something about *his* propensities which lifts them far above the propensities, however strong, of the metaphysicians and the religious enthusiast. Physics is only a matter of 'sentiment', when it is necessary to deflate the superiority of physicists; the fact remains that it is thoroughly rational, when we contrast it with the vagaries of superstition. The tension generated by these conflicting purposes is most clearly apparent in Hume's embarrassment about his theory of belief, a theory to which he several times returns in the Appendix to the *Treatise*. There is, he says, one observation which he cannot 'forbear': that the difference between 'a poetical enthusiasm' and 'a serious conviction' arises from 'reflexion and *general rules*' (T, 631). 'General rules'—Hume's positive, Newtonian methodology—are to protect us against falling into Protagorean relativism, even though the belief in them, too, is only 'a species of sensation'. The problem is to formulate a logic which will leave room for taste and sentiment without giving any encouragement to the visionary, to develop a scepticism deep enough to dispel the presumption that a developed science will be purely 'rational', but sufficiently 'mitigated' to allow of the supremacy of science over superstition. Hume's inconsistencies arise, in large part, out of his attempt to formulate such a logic and to defend such a scepticism; they are philosophically interesting inconsistencies just because they bear witness to the existence of a genuine problem, and one that still concerns us—how to describe the reasonableness of science without falling into either scepticism or rationalism.

The direction of Hume's thought becomes clear at the end of the first *Enquiry*. There we find him saying of morals and criticism that they 'are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment', and must therefore be contrasted with 'politics, natural philosophy, physics, chemistry etc.' which employ 'moral reasoning' *as distinct from* 'taste and sentiment' (E, 165). His development of Hutcheson, according