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David Hume

*“An Enquiry Concerning
Human Understanding”*

first published 1748

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Modern Western Philosophy

Section I: Of the Different Species of Philosophy

Distinction between two kinds of philosophical thought

- “Easy and obvious” philosophy for a man of action - written eloquently, uses “the most striking observations and instances from common life” to make us understand difference between vice and virtue (associated with Cicero’s writings)
- “Accurate and abstract philosophy” for a man of reason - rather than form our behavior, this philosophy tries to form our understanding and beliefs that determine our behavior (associated with Locke and Aristotle)

Abstract/Abstruse Philosophical Thought

- Should not be disregarded entirely
- Although, a life dedicated solely to this type of philosophy is punished:

“Abstruse thought and profound researches I [nature] prohibit and will severely punish by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries shall meet with, when communicated. Be a philosopher, but, amid all your philosophy, be still a man.” (535)

- A good life consists of a mix -- “easy and obvious” philosophy may be the ideal because it allows for philosophical reflection *and* social activity

Best Mix (Of the Two)

- Easy and obvious philosophy may be ideal, but accurate and abstract philosophy has its virtues too
- It demands exactness and accuracy that can lead to perfection in “practical matters”
- Example of painter studying anatomy
- Plus this type of thought is harmless, is good exercise for the mind, and can lead to truth (or away from false ideas)

Best Mix

- Combine philosophical reflection with an active and social life

“...Nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to the human race... Indulge your passion for science, she says, but let your science be human and such as may have a direct reference to action and society.”
(535)

- Downsides to only philosophical thought (social rejection, shutting oneself off)
- Downsides to only social life (ignorance)

Objection to “accurate and abstract” philosophy (metaphysics)

- It is not science -- it is a “confused attempt” to explain what we do not know
- “...they are not properly a science, but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding...” (536)
- But this does not mean we should abandon philosophy - - rather we should study it more carefully
- If we can explain human understanding, we can rid ourselves of bad reasoning
- Do for the mind what Newton has done for matter -- our explanations of behavior and understanding are similar to pre-Newtonian astronomy (we could describe planetary orbits but not explain *why* the planets move as they do)

Section II: Of the Origin of Ideas

- Impressions vs. ideas (or thoughts)
- Impressions: “lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will” (539)
- Ideas: from memory or imagination, less vivid -- “less lively perceptions of which we are conscious when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned” (539)
- “The utmost we say of [ideas], even when they operate with greatest vigor, is that they represent their object in so lively a manner that we could *almost* say we feel or see it: But, **unless the mind is disordered by disease or madness, they never can arrive at such a pitch of vivacity as to render these perceptions altogether indistinguishable**” (539)

Ideas Come From Impressions

- Golden Mountain example: a complex idea
- God: supreme goodness and intelligence comes from our impressions of human goodness and intelligence
- Imagination is limited to ideas that come from impressions -- blind person cannot imagine a color, deaf person cannot imagine a sound
- “Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters and join incongruous shapes and appearances costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects...But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, **we shall find upon a nearer examination that it is really confined within very narrow limits and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.**” (539)

Hume's Own Objection: Color

- We might be able to imagine a shade of blue (that we have *never* seen) that falls between shades we *have* seen before, though he declares this counter-example singular and says it does not upset the general maxim



- This can be applied to other things (musical tones, smells)

The value in the distinction

- Worth distinguishing between ideas and impressions because we can ask from which impression difficult ideas stem
- Since all ideas are derived from lively impressions, a term that does not connect to an impression is meaningless

Innate Ideas Argument

“It is probably that no more was meant by those who denied innate ideas than that **all ideas were copies of our impressions**; though it must be confessed that the terms which they employed were not chosen with such caution, nor so exactly defined, as to prevent all mistakes about their doctrine...If by innate is meant contemporary to our birth, the dispute seems frivolous; nor is it worthwhile to inquire at what time thinking begins...Again, the word *idea* seems to be taken in a very loose sense by Locke and others, as standing for any of our perceptions, our sensations and passions, as well as thoughts...But admitting these terms, *impressions* and *ideas*, in the sense above explained, and understanding by *innate* what is original... then may we assert that all our impressions are innate and our ideas are not innate.”
(541)

Section II, In Conclusion...

- Everything in our mind is based upon simple impressions
- Simple impressions --> simple ideas --> complex ideas
- A term is only meaningful if it is connected to some idea that comes from some impression