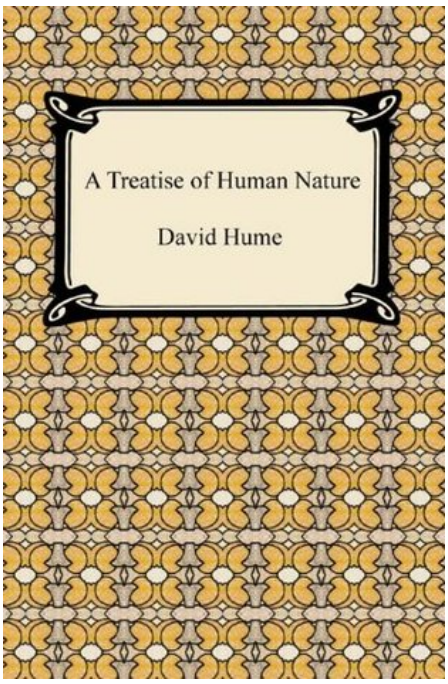

A Treatise of Human Nature [with Biographical Introduction]

David Hume

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A Treatise of Human Nature [with Biographical Introduction] David Hume
First published in 1739 to an unenthusiastic British public, Hume's "Treatise" has since been referred to as one of the most significant books in the history of philosophy. Hume, a Scottish philosopher, claimed that he was attempting to discuss moral issues with a methodical reasoning, and proceeded to do so in this foundational text. Divided into three large sections, Hume begins his work with a discussion of human understanding, from the origin of our ideas to how we divide them with space and time, with some interesting observations on skepticism. In the second section, Hume speaks of passions, encompassing a range of human emotions and introducing the effect of free will upon them. Finally, the third section covers a variety of moral ideas, including virtues and justice, promises and obligations, and the effect of politics on human morality. Through this treatise, Hume exhibits a remarkable and creative mind, disciplined and enhanced by a systematic method of reasoning, that has produced a text on moral philosophy that continues to stand the test of time over two hundred years later.

A Treatise of Human Nature [with Biographical Introduction] Details

Date	:	Published July 1st 2004 by Digireads.com (first published 1739)
ISBN	:	
Author	:	David Hume
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Genre	:	Philosophy, Nonfiction, Classics, Politics

From Reader Review A Treatise of Human Nature [with Biographical Introduction] for online ebook

Otto Lehto says

This book contains some of the greatest philosophical insights ever put on paper, but unfortunately in a cumbersome and overlong format. Hume corrected this mistake in his later and more concise books - the two Enquiries - which together are a better place to start. The Treatise is NOT my first choice as an introduction to Hume.

But despite its frustrations and shortcomings, most notably its lack of editorial oversight (which translates into reader-unfriendliness), the Treatise is a multifaceted masterpiece that revolutionised epistemology, psychology and moral philosophy - not bad for a single work.

Whether you think he was right or not (and I happen to think he was 90%* of the time), no serious scholar of philosophy should overlook this book. For even though the two Enquiries are overall better summaries of his position, the messy sprawl of the Treatise's labyrinthine thicket contains rough diamonds of ideas, many of them quite radical, that were ironed out or downplayed by the more "mature" Hume.

These can be a revelation - a lot of good stuff was left out in the Reader's Digest version of his theory. The Treatise is more unhinged - but also more repetitive and tiresome. It's definitely a mixed blessing.

Overall, I cannot recommend the book to every average Phil the Philosopher with the same unreserved glee that I would his doctrines, but it's still an impressive feat.

The deep jungle of Hume's unfiltered mind is a daunting place that is worth investigating - but not without a machete, a torch and a bottle of the finest Scotch.

(* The 10% where Hume was wrong, in my opinion, includes the overemphasis on empirical observation as the basis of our psychology and the concurrent denial of aprioristic categories of e.g. space, time and causality - as largely solved by Kant.)

Andrew Hunt says

Trenchant and profound. I wouldn't recommend the Barnes & Noble edition, which I picked up without knowing that it contained a few potentially misleading features (inexplicably, the preface to the Abstract which Hume later published is included and the Abstract itself left out).

It's good to read philosophy which, if it is sometimes obscure (though Hume very rarely is truly difficult), is so because the thoughts which it expresses are worth thinking. Certain philosophical writers of the late twentieth century should have read Hume and felt ashamed of their own bloviation and obscurantist gibberish. If they had only learned from the words of the Great Scot: "We must have an idea annexed to [our] terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible." But years later Schopenhauer lamented the tendency to wrap paltry ideas in muddled and indecipherable language, and the farce continues to this day.

Camille Stein says

Historia de la estética (XII): el empirismo británico (II): el problema del gusto | La guía de Filosofía - http://ow.ly/gOB8305ED2f

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Yann says

Il y a une remarquable unité dans ces trois ouvrages de Hume, sur la nature humaine, le premier sur la connaissance, le second sur les passions, et le troisième sur la morale. On ne saurait pas aborder ces difficiles questions de morale sans bien s'entendre préalablement sur le sens des mots, sans quoi on courrait le risque de se laisser abuser par eux, et de se payer de belles formules qui nous plaisent, car notre imagination complète le sens qu'il n'y trouve pas par celui qui nous agrée. Cette méthode consistant à poser des définitions claires, puis par la multiplication d'exemples particuliers pour mettre à l'épreuve leur consistance me semble très féconde. Hobbes et Locke ont ouvert la voie. Sans doute pourrait on regretter l'absence d'un certain esprit géométrique, et l'emploi d'une langue simple et naturelle chagrinera les âmes éprises d'acribie, mais chaque auteur a sa sensibilité, et trouve les voies les plus propres à se faire entendre. J'ai le sentiment que l'agrément procuré par ces lectures philosophiques dépend beaucoup de nos préférences tel ou tel style d'écriture, et que les apparentes oppositions entre auteurs s'évanouissent pour la plupart lorsqu'on les ramène au fond, se limitant souvent à des querelles de forme, de méthode, d'étendue du sujet. Elles tiennent à la variété des intérêts et des passions que nous dictent les circonstances et nos dispositions. Ainsi Kant a le mérite de traiter à fond la métaphysique, que ces anglais avaient mis à une place curieuse, car elle leur brulait les doigts (en dépit de leur prudence, aucun n'a échappé à des tracasseries sur ces matières), mais son analyse des facultés de l'entendement reste sommaire comparée à celle de ses prédécesseurs: sans doute était il plus préoccupé de tracer des limites bien nettes. Il s'est aussi trompé sur les jugements synthétique à priori, mais ce n'est finalement pas très grave. Tous ces philosophes s'accordent à chercher la vérité, mais chacun emploie ses facultés et son génie là où le portent sa fantaisie, et le lecteur ne risque rien à les fréquenter tous, sans préjugés. Plus personnellement, mon goût me portent plutôt vers ces auteurs qui d'abord s'attachent à décrire le monde tel qu'il est, plutôt que ceux qui le rêvent tel qu'il devrait être, car quand on a gouté aux vertus des premiers, il devient difficile de souffrir l'impertinence des seconds.

Jimmy says

Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Thanks a lot, man! You and your fancy book just had to go and wake Immanuel Kant from his "dogmatic slumber", didn't you? And every single fucking time I pick up a philosophical tome like *Critique of Pure Reason* I have to be reminded of how lazy I am for not thoroughly reading through all of the British empiricists. Don't get me wrong, from what I've read of yours, you seem like a very precise philosopher, but now I have to read you with scorn. Look at what you're doing to me. None of my Goodreads friends are going to want to play with me anymore. "Hey, it's Jimmy's page, that pretentious dickhead who really thinks he can try reading five books at once, what an asshole."

This isn't my fault David, it's yours. You and your fuckin age o reason!

I'm sorry, I love you.

Bob Nichols says

Hume's "Treatise" is divided into three books that cover understanding, passions and morals. This review is on Book II, "Of the Passions." *[Review of Book III added below, November, 2013] At first (actually, third) read, this book is a mess, but the book's meaning gains traction when viewed within Hume's overall philosophical system.

In Hume's system, the world comes at the self through the senses and ideas flow from them (impressions). As we are not just knowing beings, where do passions fit within Hume's system? Here too we receive the world through original (primary) sensations that are simply evaluated by the body as good (pleasure) and bad (pain) that we experience as desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security. Our secondary, indirect passions involve reflective thought (that include associations of emotions with each other), which Hume lists as pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, and generosity.

In his theory of passions, Hume begins with pride and humility (Part 1, Book II). Pride is elation, which is pleasure and a good thing because one has status and value, in contrast to humility, which is dejection because it's the absence of a good thing. Comparison - a reflective process - "augments" our self-esteem, and here Hume defines "sympathy" in a different way than we typically think of it. Sympathy is our capacity to identify with others and see (mirror) their situation. We "enter into the other by force of imagination," Hume writes, so that we esteem those who are well off (we want to be like them) and have contempt for those who are not (we don't want to be like them). "Upon the whole," Hume writes, "there remains nothing, which can give us an esteem for power and riches, and a contempt for meanness and poverty, except the principle of sympathy, by which we enter ino the sentiments of the rich and poor and partake of their pleasure and uneasiness."

It is the same with love and hate (Part II), which Hume states is directed to someone external to us, as opposed to pride and humility whose object is the self or those we identify with. We love the well off because they give us pleasure; we hate those not well off because they give us pain. "Nothing has a greater tendency to give us an esteem for any person," Hume writes, "than his power and riches; or a contempt, than his poverty and meanness," and this esteem and contempt are "to be considered'd as [a] species of love and hatred." In the same vein, envy (a species of both love and hatred), is "A man, who compares himself to his inferior, receives a pleasure from the comparison: And when the inferiority decreases by the elevation of the inferior, what shoul'd only have been a decrease of pleasure, becomes a real pain, by a new comparison with its preceding condition."

In Part III, Hume brings in his motive force. Like Newton's cosmic objects, we are bodies in unimpeded motion until we collide with other bodies. When we collide, we evaluate the incoming action on us as good (pleasurable) or bad (painful), and from that evaluation flow the direct and indirect passions (it may be that Hume seams all of this together in the following way: pride and humility [looking at the self], and love and hate [looking at others] are cognitive versions of pleasure [like] and pain [dislike]). While we might think we are free to choose, we are like the rest of nature. Each action has a prior cause that can be traced back to our evaluation of whether someting is good or bad, or something that provides pleasure or gives pain. That evaluation by the body releases the body's energy (will or volition), which is an "effect" of pain and pleasure, and that is expressed in the form of specific passions. Against the rationalist perspective, Hume says that reason is powerless to motivate our actions. That's the property of passion, and "Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse...." Then, Hume utters his bombshell: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey

them."

This summary is a best guess of what Hume was trying to articulate (he lamented that the Treatise, which he wrote in his late 20s, did not receive much attention). Understanding Hume's theory of the passions is a challenge. He makes numerous divisions within his thought (e.g., direct, indirect; calm, violent; original and secondary; self as object, other as object) and it is easy to get lost about what refers to what, and why. A more serious problem is his loose terminology. In places, passions and emotions seem separate ("any emotion, which attends a passion") but in other places they are one and the same ("passions and other emotions"). Pleasure and pain are independent of passion, but it's also not clear what they are (simply, body responses? cognitive, as there's an evaluation?). He refers to passions as desires and instincts, to volition (the emotion of "aversion or propensity"), and to cognition (seconday, reflective) emotions. Passions include states of being (grief, joy), reaction (fear), and action (avarice, curiosity), and generic resisting actions (aversion) and generic seeking actions (propensity). In the end, the reader is never quite clear about what a passion is and what it is not.

Beyond these challenges, there are four fundamental problems with Hume's theory. First, he sees us as passive beings. We are recepients of external stimuli coming our way, which we evaluate as painful (bad) or pleasurable (good). That's one-half of who we are. We are defensive beings who react (good/bad) to the world, but we also go into the world to get what we need to survive and for our well being. While the emotion of aversion is resisting action, "propensity" is really an active, outward seeking of what we need from the world. Schopenhauer's theory recasts this Hume-type view of pain and pleasure. For Schopenhauer, pain is an internal need that must be satisfied; when pain is satisfied, there is pleasure. Pain in this sense pushes us to seek what we need AND to resist what we don't need. When successful on both fronts, there is pleasure.

Second, as we are sensation recoders, Hume says we have no true self. The external world throws stuff our way and determines who we are, subject to our simple evaluation of whether it is good or bad. But that evaluation presupposes a standard of some sort such as survival and well-being, which in a strong way, constitutes a self, broadly construed. But beyond this broader species self (human nature), we also have a particular, individual self. More importantly, a good and bad evaluation is not the same for each individual, so on what basis does one make that evaluation other than having a particular disposition and proclivity that constitutes one's true self (disposition wise, not deterministic). Hume fuzzes this issue up considerably. He makes various references to our individual natures (e.g., "differences in the tempers and complexions of men," "my own natural temper and disposition," "variation of temper," and "general character"), but these could be environmentally determined as well as biological.

The third problem with Hume's theory is that his overall portrait of us is, again, only half right. We are in the main concerned with our own status and standing relative to others, he says in this book, and "sympathy" augments these differences. While there's a good amount of truth in that perspective, it barely speaks to the "children of light" who care about others in the normal way we think of sympathy, and there are good Darwinian reasons for us to be socially oriented in the best sense of that word. It will be interesting to compare this treatment by Hume of "sympathy" with his Book III discussion on morals

The fourth and final issue with Hume is his statement that reason is a slave of passion. Hume gets credit for highlighting the fundamental role of passion and volition relative to cognition, but to call "reason" a slave is an overstatement and creates a needless determinism. Back in the reptile and early mammal days, emotions performed the regulatory role for us in the world, and most of these emotions are still likely with us today. An alternative way of looking at this relationship between evolution and reason is that reason augments this regulatory role of emotions so that both work together and complement each other. Emotions provide the initial impulse for both seeking and resisting, and cognition tells us not only how to seek and resist, but also to evaluate whether to act or react at all given what the situation requires as well as what our broader and longer-term interests and values are. There is, in other words, a role for cognition to override a passion and,

in effect, reason constitutes a motive force in its own right, even though Hume is likely accurate in saying that, in the end, volition rests on some "contrary" impulse.

*In Book III, Hume argues that there are two parts to human nature. Affections provide the motive force and understanding (reason) tells us how to work with them. Then Hume argues "that reason is perfectly inert," powerless to produce or prevent action. Action requires the affections. This is self-interest, broadly construed as seeking those objects that bring pleasure and avoiding those that create pain. Hume states that self-interest does not extend to public benefit ("In general, it may be affirm'd, that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself.") Given this constraint, Hume derives the principle of justice from human understanding: As we recognize our self-interest, especially property, is in jeopardy in a Hobbes-like world where everyone pursues their respective self-interest, we recognize that the self-interest of each is secured only when we restrain ourselves and respect the freedom of each. In this way justice, as a human creation, serves (regulates) self-interest.

Hume's treatment of self-interest as an "impelling force," and the social implications of that position, is excellent. He says that our sense of justice does not come from nature, which is indifferent. Rather, justice is an artifice - a human creation, a public utility - to protect our self-interest. Yet, when it is understood that others - and their freedom - are a part of nature, it embeds that principle as a logical deduction in nature itself, as a biological version of adaptation. It is also likely that we've incorporated a good portion of that principle into our nature, as the sentiment of fairness and as our visceral resistance to heavy-handedness, violation and imposition.

Hume also minimizes the biological significance of our other-oriented, social nature. Hume pretty much has us as self-centered isolates, interested in others only for their reciprocal utility to ourselves. In contrast, as Darwin wrote, we are deeply tribal and that brings with it a full suite of other-regarding social skills regardless of utility.

As in Book II, Hume's treatment of the emotions is confusing. Under the general heading of affections, self-interest is defined as the various passions (desires and aversions). While passions convey excitement, these seem inert in Hume until they are stimulated by the outside. Yet, elsewhere Hume has us filled with "love of gain" and concerned about status and reputation ("comparison"). This suggests something powerful inside that directs how we relate to the world - why we seek gain and why we care about what others think. Seeking and concern are internal to us, not external, and may be lodged in an inborn character or temperament (i.e., Hume's reference to "our natural temper") that also varies within each of us as, elsewhere, Hume writes that "Men's tempers are different."

Simon says

Hume's radicalism does not stop at critiquing long-standing philosophical notions of causality, what is external to us, substance, self and God; in a profoundly anti-Cartesian moment, he attacks those who uncritically assert that animals cannot reason nor express the 'passions' of love/hatred and pride/humility...

He makes clear at the outset of the section on animal reasoning that those who fail to realize this obvious quality are 'stupid and ignorant.' Thus, '(a) bird, that chooses with such care and nicety the place and materials of her nest, and sits upon her eggs for a due time, and in a suitable season, with all the precaution that a chymist is capable of in the most delicate projection... (engages in an) extraordinary instance of sagacity....'

In terms of the passions, '(l)ove in animals, has not for its only object animals of the same species, but extends itself farther, and comprehends almost every sensible and thinking being. A dog naturally loves a man above his own species, and very commonly meets with a return of affection...

The very port and gait of a swan, or turkey, or peacock show the high idea he has entertained of himself, and his contempt of all others. This is the more remarkable, that in the two last species of animals, the pride always attends the beauty, and is discovered in the male only... every species of creatures, which approach so often to man, as to familiarize themselves with him, show an evident pride in his approbation, and are pleased with his praises and caresses, independent of every other consideration. Nor are they the caresses of every one without distinction, which give them this vanity, but those principally of the persons they know and love; in the same manner as that passion is excited in mankind. All these are evident proofs, that pride and humility are not merely human passions, but extend themselves over the whole animal creation.'

The Selby-Bigge second edition of the 'Treatise' not only contains the main work but also Hume's important 'Abstract,' an appendix, textual notes and index... highly recommended...

Duffy Pratt says

I just wrote a long review of this book, and Goodreads or the internet ate it. Grrrr... Here are the high points of that review.

Three years to read this. Of that, almost the full time was stuck on the first two parts of the second book, which seemed both dull and pointless. It ended up that it was just dull, but necessary to understand his ideas on morality.

First book - Understanding. It blows up the idea that there's a foundation in reason for induction, causation, the persistence of objects, and even for the idea of the self. This is radical skepticism at its finest. It's even more amazing that Hume presents these arguments in a way that is cogent, and engaging. There are few writers of philosophy who write better than Hume, and none of them are also systematizers. The systematizers tend to be insufferably dull (Locke) or unreadable and incomprehensible (take your pick, but Heidegger is a good example).

Second book - the bog. It's about the passions, and it couldn't be less passionately presented. Pride, humility, love, hate. If the first book awoke Kant out of his dogmatic slumbers, I would have thought that the first parts of this book would put him safely back to sleep. The curious thing here was that, after destroying the idea of causation, Hume spends most of this book focusing on causes for the passions.

The book takes off again when Hume gets to the will. He tries to reconcile free will and determinism. I wondered why he bothered. Since causation has no foundation in reason, but rests on human custom and habit, it doesn't seem necessary to me to then try to reconcile it with free will. It can also rest on other customs and habits. If the two seem to contradict each other, I don't understand the big problem. Neither of them has a foundation in reason anyways, so why get troubled over a seeming contradiction. It would have been enough to say they rest on different customs, and people are irrational.

Third book - Morality. He does a great job of showing that justice is not natural, but an invention of men. He's less good about showing the basis for morality, and this stems from his being less rigorous here than in

the first book. For Hume, all perceptions are either ideas or impressions. With causes, he showed that causes are not based on ideas, and also showed that there is no impression that corresponds to a cause. Thus, no causes. He doesn't do the same with moral perceptions. He does show that moral perceptions have no basis in ideas or reasons, and then abruptly concludes that they must be impressions. I think he could pretty easily have argued that there are no moral impressions either. And I'm not sure why he didn't. Perhaps the religious climate at the time precluded him from being as radical a moral skeptic as he was a skeptic when it came to the understanding.

I also found it odd that he bases all moral judgments on an appreciation of character. He has argued elsewhere quite convincingly that its impossible to know a cause from its effects. But in morality, all of our judgments come from just that process. We only see the effects of a person's character, and never the character itself. That, we only infer from those effects, and that is just what Hume has argued against elsewhere (famously, in his argument that we can know nothing about God from our observation of the world, if indeed God created the world.)

Finally, even though Hume tries to explain morals to us, it looks like he could not bring himself to show any true moral distinction. At bottom, for him, morality is just another species of pain and pleasure, and he doesn't try to show in what manner it differs from other types of pain and pleasure. Indeed, towards the end of the book, he admits that he can't draw a sharp distinction between morality and other natural attributes, such as intelligence.

There are many other quibbles I have with this book, but I am dumbfounded that he wrote it when he was in his twenties. It's as well written as I think a book of this type and scope can be. The ideas are truly challenging, even 250 years later. Anyone interested in philosophy or the scientific method should read at least the first book. I'm actually a bit embarrassed that I haven't read the whole thing before. And now I wonder where I should turn next. What would make a suitable encore? (And not Kant, I've already read the Critique.)

Darren says

"I was awoken from my dogmatic slumber." -Kant, on reading Hume.

In my opinion, this is probably one of the most thoroughly logical and most disturbing books ever written. Hume's use of reason completely dissects that habituation that we call "intuition", and moreover, shows how inductive reasoning is completely without merit. Science goes out the window, and the prospect of having any knowledge of the world leaves with it. The resulting nihilism will send chills down your spine. This is why everyone hates philosophers, because they assault all those comfortable cushions of assumption on which we base our lives.

Many people give Kant all the credit for being the most brilliant philosopher, but when you read Hume, you realize that many of Kant's theories where just Hume's ideas turned on their heads. Hume's "veil of perception" was illuminated and developed into Kant's "forms of sensibility" and "categories of the understanding" and became the basis for Kant's "synthetic a priori". While there is no question that Kant was brilliant, I think he gets more credit than deserved just because he came to the rescue of science and provided a (tenuously) logical solution to the problems that Hume observed. Kant's nearly indecipherable language also has a certain snob appeal, while Hume's very straightforward presentation of the problems lead the intelligentsia to regard him as pedestrian. There is a certain "lifting of the nose" observed in those who have read Kant. This laughable attitude merely shows how vain and stupid some people are about what they read, and how they think it reflects their superiority.

Hume's "Treatise on Human Nature" is a book everyone should read. It is an intellectual roller coaster that will shake the very basis for every truth you think you know. Good fun!!

Sarah says

s1:e4

Chidi: "You read this, right?"
Eleanor: "Yes. Well, I tried to. Well, I wanted to. Well, I tried to want to."

Brandon says

I got this brand new for a dollar. Hopefully Hume will awaken me from my dogmatic slumber as well.

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eesenor says

Hume continues the tradition of Locke and Berkeley, by demonstrating that causal connections are only in the mind of the perceiver, not actually in the world of perceived events.

Miles says

David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* is not a breezy book. From the first page, it plunged me into a fervid mode of double-layered analysis in which my struggle to comprehend the text was mirrored by efforts to track my personal reactions to whatever content I was able to wrest from it. Early on, my attempts felt futile—understanding occluded by my intellectual limitations and relative lack of outside support. My experience improved as I pressed on, however. Slowly, mysteriously, sentences and paragraphs began congealing into coherent expressions. From time to time, the text would open to me like an unfurling flower, or an exquisite sunrise glimpsed after an unreasonably early tumble out of bed.

Eventually, I came to a predictable conclusion: David Hume was brilliant.

His brilliance is easy to miss, though, especially for a modern reader. Despite the fact that science has validated many of Hume's core ideas, there are still lots of barriers that make it difficult for a 21st-century mind to grok Hume's 18th-century philosophy. The most confounding of these barriers are Hume's Baroque style and his outdated methods of inquiry.

Hume was a product of the late Baroque period, so clarity and brevity were absent from his intellectual toolkit. This text is rife with rambling repetition, and generally conforms to the taxonomic model of philosophy, wherein the author lays out a massive network of terms and provides definitions of varying consistency for each. Hume's arguments are generally difficult to suss out in the moment, even if they come together after many paragraphs and pages. This can make it tough to fruitfully compare passages from different sections of the text.

Hume's writing often gives the impression that he's trying to do a chemistry experiment, or math problem, using inherently fuzzy terms:

"Ideas never admit of a total union, but are endow'd with a kind of impenetrability, by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture. On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union; and like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression, which arises from the whole." (260)

This passage is easy enough to grasp if read carefully, but it also brings up questions that admit no satisfactory answer, like "*why* can impressions and passions be mixed, but ideas can't?" and "what's the significant difference between 'compound' and 'mixture' here?" We have to shrug and concede, *Well, that's just how Hume's system works.* His conceptual system is peculiar to his way of seeing the world, which makes it at least somewhat arbitrary; it can't be submitted for verification against any objective standard (or it couldn't in Hume's day, because no such standard(s) existed). This doesn't mean Hume is right or wrong about anything in particular, but it does mean we have to accept certain insupportable assertions if we want a shot at hearing him out. The good news is that, ultimately, his message is well worth a listen.

The other big obstacle is the radical difference between "empiricism" as it was understood in the 18th-century and "empiricism" as we use it today. Modern empirical analysis is characterized by data-based scientific inquiry, or other forms of externally-directed information gathering when tackling topics that defy quantification. In Hume's day, being an empiricist simply meant using your natural sense perceptions as the foundation for trying to gain knowledge of the world, rather than building some abstract conceptual system and trying to cram the world into your prefigured notions of it. Seems obvious today, but back then it was a huge shift in philosophical thought.

The way this cashes out is that *A Treatise of Human Nature* is full of thought experiments masquerading as empirical knowledge. These "experiments" passed muster in Hume's time, but would never be treated as "empirical findings" today. So while Hume is certainly a step up from the non-empiricists that came before him, he still anchors a lot of his arguments using imagined results of imagined scenarios. Additionally, he was trying to explain perception and morality long before neuroscience, psychology, or evolutionary theory. Given these enormous handicaps, it's amazing he got as much right as he did.

And oh, he did! This maw of verbal detritus contains insights that were novel to 18th-century readers, some of which represent mysteries still unsolved by modern philosophy and science. The first of these is a genuine skepticism. Unlike many of his dogmatic predecessors, Hume is comfortable admitting when he doesn't know something. In fact, he thinks admitting that we don't know (and perhaps *can't* know) certain things is a critical part of inquiry.

Hume develops his skeptical outlook primarily through a series of discursive critiques of how humans perceive cause-and-effect relationships. I found his skepticism most enlightening, however, when applied to his thoughts on personal identity. Toward the end of Book I, he identifies a question that still baffles academics and researchers today: How does the human brain/body construct a consistent notion of personal identity from memories and sense perceptions?

"How few of our past actions are there of which we have any memory? Who can tell me, for instance, what were his thoughts and actions on the first of January 1715, the 11th of March 1719, and the 3rd of August 1733? Or will he affirm, because he has entirely forgot the incidents of these days, that the present self is not the same person with the self of that time; and by that means overturn all the most establish'd notions of personal identity? In this view, therefore, memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity, by shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions…Identity depends on the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion. But as

the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity. All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union." (187, emphasis his)

Without a shred of hard data, Hume understood that personal identity is nothing more than an "imaginary principle of union" generated by the brain's ability to simulate an "easy transition" between disparate perceptions and memories. Even more remarkable is his willingness to admit that he can't think of a suitable way to resolve the tension between our *feeling* of being unified beings and the *reality* that we're anything but:

"When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself,* I always stumble on some particular perception or other…I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are remov'd for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of *myself,* and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions remov'd by death, and cou'd neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I shou'd be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. If any one, upon serious and unprejudic'd reflexion thinks he has a different notion of *himself,* I must confess I can reason no longer with him…He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself;* tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me." (180, emphasis his)

Hume doesn't invent some baseless explanation for why human identity isn't paradoxical, or claim that identity is the product of some metaphysical substance (soul). Nor does he turn to religious solutions (all things are possible…because God!). He runs into a difficult problem, scopes it out as best he can, admits his failure to provide a solution, and contents himself with confronting the mystery. This mixture of brilliance and humility is hard to come by even today, when these matters are much better understood (even if the paradox of identity remains as churlish as ever).

Hume was also ahead of the curve in his evaluation of free will, which he correctly identifies as nothing more than our internal feeling of freedom: "By the *will,* I mean nothing but *the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind*" (284, emphasis his). That Hume does not seek to exempt the will from the constraints of a strictly causal universe again situates him closer to modern thinkers than those of his own time.

Since Hume saw humans as part of the natural world rather than an exception to it, it may come as no surprise that he locates human emotion and intelligence on a continuum with animals. This position could be a direct (or indirect) reaction to 17th-century biologists who dissected un-anesthetized dogs for experimentation despite the subject's obvious anguish. Hume encouraged the reader to "take a general survey of the universe, and observe the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another" (258). This attitude no doubt helped pave the way for the philosophy of animal liberation—still a contentious matter today.

Hume is perhaps most famous for his correct assertion that the body also generates and limits our capacity for rational thought, and that reason is subject to the whims of emotion (passion). His observance that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" has proved more valid than not, although our understanding of this relationship has come a long way in the intervening centuries (295). We now know that reason can't exist without emotion (at least not in humans), but also that we have the capacity to override our emotions given sufficient motivation and favorable circumstances. It's less like a master/slave relationship and more like two dancing partners with different skill sets and no clear leader.

If he favors the passions overmuch, Hume at least has good reasons for doing so (ironic, right?). For Hume,

the passions provide the foundation not just for reason, but for morality as well. Morality is embodied—our moral judgments are rooted in sentiments of pleasure and pain that become abstracted and institutionalized via individual habit and social custom. This process is enabled by the same phenomenon that binds us to other humans and animals: sympathy:

"No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own." (225)

To avoid the sometimes irksome distinction between sympathy and empathy, let's use a different term: fellow feeling. Fellow feeling, for Hume, describes how our internal emotions naturally imitate the emotions of those around us (this general phenomenon has been validated by the discovery of mirror neuron systems).

Hume posits that our natural inclination is to satisfy our self-interest, but under ideal conditions we learn to situate our self-interest within the context of the greater good:

"After men have found by experience, that their selfishness and confin'd generosity, acting at their liberty, totally incapacitate them for society; and at the same time have observ'd, that society is necessary to the satisfaction of those very passions, they are naturally induc'd to lay themselves under the restraint of such rules, as may render their commerce more safe and commodious." (354)

This is the seed of what evolutionary theorists call reciprocal altruism. Further, the influence of fellow feeling reaches all the way into our conceptualizations of social justice:

"Every thing, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is call'd Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue; this is the reason why the sense of moral good and evil follows upon justice and injustice. And tho' this sense, in the present case, be deriv'd only from contemplating the actions of others, yet we fail not to extend it ever to our own actions. The *generals rule* reaches beyond those instances, from which it arose; while at the same time we naturally sympathize with others in the sentiments they entertain of us. *Thus self-interest is the original motive to the* establishment *of justice: but a* sympathy *with public interest is the source of the* moral approbation, *which attends that virtue*." (355, emphasis his)

The significance of Hume's tireless efforts to bring human sentiment to the forefront of philosophical discourse cannot be overstated. It is because of such thinkers that, centuries later, we have a rich and mutable scientific and philosophical discourse about how we should conduct ourselves *based on our experience as embodied beings.* John Dewey, my favorite philosopher and a great champion of embodied rationality, owes much to texts like this one.

All great philosophical texts leave us with at least one great unanswered question. The question I find most relevant from this text is how societies can help individuals strike a balance between our natural self-interest and the common good, taking advantage of any many positive sum situations as possible. As Hume explains, we have trouble foregoing immediate pleasures in favor of the general interest of society, which feels far more remote:

"As it is impossible to change or correct any thing material in our nature, the utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation, and render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote…Here then is the origin of civil government and society. Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their natures. All they can do is to change their situation, and render the observance of justice the immediate interest of some particular persons, and its violation their more remote." (382-3)

While I don’t think it’s impossible to change human nature in an absolute sense, Hume is correct that actual progress almost always comes from changing the *conditions* in which human commerce and decisions occur. The general goal is clear: the more we provide people with the time and tools to explore a broad horizon of possible actions and futures, the better off we’ll all be.

How to do this?

"I must plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding. I pretend not, however, to pronounce it absolutely insuperable. Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflexions, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions." (452)

This review was originally published on my blog, words&dirt.

Matei says

2/5 empiricism was a mistake. Out of the three empiricist philosophers I read, Hume deals with the most complex issues and treats the problems of the nature of ideas, causality and morality to their complete conclusion (often a contradictory/self-defeating one), but his fanatical devotion to the empiricist model seemed to me to make him lacking in the necessary self-awareness to give his work any relevancy.

Gary says

The real ‘scandal’ is not what Kant referred to in his 800 page rebuttal to Hume’s belief of skepticism about the real world, or the ‘scandal’ that Heidegger referred to that we were still debating the phenomenal world as such, the real scandal is that more people don’t read books like this one. Hume and this book offer more insights about today’s world and almost everything I see around me seems to want to make me stupid and accept ‘alternative facts’ as real, undermine science and its understanding of itself, and to undermine the distinction between true and false, fact and fiction, thus enabling totalitarianism to replace fairness and equality through appealing to our feelings not our reason. Books like this one are necessary in order for democracy to thrive. Regretfully, I seldom come across recent books that challenge the reader and help awake them from their ‘dogmatic slumber’ or expect the reader to actually think or learn what knowledge is and about the nature of reality.

Hume makes the foundation of all knowledge (in matter of facts, psychology or morality) as arising from our experiences from our impressions. Hume says all ideas come from our senses; all knowledge gets mediated through our senses and must come before concepts; cause is only a label arising from continuity, regularity, custom and habit for which we mentally construct a relationship; and our sympathy arising from sensibilities create what we label morality.

Hume will define reason as that which discovers truth from falsity through our relational experiences and non-contradictory ideas based on those experiences. Yes, Hume makes reason the slave to the passions, but he realizes we live in a world with other people and we have to function in the world with a set of rules so that we must act as if justice and injustice have meaning because it is functional to believe that. Reason is an ultimate good for Hume and it comes from experiences.

I read Kant before I read this book. That was sort of a mistake because Kant’s first Critique is a reaction to Hume’s skepticism and denial that all beginning things must have a cause, and Hume’s denial of cause and

effect, and empiricism as the sole determiner of knowledge. Kant will famously say, ‘thought without content is empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind’. Meaning, it takes experiences and our concepts together to give us knowledge about the real world, ourselves and the moral as opposed to Hume’s argument that all knowledge comes about through experience alone.

Hume will say that our morality comes from our sympathies arising from our sentiments. He’ll say, our passions are a result of how we perceive our pains and pleasures and their expectations. ‘The World at War’ TV show from the 1970s taught me that ‘sympathy is in the dictionary between shit and syphilis’ and in my opinion that’s where it belongs and therefore I tend to think of morality differently than Hume. Hume is big on ‘character’ that which makes us who we are that comes from outside of us as opposed to an individual’s personality as authentically acquired from the self. (Matter of fact, I would say that most readers will ignore his chastity and other statements about ‘the fairer sex’ because they are just silly and ring false to all but the sexist or misogynist among us).

Hume understands how we are trapped in a Bayesian universe through our experiences. Yesterday’s experiences are determined by the priors weighted by the expectation times the weight of the experience itself. Hume explicitly speaks about the nearer in time the event is to us the more weight we give things. He doesn’t mention Thomas Bayes but he does understand how our feelings come from our experiences get affected through our perceptions weighted by our expectations.

Going from the particular to the general (the inductive to the deductive) creates science and sometimes ‘all swans are white’ will not be true and will need a correction since science can never know itself as certain. Hume actually gives a shout out to Rev. Berkerley in this book because of the problems of induction. That surprised me because Berkerley is the ultimate idealist and Hume is essentially the opposite, an empiricist. After having read this book, I understand how the two mesh together.

I found Hume a fun read. He’s abstract but not abstruse like Hegel. He has big ideas and doesn’t get bogged down in the particulars like Kant. He’s also more coherent than Schopenhauer (who incidentally, an idealist like Rev. Berkerley, seemed to fully appreciate Hume). Hume is probably today’s most favorite philosopher among philosophers because he writes clearly and everybody is able to find something they like within him (or as I sometimes think: ‘we’re all logical empiricist on first blush’ and love to quote Bertrand Russell or Karl Popper when appropriate!). I don’t mean this as an insult, but Hume writes clearly and understandably and can be equally understood by non-philosophers of which I am.