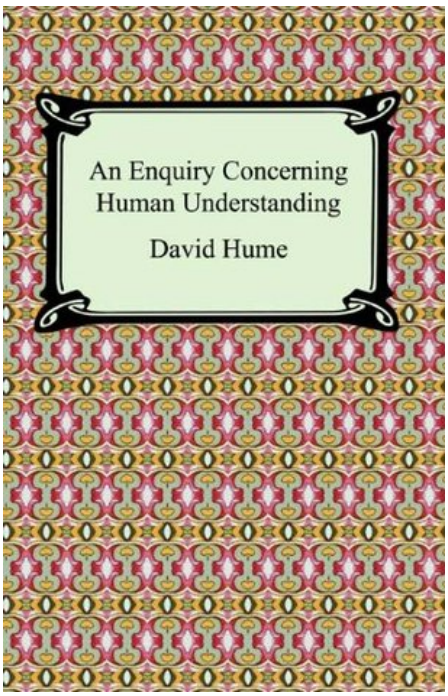

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume

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Philosopher David Hume was considered to one of the most important figures in the age of Scottish enlightenment. In "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" Hume discusses the weakness that humans have in their abilities to comprehend the world around them, what is referred to in the title as human understanding. This work, now commonly required reading in philosophy classes, exposed a broad audience to philosophy when it was first published. A great introduction to the philosophy of David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" and the ideas within it are as intriguing today as when they were first written.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding Details

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From Reader Review An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding for online ebook

Kheyreddine Hadri says

Oh, Hume! You eloquent, diligent, deep motherfucker! If you were alive, I'd marry your brainy ass.

Wait! Am I becoming like Salafists who admire their scholars? I am!
But fuck it! At least Hume teaches critical thinking and denies dogmatic approaches.

I love this book. And it requires a second, thorough read. For that the amount of wisdom being printed in this book is too much for my girly-side.

I have learned, not only the otherworldly style of writing (which is not what Hume was aiming to be taken), but also, how we know (epistemology), and what faculties we use to collect that knowledge (experience, and reason). The critics of some philosophical orientations (Pyrrhonism, etc), even if it wasn't put to ridicule, I laughed.

The last part of this book, wow! Such haughtiness!

Mohadese says

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Ashvajit says

I enjoyed the straightforward, no-nonsense style of this famous philosopher. Good though he is, however, his vision of life is that of pure empiricism - that all real knowledge is gained only through sense contact. In other words he appears to completely disregard a vital aspect of the human consciousness, i.e. the possibility of gaining knowledge through contemplating the mind itself, for instance through the practice of mindfulness and meditation. Furthermore he discounts the possibility of recognizing causality, asserting that we only know that 'b' follows 'a'; we cannot know, he asserts, that 'b' is caused by 'a', or that in the presence of 'a', 'b' always arises, and in 'a's absence it does not. He thus demolishes the whole basis of modern science, together with the most basic formulation of the understanding of what it is to be a wise human being able to affirm the knowledge that flows from a healthy mind untramelled by scepticism.

Jasmine says

"If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it*

contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: (*) For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." (p.120)

(*) Burning had long been a common fate of atheistic books. Perhaps Hume is suggesting here that the wrong books have been destroyed... (from the notes by Peter Millican)

Manny says

I had seen so many references to Hume's *Enquiry* that I almost thought I had read it; but, when I actually got around to opening the book, I found as usual that things were not quite as I had imagined. I was not surprised by his relentless scepticism, or by his insistence on basing all reasoning on empirical evidence. These qualities, after all, have become proverbial. I was, however, surprised to find that I hadn't correctly grasped the essence of his argument concerning the nature of knowledge. In case you are as poorly informed as I was, let me summarise it here.

Hume's position is wonderfully simple. He asks what grounds we have for supposing that multiple repetitions of an experiment justify us in inferring a necessary law. If we note, on many occasions, that hot objects burn our hands when we touch them, what logical reason do we have for assuming that we should not touch the next candle flame we happen to see?

The answer is that we have no logical grounds at all for making such an inference. Of course, as a matter of observed fact, we do assume, after a small number of trials, that touching hot objects will hurt us. Hume says this is nothing to do with logic; we are simply designed in such a way that we cannot help being influenced by our experience to adopt such rules. As he points out, many other living creatures do the same. It is impossible to believe that a dog or a horse is performing any kind of logical deduction when they learn to avoid touching naked flames. They simply acquire the habit of behaving in this way. The most economical explanation of what we see is that human beings are doing the same thing.

A mountain of discussion has accumulated since Hume published his book, and it would be presumptuous of me to give my opinions when so many extremely clever people have already done so. I am, however, struck by something I have noticed in the course of my professional career. I have worked in Artificial Intelligence and related subjects since the early 80s, and during that period the field has suffered a profound change. In 1980, most AI research was related to logic. People assumed that the notion of intelligence was in some essential way based on the notion of deduction. Making machines intelligent was a question of making them capable of performing the right kinds of logical inferences. This tempting approach was, unfortunately, a resounding failure.

Somewhere towards the end of the last century, a different way of looking at things started to become fashionable, and quickly gained ground. Instead of thinking about logic, people began more and more to think about probability. They collected data and extracted various kinds of statistical regularities. The new AI systems made no attempt to think logically; their decisions were based on associations acquired from their experience. At first, the AI community was scornful, but it was soon found that "data-driven" systems worked quite well. They made stupid mistakes sometimes; but so did the logic-based systems, and the mechanical logicians tended to make more stupid mistakes. They could reason, but they had no common sense. Today, data-driven systems have taken over the field, and the approach has been shown to work well for many problems which had once been considered impossible challenges. Particularly striking successes have been notched up in machine translation, speech recognition, computer vision, and allied fields.

If David Hume came back today, I have no idea whether he'd be offered a chair at a philosophy department. But I'm fairly sure that Google would be interested in hiring him.

Andrew says

A few years ago I had, for lack of a better term, an existential crisis. I was completely unsatisfied with the explanations for existence/purpose that I had been given by parents/teachers/friends. It terrified me that no one had ever written about this concerns (obviously people had, I was just never introduced to them). I felt like an idiot for allowing my mind to dwell on concepts such as the basis of human understanding.

It's nice, it's calming to know that extremely intelligent people, and many of them, have been concerned with the basis of human knowledge - and a few of them were as skeptical as I was.

Hume is a beautiful person. He allows us to move past complete skepticism without the need to blindly ignore the fact that complete skepticism is a genuine concern. And he did this hundreds of years ago, under the pressures of being called an 'atheist' and other bad things that could ruin his reputation and his life. I was afraid to explore these concepts in the 21st century for fear of being called weird and depressing.

Abailart says

Returning to an old friend! The first text I was given to study as a philosophy undergraduate, and what pleasure to revisit.

I'm not sure that Hume changed my thinking as a young man so much as brought the delight of recognition. The sweeping away of superstition, fantasy systems, spiritual mumbo jumbo and so on has never for me disabled a propensity towards reflection or deep attachment to a cleaner, less encumbered mystery. Kant, too, found his religious faith strengthened by such clarity.

I was taught philosophy very much in the empiricist and positivist traditions, and whatever crude antagonisms to these have arisen among defenders of this or that faith, have found no difficulty whatsoever in reconciling particular modes of 'philosophical' thinking with poetic, aesthetic and, yes, spiritual modes. Indeed, reading Hume is its own reward for the pleasure of the text!

There is nothing but clarity and wisdom in Hume. One has to be one's own conclusion and wisdom in considering the place of closed systems (such as language, or in this case the various Hume-given patterns) and any approach to ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, 'reality', spirit etc. (the 'noumenal') but you'd be indeed in a deep dogmatic slumber if you didn't appreciate the concision of Hume as probably the greatest help of all in beginning philosophy today.

Chris says

Hume eviscerates the belief that we can understand anything about the world on a rational and certain basis. At his most optimistic, Hume argues that all knowledge beyond direct observation is probable rather than certain. This was an important chastenment of Enlightenment rationalism, and is generally accepted today.

But Hume's argument seems to go much farther, and the more optimistic later sections are the result of his either not recognizing the strength of his earlier arguments or deliberatly obscuring it. In the critical section, "Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding," Hume demonstrates there is no rational reason to expect future events to follow the same pattern as those in the past. To have confidence in induction, and thus science and most philosophy, is therefore a matter of faith rather than reason. There is no rational way to understand the world.

In subsequent sections, Hume presents an argument for why we believe in causation and induction. It is because, he says, observing one event invariably follow another creates in our minds the expectation that it will always be so. But, as he demonstrated earlier, there is no rational basis for this belief. Oddly, in the final sections Hume proceeds as if this belief is justified, and offers critiques of miraculous and natural religion.

Rowland Pasaribu says

Bertrand Russell famously summarized Hume's contribution to philosophy, saying that he "developed to its logical conclusion the empiricist philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, and by making it self-consistent made it incredible." Hume is remarkable in that he does not shy away from conclusions that might seem unlikely or unreasonable. Ultimately, he concludes that we have no good reason to believe almost everything we believe about the world, but that this is not such a bad thing. Nature helps us to get by where reason lets us down.

Hume is unquestionably an empiricist philosopher, and he strives to bring the rigor of scientific methodology to bear on philosophical reasoning. His distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact is absolutely crucial in this respect. Anything we can say about the world is a matter of fact, and thus can be justified only through experience and can be denied without contradiction. Relations of ideas can teach us about mathematical truths, but cannot, as some rationalist philosophers would have, teach us about the existence of our selves, an external world, or God.

If we are left with only matters of fact to get us by in the world, however, we find ourselves greatly limited. How can past experience teach me anything about the future? Even to infer without circularity that future experience will resemble past experience requires some principle that cannot be grounded in past experience. Without that principle, our ability to reason according to cause and effect, and thus the greater part of our ability to reason with matters of fact, is sharply curtailed.

We should be careful to note the tone Hume's skepticism takes here, however. Rather than conclude that we cannot know anything about future events or the external world, he concludes that we are not rationally justifiedin believing the things we do. Hume does not deny that we make certain inferences based on causal reasoning, and indeed insists that we would be unable to live if we didn't do so. His point is simply that we are mistaken if we think that these inferences are in any way justified by reason. That is, there are no grounds for certainty or proof of these inferences.

Hume is a naturalist because he suggests that nature, and not reason, leads us to believe the things we do. Habit has taught us that we are safe in making certain inferences and believing certain things, and so we don't normally worry about them too much. We cannot prove that there is a world external to our senses, but it seems to be a relatively safe assumption by which to live. Rather than try to justify our beliefs or identify the truth, Hume seeks simply to explain why we believe what we believe.

The Enquiry is decidedly a book about epistemology and not about metaphysics. That is, Hume is concerned about what and how we know, and not at all about what is actually the case. For instance, he does not deal with the question of whether there actually are necessary connections between events, he simply asserts that

we cannot perceive them. Or perhaps more accurately, Hume argues that, because we cannot perceive necessary connections between events, the question of whether or not they actually exist is irrelevant and meaningless.

Hume is an ardent opponent of rationalist metaphysics, which seeks to answer questions such as whether or not God exists, what the nature or matter and soul is, or whether the soul is immortal. The mind, according to Hume, is not a truth-tracking device, and we misuse it if we think it can bring us to metaphysical conclusions. A Humean science of the mind can describe how the mind works and why it reaches the conclusions it does, but it cannot take us beyond the confines of our own, natural, reason.

Hume's stated method is scientific, of careful observation and inference from particular instances to general principles. The drive of scientific inquiry is to dig deeper and deeper so as to uncover a very few, very simple principles that govern all the complexities that we observe. Newton's genius gives us three very simple laws that can explain and predict all physical phenomena. Hume wishes to perform a similar feat for human understanding (the word "understanding" is used by Hume to describe most broadly the several faculties of human reason). The hope is that Hume will derive a similarly small and simple number of principles that can explain and predict the processes of human thought. His method will be to proceed from simple observation of how the mind works and how we use it in everyday life, and to infer from his observations increasingly general principles that govern our understanding until he reaches a bedrock of simplicity and clarity.

In this respect, Hume follows very much in the empiricist vein of philosophy and owes a large debt to “John Locke”. Locke moved against rationalist philosophy, best exemplified by “Descartes”, which relies heavily upon rational intuition. The empiricist tradition asserts that experience, and not reason, should serve as the basis of philosophical reasoning.

The motivation for Hume's project is made apparent in his complaint that the "accurate and abstract" metaphysics that he is pursuing is frequently looked down upon and disdained. The difficulty and counter-intuitive nature of these inquiries often lead to errors that may seem absurd and prejudicial to future generations. Even today, there is a great deal of debate as to whether there has been any real "progress" in philosophy: we may have refined our discussions and dismissed some bad ideas, but in essence we are still mulling over the same problems that concerned Plato and Aristotle. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that we are no nearer a satisfactory and final answer than the ancient Greeks. Hume hopes that scientific observation can uncover the principles that underlie our reasoning so that we can be more immediately aware of faulty logic and more easily guided along the correct path.

Ever since the scientific revolution of Newton, Galileo, and others, science has been held up as a paradigm of fruitful reasoning. In science, there is a carefully defined methodology that precisely details how we can test a theory and determine whether it is right or wrong. Though it is often difficult to determine the right answer, the scientific method usually prevents us from arriving at answers that are far from the mark. Philosophy lacks any such determinate method, and philosophers are continually taking up conflicting views. For instance, Hume's emphasis on observation goes directly against Descartes' rationalism, which disparages observation in favor of pure reason. Hume hopes that his empiricism will open the way for a carefully defined method that will not allow for such disparity amongst philosophers.

Hume also suggests that his work must be epistemically (epistemic: of, relating to, or involving knowledge; cognitive) prior to the new science that he so lauds. The scientific method is a product of careful reasoning, and is thus subject to the laws of human understanding. While science seems to be in far better shape than philosophy, it too can benefit from his work. In this way, Hume differs from his predecessor, Locke. Locke sees himself as laboring on behalf of the new science, clearing away some of the linguistic rubble that might lead to confusion. While Locke humbly sees himself as simply clearing a path for science, Hume believes that his own work must lay the groundwork upon which science can rest. If he can uncover the precise laws

that govern our reasoning and inferences, this should help us draw the right conclusions in our scientific investigations.

Hume brings to bear three important distinctions. The first, and most important, is the distinction between ideas and impressions. This distinction is original to Hume and solves a number of difficulties encountered by Locke. A proper discussion of Hume's footnote would take us too far afield, but we should remark that Hume's criticism of Locke is exact and powerful. The distinction between impressions and ideas might seem quite obvious and of no great importance, but Hume is quite clever to identify the full importance of this distinction. An empirical philosophy asserts that all knowledge comes from experience. For Hume, this would suggest that all knowledge comes from impressions, and so ideas are set up as secondary to impressions.

The second distinction, between complex and simple impressions or ideas, helps draw out further the power of the first distinction. A simple impression might be seeing the color red, while a complex impression might be seeing the totality of what I see right now. A simple idea might be the memory of being angry while a complex idea might be the idea of a unicorn (composed of the idea of a horse and the idea of a horn). Complex ideas and impressions are compounded out of the simple ones.

With these first two distinctions, Hume is creating a hierarchy of mental phenomena. Since the complex is compounded out of the simple and ideas are derived from impressions, everything in our mind is based ultimately upon simple impressions. A complex idea is compounded out of several simple ideas, which are in turn derived from several corresponding simple impressions. Hume thus suggests that a term can only be meaningful if it can be connected with an idea that we can associate with some simple impressions. Hume, we should note, is silently implying that every term must be connected with some idea. In the eighteenth century the philosophy of language had not yet flourished, and it was not clear how difficult it might be to determine precisely how words, ideas, and reality link up. Hume's suggestion that all terms can be analyzed into simple impressions anticipates Russell, who argues that we can analyze all terms into simple demonstratives like "this" or "that." Hume's suggestion comprehends a picture of language according to which the words we use are a complex and opaque expression of a simpler underlying language which proper analysis can bring out.

The third distinction is the three laws of association. If the previous two distinctions give us a geography of the mind, describing its different faculties, this distinction gives us a dynamics of the mind, explaining its movement. According to Hume, any given thought is somehow related to adjacent thoughts just as any given movement in the physical world is somehow related to adjacent moving bodies. His three laws of association, then, might be seen as equivalent to Newton's three laws of motion. With them, Hume hopes to have described fully the dynamics of the mind.

There are a number of objections we might want to raise to Hume's distinctions and the way they are introduced, but we will touch on only a few briefly. First, we might ask how strictly we can distinguish between impressions. Hume argues that ideas can be vague, but that impressions are exact and that the boundaries between them are clearly defined. Is the boundary between the impression of a 57" stick and a 58" stick that clearly defined? There is some level of vagueness in our impressions that Hume does not acknowledge. We could also point out that while we are experienced in distinguishing colors, we are not so good with some other sensations. For instance, we often have trouble distinguishing between tastes.

Second, we might object to Hume's implicit philosophy of language. It seems closely linked to the idea that simple impressions are clearly defined and infallible. It is far from clear, however, why it should be desirable or possible to reduce all our language to simple impressions. What, we might ask, is the simple impression from which is derived the word "sake," for example?

Third, we might ask Hume to be clearer in his distinctions. For instance, are dream images impressions or

ideas? Most likely they are ideas, since they consist of a mixture of imagination and memory. However, dreams are (arguably) phenomenally indistinguishable from waking experience: we cannot prove that we are dreaming from within a dream. Thus, all our impressions from within a dream are as real to us as we dream them as waking impressions are to us when we experience them.

Maica says

Addition since my first review: The Problem of Induction is always something to keep in mind, for we humans are used to finding a solid ground to maintain a sense of certainty on the events of the outside world. What reasons are we to justify that what we repeatedly experienced in the past will still continue to happen until the present or future? Where do we get that certainty? Is it reliable or is only a human need to make sense of a world that in many ways is beyond our control? And why should we make a general law out of a single or isolated event?

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This was my first whole reading of an actual work by David Hume and it is such an experience to have read something straight from the actual philosopher instead of bits and pieces of biography or explanation of his ideas. This book was a revised form of his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which was not received with eagerness by the public upon its first publication.

First, my impression of Hume's style was that he was frank to the point of being humorous at times with how he pokes at the way people think, behave and react within themselves and their environment. His choice of words and the presentation of ideas were presented in a clear and logical style. Just like any thinker, he considered himself unrestrained in going against what he thought were unreasonable beliefs, superstitions, and reinforced dogmatism, and as such, allowed himself to go deep in continuous process of questioning in matters of human thought and reaction, events, and the material world.

> *It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Such is the foundation of moral reasoning, which forms the greater part of human knowledge, and is the source of all human action and behaviour.*

He employed a rigorous style of empirical thinking and the way he deduced what he advocated to be the way to having correct understanding of things is through reasoning by analogy. All throughout the book, the theme of cause and effect resulting to experience, recurred in all of his ideas, and it is through this means of analogy, by applying ones understanding of experience to something newly encountered, that he applied what he thought was the correctness of knowledge in human thought and the natural world.

In this book, (though I may consider giving it a second reading), I found two striking arguments that Hume made: concerning the existence of God, and that of the material world.

In the first pages, he acknowledged the existence of a Creator by whom everything in the universe is dependent upon. But in the middle of the book, he went on to apply his method of analogy and causation to God. According to him, every effect must have a cause that brought it to existence. For example, the

footprint on the sand near the sea must have been caused by a person who walked on the sand. What made us to arrive at such a conclusion was we had been taught by prior experience that such a cause (a person walking) led to an effect (footprint on the sand), and therefore, we gain an understanding of the effect simply of our previous experience of actually perceiving the cause. This was his way of rigorously applying his empirical thinking which is limited to what is 'observed and experienced' and then to discard everything that does not conform to this method. But then, he went on to say that the existence of God cannot be justified because even though we see the creation (which is the effect), we had no direct actual experience of its Cause (God), so how can we prove the logic of His existence?

This is where the limitation of logic and rigid empiricism is shown, though Hume will not accept it. Reason will always have its limitation, as much as Faith as how Hume subjected it with criticism will have its limitation as well. Now that in this book, Hume established how human understanding can be subjected to many factors that will deem it susceptible to many kinds of errors, so too, does his method of reasoning by experience and analogy can be subjected to similar flaws. Despite the comparison of what we know of objects and experiences applied to newly encountered objects and experiences, that does not negate the fact that each are distinct from the other with their own unique qualities. In the case of the Creator - he applies analogy, but he disregards that the Creator is distinct and His Attributes are different from His creation, and therefore for him to make an analogy in the context of the creation is unreasonable. Thus, Hume becomes a victim of logic by the fact that he failed to see the difference between what and whom he is trying to compare, because he reduced the notion of 'qualities' to abstract ideas existing only in the human mind.

Much criticism can be attributed to religious interpretations as practiced by so-called religious people, but the depth of faith and wisdom coming from a belief on a Creator will always make a logical sense to humanity. What Hume dealt with is narrowly confined to issues of language, but the expression of language cannot be rid of its subjectivity and sophistry on the part of human beings with the way they express and understand it, in contrast to what reality and the actual world really is.

Human understanding can indeed be flawed, but this flaw allows room for humanity to adapt to an ever-changing world. It has to grapple with continuous change, which may lead to a downward spiral of conflict and chaos or growth, since the way humans think (as influenced both by their innate nature and outside forces) lead them to act on many different ways towards their fellow beings and with the world around them. On the other hand, if empirical thinking, as what Hume employed in this book is applied in an absolutist sense and make it manifest not only in human thought but in belief, and then subject everything to the limited role of language and reasoning by analogy, including the understanding of the Creator Himself, humanity will be devoid of values and depth of wisdom. Language, thought, and experience are thus, among many, are only parts of a complex reality that humans possess, and irrespective of the perception and resulting expression of these human faculties, there is an external world that *exist independent* of human beings. Hume, in this book failed to make a distinction between the perceiver and the perceived. And this alludes to the second point.

The second subject was Hume's argument on the perception of the material world. In this book, he did not go at great lengths in discussing it, although his ideas are particularly insightful in the philosophical sense:

> *It is universally allowed by modern enquirers, that all the sensible qualities of objects, such as hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, etc are merely secondary, and exist not in the objects themselves, but are perceptions of the mind, without any external archetype or model, which they represent. If this be allowed, with regard to secondary qualities, it must also follow with regard to the supposed primary qualities of extension and solidity; nor can the latter be any more entitled to that denomination than the former. The idea of extension is entirely acquired from the senses of sight and feeling; and if all the qualities, perceived by the senses, be in the mind, not in the object, the same conclusion must reach the idea of extension which is wholly*

> *dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. Nothing can save us from this conclusion, but the asserting, that the ideas of those primary qualities are attained by Abstraction, an opinion, which, if we examine it accurately, we shall find to be unintelligible, and even absurd. An extension, that is neither tangible nor visible, cannot possibly be conceived: and a tangible or visible extension, which is neither hard nor soft, black nor white, is equally beyond the reach of human conception.*
>
> *Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable something, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worthwhile to contend against it.*

Hume was pointing that the material world cannot possibly exist without human perception consisting of a collection of qualities which were acquired through experience. These qualities are described to objects perceived in the material world, but at the same time, they are abstract in nature and only exist in the mind. Hume contends that the perceived world is only a collection of qualities that humans attribute to what they perceive, and the independence of the external world as existing apart from the perceiver seems to be only an illusion. This reminds me of another passage from a book entitled *Consciousness* by a Neuroscientist, J. Allan Hobson,

> *If a tree falls in the middle of a forest, does it make a sound? - George Berkeley*

The immediate answer will be ‘yes’, but, ‘what sound does it make if there is nobody to hear it?’ So in this case, we have a world which is centered and continuously subjected to human perception - that in Hume’s book, is not acknowledged to be existing as independent of human, nevertheless flawed perception and understanding.

David Hume, in this book, allowed me to re-evaluate and re-confirm on a much investigative level, the ways and the limitations of human understanding. He was a frank and brutally to-the-point writer, certainly unconventional, not afraid to present alternative modes of thinking and looking at things, and he has to be commended on his empirical method which is useful in the Science disciplines.

Unfortunately, regardless of how it is presented as an objective/systematic manner, Empiricism has its own limitations like human understanding, and cannot apply in an absolutist sense on matters existing beyond the capability and scope of reason and observable experience.

Andrew says

What I like about Hume is the skepticism and empiricism. What I don't like about Hume is the doubting of causality. Too bad this is pretty much thought of as the Hume thing.

Hume was a very, very necessary step in the evolution of philosophy. He overcame the irrational rationalism of Descartes and Berkeley, and paved the way for German idealism, which of course led to Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche, etc. And really, I find Hume's brand of Enlightenment thought so much more palatable than Kant's or Hegel's.

And, other than the causality thing, it's really a very well-reasoned epistemology by my book-- most human knowledge among most humans is ultimately derived from habit and impulse rather than rational decision-making and inquiry. i can only imagine how refreshing this must have been when it was first published.

Ariel says

So I had to read this for my class "A Prehistory of Affect: Reading the Passions." It was a pretty panicked situation: I got randomly chosen to do a 30 minute presentation on this text... in the first week of my Masters. I had one week to read the Enquiry and prepare my presentation. It was incredibly stressful. I've never read philosophy, I'm very unfamiliar with the 18th century, and I had been out of school for year and a half. Talk about being kicked back into gear.

I don't know how to "rate" this text. It's pretty readable which was nice and a lot of the ideas are interesting and make you think.. but then a lot of the ideas are cyclical and redundant or just kind of silly. Im giving it three stars because that's what it conjures up in my mind, but I'm not super sure what I'm judging that off of, honestly. It's a text that is more about the discussion it creates rather than a "i liked it/i didn't like it" binary.

PS: The presentation went super well! I got an A! YAY!

Erick says

I didn't particularly enjoy this book. Hume is both pretentious and self-indulgent. While he makes a good case for experience being a necessary prerequisite for knowing effect from cause, he also contradicts himself variously and accords to experience more authority than he accredits it in certain other parts of this book. That a certain effect has happened numerous times before is no guarantee that it will happen again -true enough! Hume says that it is simply "custom" to credit any particular effect with empirical authority. But wait until he gets to the chapter on miracles; here he gives experience over arching authority to know exactly what nature and it's laws will give rise to. Hume argues that cause and effect are known only through experience and one experience will apply to other cause and effect occurrences when they are apparently similar. He admits that much of this cause/effect process occurs because of unintelligible "secret powers" that are inscrutable to reason. Whilst admitting that experience is more or less mere custom and admitting the inscrutability of secret processes, Hume undoes his argument and gauges the miraculous using the means he just put in doubtful standing! What an egregious error of logic; what a way to dig your own philosophical grave; to cast doubt on a particular method of reasoning and then endue it with absolute authority. Hume says no one has ever seen anyone rise from the dead anywhere, so presumes Hume who says that no occurrence is illogical that doesn't involve a contradiction. Hume presumes to use his customary experience to measure all events everywhere, regardless of whether he was present or not. He uses the example of an Indian disbelieving that water could become hard because of cold in his argument against miracles, when in fact it works against Hume. The example was to illustrate ignorance of physical laws that can seem miraculous when one has not experienced them. Same argument works against Hume. Hume thinks that a ship being suspended in air is a miracle; an example that is altogether ironic, given that in the 21st century we see jet airliners suspended in the air regularly. This would be a miracle to Hume, but all it really shows is Hume's 18th century ignorance of the principles of propulsion, aerodynamics and lift. Hume, as he admitted, has no means of knowing all natural laws and when and where they can be superseded because of other "secret powers" or laws coming into play. His chapter on miracles is a bit of a comical irony. Hume makes much of probability. A one thousand sided dye with nine hundred and ninety nine uniform sides with only one differentiated side figures in his argument regarding probability. It's an interesting analogy and example.

Miracles by their very nature are not regular occurrences, just as the probability of one particular side appearing in a one thousand sided dye in a roll is not a regular occurrence. A miracle only has to happen once in experience to be an experimental fact. If it occurs even once, all arguments to the contrary are simply willful ignorance and, in Hume's case, pretentious sophistry.
The only thing that saves this book from a 2 star review is his chapter "Of The Idea Of Necessary Connexion" which I must admit was quite intriguing. If I ever re-read Hume, it will probably be only this chapter and little else. Hume, subsequently, became the darling of atheists and his arguments are often recycled by them ad nauseam still. This, once again, shows the ignorance of atheists and their tendency to cherry pick sources. Hume wasn't an atheist, if anything he was a deist; although, he seems to make some claims to Christian belief, which can only be seen as ridiculous given his above positions.

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peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

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Ali Reda says

Hume discusses the distinction between impressions and ideas. By "impressions", he means sensations, while by "ideas", he means memories and imaginings. According to Hume, the difference between the two is that ideas are less vivacious than impressions. For example, the idea of the taste of an orange is far inferior to the impression (or sensation) of actually eating one. Writing within the tradition of empiricism, he argues that impressions are the source of all ideas. Hume's empiricism consisted in the idea that it is our knowledge, and not our ability to conceive, that is restricted to what can be experienced. He also explains that the difference between belief and fiction is that the former produces a certain feeling of confidence which the latter doesn't.

When we reason a priori, and consider merely any object or cause, as it appears to the mind, independent of all observation, it never could suggest to us the notion of any distinct object, such as its effect; much less, show us the inseparable and inviolable connexion between them. A man must be very sagacious who could discover by reasoning that crystal is the effect of heat, and ice of cold, without being previously acquainted with the operation of these qualities.

If we reason a priori, anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in their orbits. It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another.

However, Hume admits that there is one objection to his account: the problem of "The Missing Shade of Blue". In this thought-experiment, he asks us to imagine a man who has experienced every shade of blue except for one. He predicts that this man will be able to divide the color of this particular shade of blue, despite the fact that he has never experienced it. This seems to pose a serious problem for the empirical account, though Hume brushes it aside as an exceptional case by stating that one may experience a novel idea that itself is derived from combinations of previous impressions.

Hume accepts that ideas may be either the product of mere sensation, or of the imagination working in conjunction with sensation. According to Hume, the creative faculty makes use of (at least) four mental operations which produce imaginings out of sense-impressions. These operations are compounding (or the addition of one idea onto another, such as a horn on a horse to create a unicorn); transposing (or the substitution of one part of a thing with the part from another, such as with the body of a man upon a horse to make a centaur); augmenting (as with the case of a giant, whose size has been augmented); and diminishing (as with Lilliputians, whose size has been diminished)

Hume discusses how the objects of inquiry are either "relations of ideas" or "matters of fact", which is roughly the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. The former, he tells the reader, are proved by demonstration, while the latter are given through experience. But here arises a question, why do we suppose that multiple repetitions of an experiment justify us in a necessary law? He shows how a satisfying argument for the validity of experience can be based neither on demonstration (since "it implies no contradiction that the course of nature may change") nor experience (since that would be a circular argument). So there is no certainty of experience to ensure knowledge through cause and effect.

When it is asked, What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning matter of fact? the proper answer seems to be, that they are founded on the relation of cause and effect. When again it is asked, What is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation? it may be replied in one word, experience. But if we still carry on our sifting humor, and ask, What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience? this implies a new question, which may be of more difficult solution and explication.

All reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely, demonstrative reasoning or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence. That there are no demonstrative arguments in the case seems evident; since it implies no contradiction that the course of nature

may change, and that an object, seemingly like those which we have experienced, may be attended with different or contrary effects. May I not clearly and distinctly conceive that a body, falling from the clouds, and which, in all other respects, resembles snow, has yet the taste of salt or feeling of fire? Is there any more intelligible proposition than to affirm, that all the trees will Sourish in December and January, and decay in May and June? Now whatever is intelligible, and can be distinctly conceived, implies no contradiction, and can never be proved false by any demonstrative argument or abstract reasoning a priori.

If we be, therefore, engaged by arguments to put trust in past experience, and make it the standard of our future judgement, these arguments must be probable only, or such as regard matter of fact and real existence, according to the division above mentioned. But that there is no argument of this kind, must appear, if our explication of that species of reasoning be admitted as solid and satisfactory. We have said that all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect, that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience, and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question.

For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities. If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance.

For Hume, we assume that experience tells us something about the world because of habit or custom due to our imagination, the observation of constant conjunction of certain impressions across many instances. This is also, presumably, the "principle" that organizes the connections between ideas. And this principle can be changed any time because there is no logical reason or empirical justification for it to be necessary.

The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse, as by the shock of two billiard balls, he could not pronounce that the one event was connected: but only that it was conjoined with the other. After he has observed several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them to be connected. What alteration has happened to give rise to this new idea of connexion? Nothing but that he now feels these events to be connected in his imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other. When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other's existence: A conclusion which is somewhat extraordinary, but which seems founded on sufficient evidence. Nor will its evidence be weakened by any general diffidence of the understanding, or sceptical suspicion concerning every conclusion which is new and extraordinary. No conclusions can be more agreeable to scepticism than such as make discoveries concerning the weakness and narrow limits of human reason and capacity.

It seems evident that, if all the scenes of nature were continually shifted in such a manner that no two events bore any resemblance to each other, but every object was entirely new, without any similitude to whatever had been seen before, we should never, in that case, have attained the least idea of necessity, or of a connexion among these objects. We might say, upon such a supposition, that one object or event has followed another; not that one was produced by the other. The relation of cause and effect must be utterly unknown to mankind. Inference and reasoning concerning the operations of nature would, from that moment, be at an end; and the memory and senses remain the only canals, by which the knowledge of any real existence could possibly have access to the mind. Our idea, therefore, of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other.

These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent inference from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexion.

Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses. We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our natural powers in the production of any effect. There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the chief part of speculation.

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

On Miracles, is the last chapter in the Enquiry, Hume argues that as the evidence for a miracle is always limited, as miracles are single events, occurring at particular times and places, the evidence for the miracle will always be outweighed by the evidence against — the evidence for the law of which the miracle is supposed to be a transgression. There are, however, two ways in which this argument might be neutralised. First, if the number of witnesses of the miracle be greater than the number of witnesses of the operation of the law, and secondly, if a witness be 100% reliable (for then no amount of contrary testimony will be enough to outweigh that person's account). And both cases can't happen.