

# David Hume and Contemporary Philosophy



# David Hume and Contemporary Philosophy

Edited by

Ilya Kasavin

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

David Hume and Contemporary Philosophy,  
Edited by Ilya Kasavin

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4131-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4131-3

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## PREFACE

The papers contained in this volume incorporate a part of theoretical and organizational work of the department of the social epistemology as well as other departments of the Institute of Philosophy of Russian Academy of Sciences. We would like to express deep gratitude to our colleagues A. Antonovsky, R. Apresjan, A. Gusejnov, A. Ignatenko, D. Ivanov, P. Kusliy, V. Lektorsky, N. Motroshilova, P. Safronov, O. Stoljarova, E. Vostrikova and the partners from other institutions—V. Mironov, A. Kostikova, V. Vasiljev (all—Lomonosov Moscow State University), A. Rutkevitch, A. Yastebtzeva (both—Higher School of Economics), A. Krouglov, M. Belousov (both—Russian State University for the Humanities), V. Bazhanov (Uljanovsk State University), who actively participated in the organization of the International Conference “David Hume Conference, in the process of papers selection. We will be really sorry if anybody has been forgotten. We are also highly indebted to Russian State Foundation for Humanities<sup>1</sup> (Moscow), Association of Russian Banks and Vneshprombank, Group of the companies “Inpark,” and Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation (Bonn), the Hume Society (Edinburgh) and its President Elizabeth Radcliffe for financial and/or moral support of the above Conference and correspondent research and editorial activity.

Ilya Kasavin

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<sup>1</sup> Project 11-03-00423a.

## INTRODUCTION

# HUME AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY: LEGACY AND PROSPECTS

ILYA KASAVIN AND EVGENY BLINOV

There is a matter of the dominant historical/philosophical consensus to assume that the period of classical philosophy of the New Times starts from F. Bacon and Descartes and ends with Hegel. We, on the contrary, consider ourselves as living now in the non-classical world. Main intellectual heroes of the classical epoch serve normally as unproblematic foundation for philosophical education, but then lose their significance as soon as anybody is intended to create an original argument for contemporary debates. There is also a standard case with David Hume. His thorough analysis of impressions and ideas, skeptical attitude towards material and spiritual substances, criticism of causality and induction are often considered an inevitable introduction to classical philosophy. His name can be also used to dub some contemporary dilemmas (*Hume's Fork*, *Hume's Guillotine*) though such denotations remain perhaps much more symbolical than essential. In short, Hume's relevance for analytical philosophy or phenomenology after Frege and Husserl is often viewed as rather problematic, and his ideas belong seemingly to the glorious past of European philosophy.

But the above approach is conceptually erroneous as well as factually false. It is based, firstly, upon evident neglecting of the nature of philosophy which, in contrast to the sciences, includes its past developments into the very essence of the current body of thought. Secondly, it would be an intended underestimation to view Hume as obsolete taking into account his high impact on contemporary philosophy (thousands of scholars around the world every year confirm this thesis with their studies)

David Hume plays a unique role in the history of Anglo-American thought including civil history, religious studies, political theory, political economy, epistemology and moral philosophy. He is like Immanuel Kant

of Anglophone world. Two major approaches in the XX century systematic philosophy—naturalism and relativism—have been both basically inspired by Hume and build the strongest controversy of nowadays. According to many contemporary scholars, Hume bridges a gap between classical and non-classical philosophy. The dethroning of the knowing agent and the spiritual substance from their privileged place opens way to “the death of God” (Friedrich Nietzsche) or “the death of the Author” (Roland Barthes). His criticism of causality corresponds to the indeterminism of quantum mechanics (Bertrand Russell). Karl Popper’s falsificationism would be hardly possible without Hume’s account of induction. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s considerations on rule following reveals similarities with Hume’s idea of custom, or habit (Saul Kripke) as well as with Pier Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus.” David Bloor likes “to think of Hume as Edinburgh’s great sociologist of knowledge”—an important source of social epistemology (while Hume’s debate with Thomas Reid anticipates Bloor’s own controversy with Colin McGinn).

These and many other aspects of Hume’s ideas and their relevance for contemporary philosophy have been intensively discussed during numerous conferences devoted to his 300 jubilee 2011. This volume originates from International Conference “David Hume and Modern Philosophy” (Moscow, November 15-17, 2011) where over 250 participants from 14 countries analyzed Hume’s epistemology, philosophy of mind, political and moral theory and his place in the history of philosophy.

The present collection is not intended to be merely a contribution to the history of philosophy, though it covers many problems discussed in contemporary Humean scholarship and contains articles written by some of the leading researchers in the field. Rather, its aim is to demonstrate the importance, or, to put it using one of Hume’s favorite terms, “vivacity” of his project to contemporary philosophy. Various entries in this book give clear and powerful insights that attest the sharp topicality of his philosophical work. Its subject matter is not limited to a narrow frame of some particular problems but ranges from the subtlest questions of the development of his thought and its impact on the contemporaries to the most recent and controversial topics in epistemology and the philosophy of science as well as in political theory and ethics.

However, in order to give our book the consistency required by the standards of academic research, we grouped the contributions into four sections. The articles in the first section, “Hume’s Skepticism: Pro & Contra,” are devoted to the diverse issues of the complex and discrepant topic of Hume’s attitude towards skepticism. They deal with both the historical aspect of the problem—such as, for instance, the relation of

Humean “mitigated skepticism” to the ancient Pyrrhonism and the New Times skepticism of Montaigne and Descartes—and with the methodological one, exploring the place and the meaning of skeptical questioning in Hume’s system.

Barry Stroud offers an accurate analysis of the correlation of the “skepticism” and “naturalism” that lies at the very heart of Humean project of the study of human nature. He claims that the very ambition to “introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects” inevitably leads Hume to a state of embarrassment, which is so bitterly exposed in the Appendix to *A Treatise of Human Nature*. And thus, Hume’s “skepticism” is not only the premise of his scientific method but rather an “outcome” of his attempt to give a naturalistic account of human nature. Stroud claims that the main cause of Hume’s “skeptical disaster” is the central role ascribed to imagination. Meanwhile, Hume manages to find a powerful counterweight to the skeptical reflections about the “fictions” produced by the imagination and appeals to the “superior force of nature” in order to “mitigate” the “paralyzing effect” of skepticism on human activities. According to Stroud, the whole project of Enquiry is intended to be an apology for this “mitigated” version of skepticism, which is considered by Hume to be the proper account of knowledge.

The articles in the second section, “The systematic issues in Hume’s epistemology,” broach a far wider range of questions, which expressively show the relevance of Humean theory of knowledge to the contemporary philosophy of science. A large number of topics in recent debates in epistemology such as the problem of “testimonial knowledge” can be traced back to Hume’s insightful inquiries.

At the same time, Hume’s famous treatment of causality is deeply rooted in the scientific context of its time. Rom Harré in his paper clearly shows this using the example of Hume’s divergences from the “physicists” of his time in the question of causal powers and causal necessity. He claims that Hume’s arguments against the necessity of “necessary” or “causal” connections between the objects were worked out in the polemics of the experimental science of the day and its rationalistic metaphysics. Hume not only rejected Robert Boyle’s corpuscular theory and John Locke’s doctrine of primary and secondary qualities but he also refrained from giving any “explicit commentary” on the ontological premises of Newton’s system. And although he pretended to be a “Newtonian,” Hume was well aware of the incompatibility of his epistemology with the metaphysical grounds of the science of his time.

Being revolutionary and far ahead of its epoch, many of methodological and epistemological problems raised by Hume remain valuable to the actual debates in the philosophy.

Ted Kinnaman emphasizes the central role of Hume's arguments in recent discussions of "sources of normativity." He analyses the relation of normativity to reflexivity in order to elucidate whether Humean casual account of belief provides not only an explanation but also a justification to this grounding cognitive mechanism. This kind of task was required by Kant in his claim for *quaestio juris* of the validity of this procedure and still could be regarded as a major problem concerning the status of normativity.

The articles grouped in the third section—"Hume and the History of Philosophy: Answers and Interpretations"—examine the various responses and reactions to Humean thought. Since Reid and Kant, many controversial hypotheses about the nature of Hume's "questioning" and, correspondingly, the pertinence of possible answers to it have been proposed. Tom Rockmore exposes a protracted discussion on the meaning of Kant's answer to Hume launched by his earlier commentators, such as Reinhold and Schultze and repeatedly revisited in the twentieth century, for instance, under the influence of Peter Strawson's important interpretation. The various aspects of this debate include not only the polemics around the principles of causation but the whole body of principles underlying Kantian transcendentalism. According to Rockmore, Hume and Kant are proponents of rival doctrines regarding the subject and the way it constructs the "causal conception of experience" and so his answer cannot be assimilated to a straightforward Humean approach. Heiner Klemme in his paper explores the so-called "Aristotelian counter-Enlightenment"—another widely debated topic. Alisdair MacIntyre in his highly influential work "After virtue" suggests that Hume's and Kant's critique prevents contemporary philosophers from treating moral judgments as "factual statements." For Klemme it is an occasion to revisit Humean naturalism as well as Kantian supra-naturalism in the light of some recent discussions.

John Bricke's paper contributes to the theme of Hume and modern philosophy by examining Hume's moral psychology in the light of the seminal work of Donald Davidson (1917-2003) on action, interpretation and truth. Bricke interprets Hume as a conativist non-cognitivist with respect to action and moral evaluation. For Hume, conative states (desires) rather than affective states (emotions such as pride or shame) are central to the characterization of action and evaluation. Accordingly, neither conative states nor their linguistic expression can be assessed in terms of truth and falsity. Bricke finds support for Hume's conativism in Davidson's work in

theory of action and theory of interpretation. But he also reaches the unexpected conclusion that Davidson's work on truth and interpretation shows that conative states and their linguistic expression must be understood as truth-evaluable.

Steve Fuller's paper focuses on the more general aspect of reception of Hume's in the different domains of epistemology. Fuller claims that the historical dynamics of epistemology could be presented as a branch of economical theory or "cognitive economics." For this reason he believes that it was Joseph Keynes who presented Hume as a "modern champion of demand-side economics" and thus reintroduced his treatment of induction into contemporary epistemology long before it was scrutinized by the scholars. He also refers to the interpretation of Hume's theory of personal identity proposed by one of the leading British idealists of the 19th century—T.H.Green in order to demonstrate its closer ties with political debates of its time. Furthermore, Fuller shows in which way Hume's version of associationist psychology differs from that of his contemporaries Priestley and Hartley claiming that it had serious impact on his atheistic convictions in contrast to latter's religious "enthusiasm."

The articles in the forth section—"Hume's moral and political philosophy" cover a variety of ethical and political issues explored in his work. The interest of scholars in his "moral" philosophy has considerably increased in recent decades and seems far from being exhausted. Joseph Pitt emphasizes the central place of Hume's moral philosophy in his whole project by offering a historical account of composition of the Treatise in order to understand his particular "strategy" in analyzing "moral subjects." Pitt suggests that a careful study of historical background of Hume's time could provide us with valuable hints for comprehension of his philosophy that has so often been reduced to his "skeptical" or "negative" theory of knowledge.

As most for most of his contemporaries, moral philosophy was for Hume the pretext for a meditation about the way of redesigning the society. Michael Szczekalla proposes a wide survey of Hume's political thought with a special focus on his account of liberalism. Angela Coventry and Alexander Sager expose Hume's paradoxical impact on contemporary political philosophy: being one of its central figures Hume is not properly associated with any long-established school. At the same time, they suggest that a careful study of his political work could offer many insights on contemporary world to an attentive reader.

Taking into account that this volume is to a certain extent indebted to the Moscow conference, it is therefore meaningful to explain the reasons why that first big event on Hume in Russia was especially significant and

why it was the particular character of Hume's reception in Russia that essentially determined the place of Russian philosophy in the space of the world philosophy.

There were only Hume's ethical and social/political views that have been met in the XVIII and first part of the XIX centuries Russia with certain interest, and in this aspect Russian educated audience followed the way of the British one, who initially ignored "*Treatise*."

Only to the end of the XIX century the interest shifted to the theory of knowledge and mind, recorded even earlier in an original interpretation of Mikhail Bakunin. "If Kant believed his contemporary Hume, who argued against him though completely consistent with truth, that allegedly a priori forms of consciousness are nothing but the product of our countless, unconscious or forgotten impressions and experiences <...> then he would not contrasted the ideal world with the real world of things, would not put an artificial gap between them and, of course, would have guessed, that there is no and cannot be a difference between the phenomenon and the thing in itself."<sup>1</sup>

Many significant Russian scholars of the turn of XIX and XX centuries explore Hume's work; the translations of his main works and first studies of his philosophy belong to that period. It coincides chronologically with the powerful influence of the ideas of positivism. Clearly, Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin in "Materialism and Empiriocriticism" (1908) was in line with the interest, while setting it to a vector, which almost banned Hume's ideas for all orthodox Marxists. Is it any wonder that a number of thorough Russian studies like Gustav Špet's "The problem of causality in Hume and Kant" (Kiev, 1907) remained in fact unknown to Russian reader? As a consequence, there has been a constant control of all Marxist attempts to assimilate the leading Anglo-American epistemological tendencies of the XX century, more or less based upon Hume's ideas and insights.

It is a great paradox of intellectual history that Hume's skeptical philosophy which inspired the French Enlightenment, anticlerical and revolutionary movements was presented by Russian revolutionary leader, Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin as a "priestly ideology of counter-revolution." Strong political engagement and philosophical ignorance of dogmatic Marxists determined misinterpretation and oblivion of Hume's heritage in Russia.

And still Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin was astute enough to understand: the main problem of Hume, which did not almost found response from his

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<sup>1</sup> M.A. Bakhunin, *Philosophy. Sociology. Policy* (Moscow: Pravda, 1989), p. 128 (in Russian).

contemporaries, being concerned as usual, with moral and economic issues, is a question about the nature of knowledge. It serves as a prerequisite for the consideration of other, more concrete tasks, and it is significant that its solution is in no way single-valued. It clearly shows that ambivalence is inherent in philosophical thinking, and thus Hume problematized philosophical themes, forcing the reader not just to study the solutions of major questions, but to follow the path of their own analytical reflection.

Philosophy today is to a great extent divided into the closed circles of rather narrow specialists practicing esoteric language games and praising their dogmatic idols. But the new era of the changing world requires new philosophical thinking. The time of Hume's antiauthoritarian criticism has come again.



## **PART I**

# **HUME'S SKEPTICISM: PRO AND CONTRA**

CHAPTER ONE

NATURALISM AND SKEPTICISM  
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HUME<sup>1</sup>

BARRY STROUD

Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* was "An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into MORAL SUBJECTS."<sup>2</sup> The goal was a comprehensive "science of man" or "of human nature" that would reveal "the extent and force of human understanding, and . . . explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations we perform in our reasonings."<sup>3</sup> A full development of that "science" would encompass human understanding not only in its "theoretical" employment, but also in morals, politics, religion, and social life, as well as human desires, passions, and emotions.

Hume wanted to "introduce" "the experimental method of reasoning" into the study of human nature because he thought that method had not always been followed in the past. He found that: "the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity, labor'd under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a shortened version of my "Naturalism and Scepticism in the Philosophy of Hume" in P. Russell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of David Hume* (Oxford University Press (forthcoming)). It appears here with permission.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge), (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1958), subtitle.

<sup>3</sup> *Treatise*, p. xix.

<sup>4</sup> *The Letters of David Hume*, Volume I (ed. J. Y. T. Grieg) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969), p. 16.

In comparing “moral philosophy” unfavorably with “natural philosophy” in this respect Hume apparently attributed much of the impressive success of the new science of physical nature to its “experimental,” observational character. He accordingly envisaged a new “science of human nature” to be pursued by a similarly “experimental” method of investigation.

For to me [he says] it seems evident, that the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations.<sup>5</sup>

But whatever general principles we might establish by such a study, and however firmly they might appear to be supported by the “experiments”: “we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate, original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical.”<sup>6</sup>

This means that when we have carried the investigation as far as we can we must be willing to “sit down contented” and admit that “we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles, beside our experience of their reality.”<sup>7</sup> A “free confession” of our ignorance in this respect is the surest guarantee against “that error, into which so many have fallen, of imposing their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles.”<sup>8</sup>

Hume is clear and emphatic about the purely observational, “experimental” character of his project, and about its corresponding limitations. But it is limited only by our limited human capacities and our own ingenuity. Hume notes one significant difference between the study of human nature and the procedures of experimentation in natural philosophy. It is possible to intervene directly in the processes of inanimate nature and observe the result, but intervening “experimentally” in human social life would so disturb the operation of natural principles that no just conclusions could be drawn. “We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men’s behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Treatise*, p. xxi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Treatise*, p. xxii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Treatise*, p. xxiii.

This conception of the proper study of human nature treats human beings and every aspect of their lives as natural phenomena to be studied like other parts of nature. They are to be understood solely in terms of what can be found out about them through the use of those capacities human beings are naturally endowed with for finding out anything. This idea is familiar to us today in our conception of the social or “human” sciences. It is perhaps difficult to realize that those ways of understanding human life have not always been with us. The very idea of such a study started only in Hume’s day, and gained momentum at least in part from the “science of human nature” as he understood it.

That comprehensive project could be called a form of “naturalism” as that term came to be used of certain so-called “naturalist” philosophers of the twentieth century. Although Hume never used that word in that way, his project involves taking nothing for granted that cannot be found in nature, relying only on procedures whose reliability can be tested by their observable results, and explaining as much as possible of human life by appeal only to what can be discovered to be true of human beings and their relations to the world around them. Nothing more than that would be needed for an understanding of animals and animal life, for instance. And Hume had that parallel explicitly in mind. Both the *Treatise* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* contain a section called “Of the Reason of Animals.” But to insist that human beings and the other animals are to be studied and understood in the same generally “experimental” way is not to deny or to minimize the great differences between them. It is precisely those differences that make the “science of human nature” of distinctive interest and importance for us.

One way human beings are distinctive is in possessing and deploying an elaborate body of knowledge about the world they live in. The goal of Hume’s “naturalistic” investigation was to explain, among other things, how human beings actually get all the thoughts and beliefs and knowledge of the world that they depend on. And apparently for that reason Hume did not want simply to take for granted most of the knowledge we already have of the world. That huge body of knowledge is what his project was meant to account for. So he started from what he thought human beings themselves start with in becoming knowers. They start with what they perceive in sense-experience. And Hume thought perceivers never strictly speaking perceive how things are in the world they live in. The most they get from the world are what Hume called “fleeting and momentary impressions.” It is from these materials alone, which strictly imply nothing about how things are in the world beyond them, that Hume thought human

beings construct their elaborate conception of the world and their place in it.

“Nature” is at work in this process in the form of certain general “principles of the mind” or “of the imagination” according to which impressions and ideas naturally come and go in human minds. That is simply part of the way things are in nature, and not further explained. The task of the “science of human nature” was therefore to discover what those natural “principles” are and to see how they work. That would be to explain how the relatively meagre materials human beings receive in perception eventually lead them to form the rich body of thoughts and beliefs and other responses they have to a world of objects and events and other people.

There is a question of how Hume thought he knew that human beings’ perceptual access to the world is restricted in that way. Is that something he found to be true by following “the experimental method of reasoning” in the study of human beings? He does mention a few “experiments” that he thinks support the idea; for instance, if you press your eye with your finger in a certain way, you see double. And he thinks “a very little reflection and philosophy” is enough to convince you that what you see in that case is the only kind of thing anyone ever sees.<sup>10</sup> But he does not explain in any detail the kind of “reflection and philosophy” he thinks can lead so easily to that conclusion.

Whatever it was that convinced Hume that human beings all start with nothing more than fleeting, momentary impressions, his attempt to explain all of human thought and experience from that starting-point led to disaster. It left him, and so appears to leave all the rest of us, in a deeply unsatisfactory position. Part of the disaster is that if that were so, we could never understand ourselves as having any reason to believe any of the things we believe about the world around us. Hume himself could therefore not even find reason to believe the very “results” he thought he had arrived at in the “science of human nature.” The unfortunate position that would leave all of us in is often called “scepticism,” and Hume himself sometimes calls it that.

But having argued at length and with great force that we are all in that “sceptical” position, Hume came to see and to feel the hopelessness of understanding ourselves in that way. He despaired of ever escaping from that plight. He eventually did manage to escape the despair, but not by showing that we are not really in the position he had proved we are in. Relief came only by continuing to accept those earlier “sceptical”

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<sup>10</sup> *Treatise*, p. 210.

conclusions while overcoming the hopelessness that discovering them had cast him into. That agreeable outcome is also a form of what Hume calls “scepticism.” It is deeper and more consequential than the earlier “scepticism.” It is a condition or state of mind Hume endorses. But he thinks that state becomes available to us only by our first passing through the earlier “sceptical” disaster that his “science of man” inevitably led him into.

The first step on the path into that disaster is the idea that in perception we never receive anything more than momentary, fleeting sense-impressions of this or that sensory quality, never objects or states of affairs in the “outer” world. This means, as Hume points out in many different ways, that we cannot find in our experience any reason to believe anything beyond our current perceptions. When we have found perceptions of a certain kind always followed by perceptions of another kind, for instance, we inevitably come to expect a perception of the second kind given one of the first. But that transition from what we have observed in the past to what we expect to find next “is *not* founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding.”<sup>11</sup> Any attempt to support such an inference from past to future by appeal to past experience, Hume argues, “must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question.”<sup>12</sup> But nothing other than past experience could ever support such an inference. Hume thinks there is no question that we do inevitably get such expectations in the circumstances he describes, but what we have experienced up to any point does not give us any reason to expect what we do.

Repeated experience of things of one kind regularly followed by things of another kind leads not only to a belief that the correlation will continue, but also to a belief that things of the first kind cause things of the second kind. That belief also goes beyond all past experience, and past experience gives us no reason to believe it. But the very idea of “cause” itself goes beyond anything to be found in any particular experience, and so, Hume argues, it is not an idea of anything that is so in the world we come to think about. Causation as we think of it involves some kind of necessary connection between cause and effect, but necessity, Hume says, “is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider’d as a quality in

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<sup>11</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962), p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 36.

bodies.”<sup>13</sup> The scientist of human nature arrives at this verdict about causation by investigating the operation of those “principles of the imagination” that lead human beings to get the idea of cause or necessity from sense-impressions that never present any instances of causation. The operation of those principles alone is enough to ensure that perceivers will come to get the idea of causation, given the appropriate sensory experiences. But there is nothing in the “outer,” or even in the “inner,” world that answers to that idea of necessity or causation.

The same is true of the idea of an object’s continuing to exist when it is not perceived. That is another fundamental idea we have and need, and Hume’s account of perception also implies that we are never presented with any such thing in experience. He explains how we get the idea only by indulging in a certain kind of “fiction.” In attending both to the similarities and to the differences between resembling but different series of perceptions, for instance, our thoughts can be pulled in opposite, incompatible directions. The mind “will naturally seek relief from the uneasiness”<sup>14</sup> by constructing a new idea that resolves the otherwise unavoidable conflict. We accordingly “suppose” or “feign” the identity and the continued and distinct existence of an object that remains one and the same while the perceptions change. That idea is a “fiction” in the sense that no such things are ever found in our perceptual experience, and they do not even have to exist in the world at all in order to explain how we come to get the idea of them.

This pattern of explanation runs throughout Hume’s whole “science of human nature.” The “science” is “naturalistic” in the sense of an empirical investigation and explanation of what actually goes on with human beings. But the only aspects of the “natural” world that are drawn on to explain the facts in question are the fleeting perceptions human beings receive and the “principles of the mind” that govern the comings and goings of the thoughts, beliefs, and other reactions that result from those perceptions. That restriction is what leads to the disaster.

Hume was left with that “sceptical” disaster despite his “naturalism,” and he eventually faced the fact that that is what his “science of human nature” inevitably leads to. He came closest to recognizing the source of deep trouble when he tried to apply the explanatory treatment he had used elsewhere to the idea of personal identity—the idea each of has of ourselves as a single person or mind continuing to exist through the whole course of our lives. In one of the most-cited sentences in all of Hume’s

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<sup>13</sup> *Treatise*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>14</sup> *Treatise*, p. 206.

works, he famously declared: “when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other . . . I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.”<sup>15</sup> No being who “has” or undergoes those perceptions is present to any person in that person’s own experience. If we think and speak of such “subjects” or persons, as we do, the idea we have of them cannot be an idea of anything we find in experience. The idea must be produced only by something that happens when we contemplate the perceptions we find in our own minds.

That is the general pattern of explanation; the idea of the individual mind is a “fiction” in the sense that our having the idea is explained without supposing that there is any such thing. “The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man,” Hume says, “is only a fictitious one.”<sup>16</sup> “There is properly no *simplicity* in [the mind] at one time, nor *identity* in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity.”<sup>17</sup> We “imagine” or “suppose” there is “something that really binds our several perceptions together,”<sup>18</sup> but “identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them.”<sup>19</sup>

Hume quickly became dissatisfied with this explanation of the origin of the idea of the “we” or “I” or “mind”—that thing that he says has a “propension” to “ascribe” or “attribute” a “fictitious” identity to a bundle of perceptions it “reflects” on. In an “Appendix” to the *Treatise* he confessed “that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding,” although perhaps not “absolutely insuperable.”<sup>20</sup> But the section “Of Personal Identity” in the *Treatise* itself is immediately followed by a poignant concluding section in which Hume expresses his deep dissatisfaction with his whole treatment of “the understanding.” At the end of that first Book of the *Treatise* Hume found himself in a “forelorn solitude”;<sup>21</sup> he clearly saw and felt the effects of the disaster his conception of the “science of human nature” leads to.

Hume had to acknowledge that according to his theory of human nature he has no reason to assent to anything beyond what is immediately

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<sup>15</sup> *Treatise*, p. 252.

<sup>16</sup> *Treatise*, p. 259.

<sup>17</sup> *Treatise*, p. 253.

<sup>18</sup> *Treatise*, p. 259.

<sup>19</sup> *Treatise*, p. 260.

<sup>20</sup> *Treatise*, p. 636.

<sup>21</sup> *Treatise*, p. 264

present to his senses at a given moment. Even to regard some of his current perceptions as memories of perceptions he enjoyed earlier would require a step in thought from those present perceptions to a belief in the past perceptions they are believed to represent.<sup>22</sup> And nothing in his current experience gives him any reason to make that step, just as nothing gives him reason to believe anything about the future. When generalized, this is an extremely “sceptical” conclusion to reach about human beings: that they have no reason to believe in anything beyond their current perceptual experience, and that they would possess their most fundamental and apparently indispensable ideas even if those ideas were not true of anything in the world. Even the idea human beings have of “the world” they believe in is just one more of their “fictions.”

But Hume’s lament in his Conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise* is not simply that he has arrived at an outrageous view of human nature that no one will agree with. However unacceptable the view appears to be, if the best evidence from the study of human beings supported it above all others, we would have to accept it. If human scientists studying animals found that every aspect of animal behaviour can be explained in terms only of what animals receive in perception and how their internal constitution operates on that input to make them behave in all the ways they do, it would not be outrageous to conclude that that is the way things are with animals; they have no reasonable beliefs or accurate ideas of the world.

Hume’s complaint about his own position has a different source. He is disturbed in a way that is unique to the study of human nature. Human beings who study animals can accept any theory that best accounts for everything animals do. But in the science of human nature, human beings are both the objects of the study and the agents who carry it out. They seek to understand themselves, so they must be able to accept the results they arrive at as true of themselves. I think what Hume sees, and feels, and expresses despair about, is that on his view he can never achieve that kind of satisfaction in his own efforts at self-understanding. He complains that the position he has reached seems “to turn into ridicule all our past pains and industry, and to discourage us from future enquiries.”<sup>23</sup> We take up the science of human nature to search for the causes of every phenomenon concerning the mind of man. But “how must we be disappointed” to find through our researches that this very idea of cause, for instance, is nothing more than the offspring of a determination of the mind, acquired by

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<sup>22</sup> *Treatise*, p. 265.

<sup>23</sup> *Treatise*, p. 266.

custom, to pass from one idea to that of its usual attendant.<sup>24</sup> This “cuts off all hope of ever attaining satisfaction,”<sup>25</sup> he says. It is here, in his talk of “satisfaction” and “disappointment,” that I think Hume puts his finger on the real source of the disaster and the despair he finds himself in.

When he tries to apply to himself the conclusions he has reached about human beings in general, Hume cannot see himself as having any reason to believe anything. “After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I should assent to it; and feel nothing but a *strong* propensity to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear to me.”<sup>26</sup> As a scientist he has discovered that to believe something is simply to have a “stronger” or “more lively” idea of it. But he has also found that what “enlivens some ideas beyond others” is nothing more than certain principles of the imagination operating on whatever perceptions happen to be present in the mind. “The memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas.”<sup>27</sup>

This is the real source of the difficulty. By assigning the central role in the mind to “the imagination” as he does, Hume is left feeling the loss of what might be called “his own” role, or the role of the thinker himself, in what goes on in his mind. Since it is only “the imagination” that “makes” him consider certain objects “more strongly” or with “greater vivacity” than others, Hume sees that he would believe what he believes whether he could give any reason for assenting to it or not. This appears to be what he means in complaining that the imagination “seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason.”<sup>28</sup> The imagination is not “trivial” in its effects; its influence is pervasive. The point is that the operations of the imagination seem only “trivially” or “accidentally” related to the truth or reasonableness of any of the beliefs they produce. Those operations alone are what bring about the effects of whatever impressions and ideas we happen to receive. That is why explaining the source even of apparently fundamental ideas by the operation of the imagination alone reveals them as “fictions”: there need be nothing in the world those ideas are meant to apply to in order for the imagination to produce them from the materials available to it.

This means not only that Hume is “discouraged from future enquiries” into human nature. He cannot even see at the moment that he has any

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Treatise*, p. 267.

<sup>26</sup> *Treatise*, p. 265.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

reason to believe the conclusions he has reached or thinks he has reached so far in the “science of human nature.” Even the apparently “sceptical” conclusion that no human beings have any reason to believe anything beyond their current experience is something he sees he has no reason to believe.

Even the “discovery” that the human imagination somehow “enlivens” some ideas rather than others is something he simply finds himself with a strong propensity to accept. In the state he is in at this point in his reflections, he cannot see that he even has any reason to believe in the very subject-matter he has been investigating. What he calls the “science of human nature” appears to have vanished for him as a project he can find reason to pursue. He is completely at sea; despair seems total. He says: “I begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty.”<sup>29</sup> “I fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell’d all human commerce, and left utterly abandon’d and disconsolate.”<sup>30</sup>

This might in other circumstances have sounded like little more than histrionic self-dramatization. But I think it becomes intelligible as a way of expressing the troubled frame of mind Hume finds himself in at this point. His pursuit of the science of human nature in the direction he has taken has left him feeling scarcely like a human being at all.

It is the dominance of what Hume calls “the imagination” that leads to all the trouble. We know the imagination has great influence, but we cannot decide to what extent we should yield to it. There is no reasoning oneself out of the dilemma of how far to go along with what the imagination produces. Whatever we decided would have no effect anyway; what goes on in the mind is settled by the operations of the imagination. “For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. I can only observe what is commonly done; which is that this difficulty is seldom or never thought of; and even when it has once been present to the mind, is quickly forgot, and leaves but a small impression behind it.”<sup>31</sup>

Hume here draws attention to the important fact that we simply cannot continue to believe the philosophical conclusions we admit we cannot avoid reaching. This is put forward as a fact of the human condition, presumably discoverable by “the cautious observation of human life.” “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling

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<sup>29</sup> *Treatise*, pp. 268-269.

<sup>30</sup> *Treatise*, p. 264.

<sup>31</sup> *Treatise*, p. 268.

these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium ....”<sup>32</sup>

This is an appeal to the force of “nature” over “reason” and its attendant scepticism. “Nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding.”<sup>33</sup> As a result, Hume says, “I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life.”<sup>34</sup> In “this blind submission” to the forces of nature, Hume says, “I shew most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles.”<sup>35</sup>

The “scepticism” he has in mind at this point is brought about not by reflection but by the forces of nature operating on what had been the disastrous results of earlier philosophical reflections. It is “scepticism” in the sense of those sceptics of antiquity who were said to have achieved a contented, tranquil way of life by having overcome an obsession with reason and with trying to establish the truth and simply going along with their natural inclinations. But Hume thinks “nature” can have this kind of liberating effect only on those who have first engaged in philosophical reflections about human nature and found themselves in the disastrous “sceptical” plight he first reached. The “excessive,” paralyzing effects of those earlier “sceptical” reflections are “mitigated” by the superior force of nature in the form of certain natural human instincts. That agreeable “natural” outcome cannot be achieved by reasoning and reflection alone. We can see and fully appreciate the superior force of “nature” over “reason” only by finding ourselves inevitably believing and acting in the very ways our “sceptical” philosophical reflections had convinced us we have no good reason to do.

*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* can be seen as a sustained defense of this conception of scepticism, and so as a recommendation of the agreeable human condition Hume thinks it can lead to. The “Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding” explained and defended in Section IV of that book show that our beliefs in matters of fact beyond the present testimony of our senses and memory “are not founded on reasoning or any process of the understanding.”<sup>36</sup> If we believed only what we can see we have reason to believe we would believe nothing. This would mean: “All discourse, all action, would

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<sup>32</sup> *Treatise*, p. 269.

<sup>33</sup> *Treatise*, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> *Treatise*, p. 269.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 32.

immediately cease; and men remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence.”<sup>37</sup>

The “Sceptical Solution of These Doubts” offered in the next section lies in the fact that “the great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life.”<sup>38</sup> We inevitably get the beliefs we do as a result of the customary conjunctions we perceive in our experience. That we do in fact make such transitions is the key to the “solution.” The “excessive,” apparently paralyzing results of those earlier reflections will have no lasting effects on us. But that fact can have the most desirable liberating consequences only on someone who has followed the abstract reflections and is “once thoroughly convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt, and of the impossibility, that anything, but the strong power of natural instinct, could free us from it.”<sup>39</sup> Finding the negative “sceptical” conclusions about “reason” unanswerable is a necessary step to the desired outcome. “We must submit to this fatigue, in order to live at ease ever after.”<sup>40</sup>

The liberation this leads to is therefore not simply the acceptance of a certain attitude or the adoption of a correct abstract theoretical position. It is a state of mind or a condition of life that is “consequent to science and enquiry.”<sup>41</sup> It is the “natural result”<sup>42</sup> of the profound “sceptical” doubts arrived at in philosophical reflection together with the irrepressible forces of nature that lead us to draw the everyday conclusions we do from whatever our experience presents us with. Living in full acknowledgement of both these aspects of human nature is the “more *mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy” explained and defended in the last section of Hume’s first *Enquiry*.

Among the many benefits of reaching that state, Hume thinks we will tend to be less “affirmative and dogmatical” in our opinions and will approach that “degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner.”<sup>43</sup> We will also tend to be less “delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary,” and so to resist “distant and high enquiries” by restricting our attention “to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow

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<sup>37</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 160.

<sup>38</sup> *Enquiries*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>39</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 162.

<sup>40</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> *Enquiries*, p. 162.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

capacity of human understanding.”<sup>44</sup> With greater appreciation of the limitations of the faculties available to human beings: “While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin or worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?”<sup>45</sup>

The “mitigated scepticism” Hume recommends is a condition or state of mind that he regards not only as the most satisfactory outcome of philosophical reflection but also as the best way to live. It can be called a “sceptical” state or stance, but it is a purely natural result of intense philosophical reflections that lead inevitably at first to the “excessive” or “Pyrrhonist” “sceptical” quandary. The inevitability with which the curious human thinker is first driven into that disaster comes from the acceptance of “reason” as the distinctive foundation of human nature. The inevitability with which that same human being is eventually freed from that “sceptical” quandary comes from “nature” alone. Both movements of thought are essential for achieving the best human outcome. So there is a way in which both “scepticism” and “naturalism” are central to Hume’s understanding of human nature and his conception of a full and distinctively human life. Pursuing the “science of man” in the way he proposes is what he thinks will bring this most agreeable human condition home to us.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.