David Hume

An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume was born the second son of a wealthy Scottish family. His father died while Hume was still an infant, but his mother was a determined and capable woman who saw to her children's education. His family thought his studious nature made him fit for the study of law, but he resolved as a young man to pursue philosophy and literature instead and remained firm in his resolve throughout his life. He was still in his twenties when his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738) was published. . When it received almost no commentary, he was forced by his meager means to seek employment. He was turned down by the university on the basis of his alleged atheism and returned to his brother's estate where he lived and continued to write until 1745. Thereafter he was employed in a variety of positions—as secretary, tutor, librarian, historian—but he always wrote. He retired to live and write in Edinburgh in 1769, where he died following a brief illness in 1776.

CONTEXT

Having written on aesthetics, ethics, history, government, economics, psychology, and metaphysics, Hume is thought to be one of the more important representatives of Enlightenment thinking as both a philosopher and man of letters. He rejected received authority and opposed metaphysics and religious dogmatism. And while this stance in itself could be seen as an affirmation of the Enlightenment belief in the power of man's reason, Hume's actual position was more problematic. He found the experience of the senses more reliable than reason, but believed that even they were incapable of delivering the truth of a mathematical certainty. Although he identified himself as an Empiricist in the philosophical discussions of his time, his skepticism was pursued so rigorously that he finally found even empiricism incapable of producing knowledge or truth. His *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1748, is a series of essays in which he revisited his thinking in his earlier *Treatise on Human Nature*. The *Treatise*, which was largely ignored during his lifetime, is now generally acknowledged to be his masterpiece, but as Hume himself said, the *Enquiry* is the best introduction to his thinking. His influence can be seen in such contemporaries as Immanuel Kant and he is justly considered the father of modern Skepticism.

SUMMARY

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding is a series of twelve essays in which Hume considers the workings of the mind in its efforts to understand reality. *Essay I: Of the Different Species of Philosophy* begins by identifying two different modes of moral philosophy: one that views man as given to action and moved by his appetites and the other that views him as moved by reason. He sees the nature of mankind as requiring both the active and the contemplative. He then considers "profound Reasonings or what is commonly called Metaphysics." These he finds vulnerable to human vanity and popular superstitions and asserts that accurate and just reasoning is the only way to prevent metaphysics from becoming impenetrable to the ordinary man and thus acquiring an air of science and wisdom. Having rejected the abuse of learning by looking accurately at human nature, he suggests that an enquiry into the operation of the human mind, its powers and faculties, its abilities to perceive and reflect, is as worthy a subject of research as the movements of the heavenly bodies.

The second essay, *Of the Origin of Ideas*, distinguishes between sensory perceptions and thoughts. Of the two modes of perception, the stronger are actual experiences—anger, love, etc—and sensory perceptions—pain, warmth, etc—and these he calls *impressions*. The less vivid mode is made up of our mental conceptions of these same perceptions when we reflect on or remember them, and these he calls *thoughts* or *ideas*. He denies the commonly held belief that man's thoughts are virtually unlimited, constrained by neither nature nor reality, asserting instead that they are in fact limited by our senses and experience.

Essay III, *Of the Connection of Ideas*, considers the three principles that operate to relate one idea to another. These are the principles of *resemblance, contiguity* in time or place, and *cause and effect*. *Resemblance* refers to anything that the two distinct ideas have in common: it can be a physical resemblance, as when the picture of an object calls to mind the original; or it might be a common subject, as a group of stories linked by a common theme. *Contiguity* applies most to the work of an annalist or a historian who links ideas in a common time or place. *Cause and effect* is both the most common link and the most powerful as it is through this link that we learn to govern our future. Pain, for example, calls to mind the injury that caused it as well as the determination to avoid the cause of the pain in the future.

Essay IV, *Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding*, begins by distinguishing between *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact* as the two classifications of the objects of human reason. *Relations of ideas* are the propositions of mathematics and they can be known without reference to physical matter. *Matters of fact* are quite different. The contrary of one of Euclid's propositions is a contradiction and thus cannot be conceived; the contrary of any matter of fact however, is no less intelligible a proposition than its affirmation. To illustrate, he offers the proposition that the sun will not rise tomorrow as being as intelligible as the affirmation that it will indeed rise tomorrow. He considers the evidence that we use to establish a matter of fact beyond our immediate experience and our memory and finds that it is typically founded in cause and effect. He goes on to offer as a maxim that the knowledge of cause and effect is never

attained through *a priori* reasoning but derives entirely from our experiences. This raises a further question for him: on what principle of reason does the mind move from the experience of a cause and effect event to the expectation that a similar cause will produce a similar effect? To this he answers there is no reasoning involved (at least not the kind that produces mathematical certainty); it is an inference we make based on our experience of a past event.

Essay V, *Skeptical Solution of these Doubts*, offers the principle of custom or habit in answer to the question what causes the mind to make an inference for the future based on a past experience. It is the force of habit in seeing two events repeatedly follow one on another that causes us to make inferences, thus making our experiences useful to us in directing our future actions as means to ends.

Essay VI, *On Probability*, establishes that inferences about future events are based on probability.

Essay VII, *Of the Idea of Power or Necessary Connection*, deals with the meaning or ambiguity of the terms. The advantage to mathematical philosophy is that all terms are clearly defined down to the smallest conceivable distinction. The terms used in moral philosophy, specifically *power, force, energy* or *necessary connection* are obscure and uncertain. He considers them in the context of the operations of the will over the body and the mind and concludes that the power or energy by which this control is effected is entirely beyond our comprehension. In Part II he distinguishes between single events in which we may observe that two things are *conjoined* and repeated events in which similar events are always followed by similar effects and we see them as *connected.*

In Essay VIII, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Hume attempts to show that the controversy over necessity and free will has been caused by a failure to agree on the definition of terms. He argues that if the terms are used in a reasonable sense, it can be shown that all men are of the same opinion on both the doctrines of necessity and liberty. Beginning with the doctrine of necessity, he finds that because all men agree on the principle of cause and effect by their participation in the act of inference, all men believe in necessity. Liberty too is a matter of common consent when it is defined as the ability to act in accord with one's own determination, an ability that all but a prisoner has. He briefly considers the extension of necessity to the realm of human actions, an extension that would ultimately mean that acts we designate as criminal are not or that since God is the ultimate cause of all things, He must share in the blame for criminal acts. Both of these positions being absurd, the reasoning that gives rise to them must also be viewed as absurd.

Essay IX turns to the *Reason of Animals*. Hume finds an analogy between the workings of the human and the animal mind as both operate on the instinct that foresees a future cause and effect from a past experience of a similar cause and effect.

In Essay X, *Of Miracles*, he defines a miracle as "a violation of the Laws of Nature," and goes on to find that because proof of miracles depends on the testimony of men, who

have always been vulnerable to vanity and deception, there is no justification for believing in them.

Essay XI, *Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State*, was originally entitled "Of the Practical Consequences of Natural Religion." In it Hume presents the argument against speculative philosophy in the form of a discussion between himself and a friend. The friend takes the position of Epicurus defending himself against the accusations of the Athenian mob, arguing against the attempt to base religion on reason.

In the final essay, *Of the Academical or Skeptical Philosophy*, Hume asks the question, what is meant by a skeptic? He begins with Descartes' universal doubt, and extending it to its logical end, he concludes that it would produce a state in which assurance or conviction on any subject would be impossible. A more moderate species of skepticism would begin with clear and self-evident principles, advance by hesitant steps, frequently review its conclusions, and examine all their consequences. He goes on to consider the arguments against the reliability of the senses and against abstract reasoning and concludes that a "mitigated Skepticism" or what he calls *Academical Philosophy* is the most useful and lasting philosophy.

Things to Think About

1. Hume stepped into the ongoing philosophic debate between those Rationalists who began their thinking with what they believed to be irrefutable truths (Descartes' "innate ideas," or his "I think, therefore I am") and those Empiricists who argued that all human knowledge had to begin in the senses. He saw himself as an Empiricist but carried the logic of Empiricism so far that even the conclusions it produced would not hold up.

2. Hume believes that the workings of the human and animal mind are closely analogous. Do you think that are as close as Hume claims? Given Hume's views on reasoning, do you think that he would believe that animals can reason? What for Hume would be the differences between man and animals?

3. Hume does refer to the will. Do you think that it is in any sense a free will?

4. Given his skepticism, does it make sense for Hume to affirm three principles, resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect, as bases for the ways in which the mind connects ideas? These principles actually seem to be some sort of *apriori* or innate principles of the mind, and as such, they should not be so positively affirmed by Hume.

Study Questions

1. Hume offers as a maxim that all ideas are the result of impressions that is they derive from our experiences and our sensory perceptions. How does he trace our idea of God (Essay II)?

2. Hume asks if there is anything that we can discover in examining a stone that would tell us that suspended in the air without support or constraint it will fall rather than fly off (Essay IV). What maxim is he illustrating?

3. How does Hume explain the movement of the human mind from the experience of one event of cause and effect to the expectation that a similar cause will produce a similar effect in the future (Essay IV, Part II)?

4. What is Hume's definition of *belief* (Essay V, Part II)?

5. In his consideration of the powers that produce effects from causes, Hume comments on those philosophers who assert that the immediate cause of all actions is God. What does he see as the implications of this thinking (Essay VII, Part I)?

6. What is Hume's attitude toward Academical Skepticism (XII)? What effect does he think it might have on the life of the common man? How does human nature protect man from the worst effects of skepticism?

7. In his discussion of miracles in Essay X, Hume systematically eliminates the eyewitness as a proof of anything miraculous by affirming the evidence of our senses in observing natural laws of cause and effect and calling into question both the ability of a man to accurately assess what he has seen and his motives. In this way he dispenses with what he calls "superstitious delusions." He holds out the possibility of believing the Christian religion, which requires accepting miracles, through the movement of faith. What questions would you want to ask Hume about his compartmentalization of reason and faith?

Questions on Language and Form

1. The method that Hume follows is fairly traditional. He is working with concepts and so writes in treatise form, arguing from premises to conclusions. But notice how his arguments are determined by the currents of his time. He is unsatisfied with the rationalism of Descartes and yet he is clearly drawn to the power of mathematics and the tendency of post-Copernican philosophers, especially Descartes, to look to math for certain answers. Recall Aristotle's caution, that one could not expect more from a discipline than its ends and means would allow. Following Locke and the other empiricists, Hume gives full credit to the senses and the images or impressions they deliver to man. How does Hume account for the fact that different things in nature seem to share forms or natures? St. Thomas would follow out the trail left by what the senses deliver to questions having to do with being and essence. What is it about Locke's methods or procedures that make him stop short?

Reflection Questions

1. In *Essays IV* and *V* Hume establishes that man's inferences of cause and effect in future events cannot be justified by the observation of similar cause and effect events in the past; these inferences, he says, have no basis in reason. If, for example, we see the sun rise each day, we have no rational basis for assuming it will rise tomorrow. Likewise, if we play pool and recall that striking one ball into another made the second move, it would not be rational to assume it would do it again. What is his attitude toward this unreasonable habit of the human mind to assume cause and effect from past experiences at the close of *Essay V*? Do you see any implications of this attitude, particularly for a philosopher of the Enlightenment?

2. Hume is considered the father of modern skepticism and he was denied teaching positions on the basis of accusations that he was an atheist. Having read his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, do you agree or disagree with the accusation?

3. What is the difference between Hume on the one hand and Aristotle and St. Thomas on the other on the role of the senses in knowing? How would these two sets of philosophers differ on questions of cause and effect?