

Hume's Treatise, 1: Ideas and Faculties

Hume's *Treatise*, Book 1

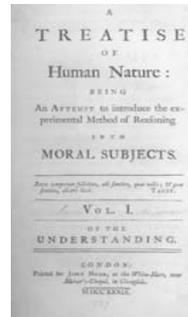


1. Introduction,
*Hume's Theory of Ideas,
and the Faculties*

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1(a)

Overview of the *Treatise*



Hume's Treatise, 1: Ideas and Faculties

Understanding *Treatise* Book 1

- Some of the *Treatise* is rather confusing:
 - 1.4.2 and 1.4.6 seem to mix discussion of the origin and nature of our ideas, bringing in associationist psychological explanations of how our minds are misled, which seem to have deeply sceptical metaphysical implications.
 - In 1.4.2 and 1.4.7, Hume's thought seems dynamic, moving from confident to sceptically confused (and, at least in 1.4.7, back again).
 - The despairing "Appendix" of 1740 leaves us unsure what to make of 1.4.6: what is left?

The Hume of the *Treatise*?

- Associationist and Destructive Sceptic?
 - The well-known Hume of many textbooks is obsessive about ideas, impressions, and associationist psychology.
 - Major "topics" are the origin of ideas, causation, the external world, and personal identity.
 - Induction is reduced to association of ideas and thus shown to be irrational.
 - Account of the ideas of external objects and personal identity seems to indicate that both are completely incoherent.

A Treatise of Human Nature

- Book 1 "Of the Understanding" and Book 2 "Of the Passions" published January 1739.
- Book 3 "Of Morals" published November 1740, together with an "Appendix" in which Hume gives corrections to Book 1 (and confesses failure over personal identity).
- Hume's first and most ambitious work, presenting a synthesis of epistemology, metaphysics, psychology and morals.

Treatise Book 1

- Follows Locke's *Essay* by starting with the origin of ideas – a pervasive theme.
- Part 1 ends with an account of general ideas (like Berkeley's account, this denies what he and Hume take to be Lockean "abstraction").
- Part 2, "Of the ideas of space and time" denies infinite divisibility, inferring from the nature of our ideas to the nature of space and time themselves. This part is more metaphysical than most of the rest of the *Treatise*.

A Constructive Purpose

- But there are plenty of indications that Hume's aims are not primarily destructive:
 - The subtitle of the *Treatise* declares it to be "an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects" (i.e. human science).
 - Book 2 builds a systematic account of the passions, using associationist psychology.
 - Book 3 develops a systematic account of morality and its foundation in human nature.
- All of this evinces a firm commitment to inductive science, as do his *Essays* and other works!

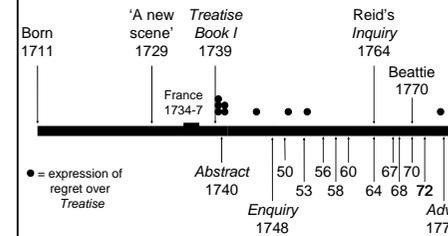
Hume's Central Concerns?

- Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) gives a more consistent picture:
 - Focuses on induction (and probability): its basis, method and application.
 - Can be seen as a manifesto for inductive science.
 - Attacks "superstition" (i.e. religion), but avoids self-destructive scepticism.
 - Hume preferred the *Enquiry* (details in OWC edition pp. 2, 163-4, 167-8).
 - See www.davidhume.org/millican.htm

- Part 3, by far the longest part, is mainly devoted to causation and causal inference.
 - Part 3 Section 1 presents an important distinction between types of relations (cf. Part 1 Section 5). Some of these can yield "knowledge" (i.e. certainty, capable of *demonstration*), whereas others cannot.
- The main discussion of Part 3 (from Section 2 to 14) investigates the nature of the *idea* of cause and effect.
 - On the way it discusses induction (or "probable reasoning") and rational judgement.

- Part 4 discusses various sceptical topics:
 - Section 1: "Scepticism with regard to reason"
 - Section 2: "Scepticism with regard to the senses" (i.e. the nature of our ideas and beliefs about the external world)
 - Section 3: "Of the antient philosophy"
 - Section 4: "Of the modern philosophy" (i.e. primary and secondary qualities etc.)
 - Section 5: "Of the immateriality of the soul" (argues that matter could cause thought)
 - Section 6: "Of personal identity"
 - Section 7: "Conclusion of this book"

A Timeline of Hume's Life



Hume's 'Advertisement'

'... several writers, who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work [the *Treatise*]. ... Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces [EHU, DOP, EPM, NHR] may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles.'

Enquiry, 'Advertisement', 1775

Hume's Treatise, 1: Ideas and Faculties

The Importance of the *Treatise*

- The *Enquiry* is more polished, and more consistently excellent, but the *Treatise* ...
 - is more ambitious, covering far more ground;
 - gives more detail of the underlying theory, and is more comprehensively systematic;
 - raises, and contributes to the discussion of, a host of fascinating philosophical problems;
 - is less carefully edited: more unresolved loose ends, which are often very revealing;
 - shows a philosophical genius at work.

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Scepticism, Naturalism, Irreligion?

- Scholars debate, seemingly endlessly, regarding whether Hume is “really” a sceptic or a naturalist, and whether these themes can be reconciled.
- Paul Russell has recently argued that *irreligion* is the main unifying theme.
- Rather than getting bogged down in such debates, we are going to examine the text in fairly close detail ...

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Force and Vivacity

- Hume says that impressions have more *force, vivacity, or liveliness* than ideas:

“All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the soul, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those ... which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions* ...” (T 1.1.1.1).

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An Inconsistency?

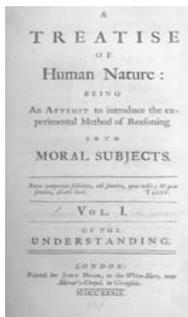
- But Hume hints that sometimes a thought can in fact be as lively as a sensation:

“in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: [And] it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas.” (T 1.1.1.1)
- Compare, for example, dreaming of an attack of spiders, with watching paint dry!

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1(b)

The Theory of Ideas



What is an “Idea”?

- John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) defines an *idea* as “whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks” (I i 8).
- This is supposed to include all types of “thinking”, including perception and feeling as well as contemplation. So our *ideas* include thoughts and sensations, and also “internal” ideas such as feelings.

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Feeling and Thinking

- Hume's distinction is most easily understood as that between *feeling* and *thinking*:

“I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking.” (T 1.1.1.1)
- So then impressions (and ideas) are not defined as being our more (and less) vivacious perceptions.

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The “Liberty of the Imagination”

- Some of our ideas can be divided up imaginatively into components:

An apple has a particular shape, a colour, a taste, a smell ... Its shape is also complex ...
- We can *put ideas together* in new ways:

gold + mountain = golden mountain;
horse + horn = unicorn;
banana + taste of apple = banapple = shape of banana + taste of apple.
- See T 1.1.3.4 on this “second principle”.

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Ideas and Impressions

- Hume thinks Locke's usage is too broad, so he adopts different terminology:
 - An *impression* is a *sensation* (e.g. from seeing a blue sky or smelling a flower) or a *feeling* (e.g. being angry, or feeling pain);
 - An *idea* is a *thought* (e.g. about the sky, or about a pain, or about the existence of God);
 - A *perception* is either an *impression* or an *idea*. (So Hume uses the word *perception* to cover everything that Locke calls an *idea*.)

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Sensation and Reflection

- “Impressions [are of] two kinds, those of *sensation*, and those of *reflection*.” (T 1.1.2.1)
 - Some impressions come directly from sensation (e.g. colours, smells, pains).
 - Other impressions arise only from things that we *think* or *reflect* about (e.g. thinking about pain can make us feel fear; thinking about someone else's good luck can make us envious). These are *impressions of reflection*, which at T 1.1.6.1 Hume says are either *passions* (e.g. the desire for something) or *emotions* (e.g. happiness).

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Simple and Complex Ideas

- At *Treatise* 1.1.1.2, Hume divides all ideas and impressions into simple and complex:

“Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts.”
- In the *Enquiry*, Hume only hints at this distinction (at 2.6 and 7.4) – perhaps he is doubtful whether every idea is absolutely simple or complex?

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The Origin of Ideas

- Book I of John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) argues against “innate” ideas and principles.
- Book II then aims to explain how all our various ideas can arise from experience.
- So Locke is an *empiricist* about ideas.
- Descartes and other *rationalists* claimed that we have innate ideas (e.g. of God, or of extension), yielding a priori knowledge.

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The Copy Principle

- Hume's version of Locke's empiricism is expressed in what is commonly known as his Copy Principle:

"that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent." (T 1.1.1.7)

- At *Enquiry* 2.9 n. 1, Hume suggests that this is really the essence of Locke's empiricist doctrine that there are no innate ideas.

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The Principle as a Weapon

- In the *Enquiry*, the Copy Principle is presented as a weapon against bogus ideas:

"When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning, or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion." (E 2.9)

- In practice, Hume uses it to *clarify* ideas.

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The Missing Shade of Blue

- Immediately after presenting his arguments for the Copy Principle, Hume himself gives a counter-example to them, the famous "missing shade of blue" (*T 1.1.1.10*).
- Hume seems to think that this example isn't a serious problem for his position, maybe because he sees that even in this case, the "new" idea is being constructed from materials that are provided by impressions?

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The Theory of Ideas

- The central assumption of the Theory of Ideas is that thinking consists in having "ideas" (in Locke's sense) or "perceptions" (in Hume's sense) before the mind, and that different sorts of thinking are to be distinguished in terms of the different sorts of perceptions which they involve.
- This approach makes the mind very passive – its only activity seems to be to *perceive* impressions and ideas ...

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Hume's First Argument for the Copy Principle

- There seem to be no counterexamples:

"After the most accurate examination, of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exception, and that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea." (T 1.1.1.5)

- And the impressions come before the ideas (*T 1.1.1.8*), so they must cause the ideas.

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Hume's Second Argument for the Copy Principle

"wherever by any accident the faculties, which give rise to any impressions, are obstructed in their operations, as when one is born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas; ... likewise where they have never been put in action to produce a particular impression [such as] the taste of a pine-apple ..." (T 1.1.1.9)

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The Mental Stage

- The mind is seen as like a stage, on which "perceptions" are the actors:

- *seeing* a tree involves having an *impression* of a tree "in front of the mind";
- *thinking* of a tree involves having an *idea* of a tree in front of the mind;
- *feeling* a pain involves having an *impression* of a pain;
- *thinking* about a pain involves having an *idea* of a pain.

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The Copy Principle and Imagism

- If ideas are copies of impressions, then Hume must take our ideas to be something like mental images (not necessarily visual).
- Together with the theory of ideas, this implies that (at least most) thinking consists in the having of mental images.
- Note in particular this impoverished view of *reflection*, which ought to include both feelings and desires, but also (which Hume neglects) awareness of our mental activity.

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Problems with Hume's Arguments

- Hume's first argument doesn't seem to fit very well with his use of the Copy Principle against opponents:

- Suppose someone claims to have an idea which *doesn't* derive from a corresponding impression; he will deny Hume's generalisation and hence his argument for the Principle. Bennett (2002, pp. 100-101) presses this sort of objection.
- Garrett (1997, pp. 46-8) mounts a defence on Hume's behalf.

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- Hume's second argument also has problems. It seems very plausible that a blind man can have no idea of *red*, for example. But *how can Hume know that this is the case?* Might it not be that the man has private mental experiences that involve the colour red?

- Some authors (e.g. Bennett, Dicker) argue that Hume's point is best understood as being not about private mental experience, but about *public meaningfulness*. The blind man *cannot use the word "red" correctly*, and this is the real point of Hume's position.

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Hume on the Association of Ideas

"all simple ideas may be separated by the imagination, and may be united again in what form it pleases ... [yet there is] some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another" (T 1.1.4.1)

- Hume calls this "a gentle force, which commonly prevails", and which explains why languages "so nearly correspond to each other" in the complex ideas that are represented within their vocabulary.

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Three Principles of Association

- Ideas may be associated in three ways:
 - "The qualities, from which this association arises ... are three, viz. RESEMBLANCE, CONTIGUITY in time or place, and CAUSE and EFFECT."* (*T 1.1.4.2*)
- Association is "a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world" has remarkable effects like gravity in the physical world (*T 1.1.4.6*).
- The complex ideas that arise from such association "may be divided into RELATIONS, MODES, and SUBSTANCES" (*T 1.1.4.7*).

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Locke on the Association of Ideas

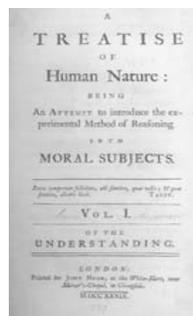
- Hume will appeal to the association of ideas with great enthusiasm, but Locke's attitude to it had been far less positive:

"[3] this sort of Madness ... [4] this ... Weakness to which all Men are ... liable, ... a Taint which ... universally infects Mankind ... [5] ... there is [a] Connexion of *Ideas* wholly owing to Chance or Custom; *Ideas* that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds that 'tis very hard to separate them ..." (Essay II xxxiii 3-5)

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1(c)

Hume's Faculty Psychology



Humean Faculties

- At T 1.1.2, Hume distinguishes between impressions of *sensation* and *reflection*.
- At T 1.1.3, he distinguishes between ideas of the *memory* and *imagination*.
- Talk of mental faculties (*reason*, *senses*, *imagination* etc.) will continue to play a major role in the *Treatise*. Indeed some of Hume's most important and famous results are expressed in these terms ...

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Faculties, Induction, and Body

- ... the next question is, whether experience produces the idea by means of the understanding or imagination; whether we are determined by reason to make the transition, or by ... association ... of perceptions. (T 1.3.6.4)
- The subject, then, of our present enquiry, is concerning the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body: ... we ... shall consider, whether it be the *senses*, *reason*, or the *imagination*, that produces the opinion of a *continu'd* or of a *distinct* existence. (T 1.4.2.2)

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Faculties and Morality

- ... we need only consider, whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction. (T 3.1.1.3-4)
- There has been a controversy started of late ... concerning the general foundation of MORALS; whether they be derived from reason, or from SENTIMENT ... (M 1.3)

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Faculties in the *Treatise* (1)

- *The (external) Senses*
Present impressions to the mind (thus creating ideas which copy them).
- *Reflection*
An *internal sense*, by which we inwardly sense our own mental state.
- *Memory*
Replays ideas vivaciously, reflecting their original order.

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Hume's Treatise, 1: Ideas and Faculties

Faculties in the *Treatise* (2)

- *Imagination (or the Fancy)*
Replays ideas less vivaciously, with freedom to transpose and mix them.
- *Reason (or the Understanding)*
The overall cognitive faculty: discovers and judges truth and falsehood.
- *Will*
The conative faculty: forms intentions in response to desires and passions.

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Hume's on Reason as Cognition

- 'Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood.' (T 3.1.1.9)
- 'That Faculty, by which we discern Truth and Falshood ... the Understanding' (E 1.14, note in 1748/1750 editions)
- '... reason, in a strict sense, as meaning the judgment of truth and falsehood ...' (DOP 5.1)
- See also T 2.3.3.3, 2.3.3.5-6, 2.3.3.8, 2.3.10.6, 3.1.1.4, 3.1.1.19 n. 69, 3.1.1.25-27, 3.2.2.20, M 1.7, M App 1.6, 1.21.

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Hume on Reason and Understanding

- Hume implicitly identifies Reason with 'the understanding' in many places, e.g.:
 'When the mind [makes an inductive inference] it is not determin'd by *reason*, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in *the imagination*. Had ideas no more union in *the fancy* than objects seem to have to *the understanding*, ...' (T 1.3.6.12)
 – See also T 1.3.6.4, 1.4.1.1, 1.4.2.46, 1.4.2.57, 1.4.7.7, and compare 2.2.7.6 n. with 1.3.9.19 n.

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Distinguishing Between Faculties

- imagination/reason (T 1.4.2.2); imagination/memory (T 1.3.5); imagination/the senses (T 1.4.2.2); imagination/passions (T 2.2.2.16).
- reason/memory (T 3.3.4.13); reason/the senses (T 1.4.2.2); reason/the will (T 2.3.3.4).
- memory/the senses (T 1.1.2.1).
- Hume *never* distinguishes between "reason" and "the understanding", or between either of these and "the judgment". And he insists that our "intellectual faculty" is undivided (T 1.3.7.5 n.20).

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Locke's Scepticism about Faculties

- Locke ridicules the language of faculties as a source of philosophical error, and declares himself inclined to forego it completely were it not that faculty words are so much in fashion that 'It looks like too much affectation wholly to lay them by' (Essay II xxi 17-20).
- When we refer to man's 'understanding', all we can properly mean is that man has a power to understand.
- It is a serious mistake to speak of our faculties 'as so many distinct Agents'.
- 'the understanding, or reason, whichever your lordship pleases to call it ...' (First Letter to Stillingfleet, III 70)

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Hutcheson on the Faculties

- 'Writers on these Subjects should remember the common Division of the Faculties of the Soul. That there is 1. Reason presenting the natures and relations of things, antecedently to any Act of Will or Desire: 2. The Will, or *Appetitus Rationalis*, or the disposition of Soul to pursue what is presented as good, and to shun Evil. ... Below these [the Antients] place two other powers dependent on the Body, the *Sensus*, and the *Appetitus Sensitivus*, in which they place the particular Passions: the former answers to the Understanding, and the latter to the Will.'

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