Hume

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Preface

In this book I present a study of the most important themes in the work of the great British philosopher David Hume. The exposition largely follows the order in which these themes appear in his first and greatest work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Thus, after an introductory chapter outlining the background to Hume's thought and setting him in the context of his time, the second chapter of this volume examines Hume's theory of the mind, as found in Part I of Book I of the *Treatise*. The third chapter is devoted to Hume's discussion of causation, induction and the idea of necessary connection in Part III, the fourth is concerned with Hume's discussion of belief in the external world, in Section 2 of Part IV, the fifth with his discussion of personal identity in Section 6 of Part IV, and the sixth with Hume's theories of the passions and morality in Books II and III of the *Treatise*. Finally, in chapter 7 Hume's views on religion, as contained in the section of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* entitled 'Of Miracles', which was originally intended for publication in the *Treatise*, and in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are expounded.

I am grateful to former colleagues at the University of Birmingham and colleagues at the University of

Nottingham for the care with which they have read and commented on drafts of this material.

References have been given in general according to the Harvard referencing system. However, references to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* are by book, chapter and section. Other occasional exceptions to the Harvard system are explained in the bibliography.

H. W. N.

Chapter One

Introduction: Hume's life and work

Hume's life and times

David Hume, the great British philosopher, was born in Edinburgh on 26 April 1711, into a family of strict Presbyterian gentry. He was educated at Edinburgh University, where he acquired grounding in the classical authors, logic and metaphysics, natural philosophy, ethics and mathematics.

In his brief autobiography 'My Own Life' (Hume 1993b: 351–6) he describes this period:

> I ... was seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life. ... My studious disposition ... gave my family a notion that the law was a proper profession for me, but I found an insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning; and while they fancied I was pouring upon Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors I was secretly devouring.
>
> (Hume 1993b: 351)

In 1729 Hume embarked upon the philosophical study that was to lead to his writing of his first book, *A Treatise of Human Nature: An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (Hume 1978). In his own words he 'entered upon a new scene

of Thought' and pursued it with such intensity that it led to a breakdown in his health.

In the hope that a period of alternative employment would enable him to resume his philosophical studies with renewed vigour Hume took up, in 1734, a post as a merchant's clerk in Bristol, but he soon left for France to continue study and writing. There he lived first at Rheims and then at La Fléche, which contained the Jesuit college in which Descartes had been educated. There, by 1737, he completed the *Treatise*.

The *Treatise* was published anonymously, with Books I and II appearing in 1739, and Book III following in 1740 along with an Appendix which contained some corrections to and modifications of his already published material.

Its reception disappointed Hume. It 'fell dead-born from the press', he wrote, rather inaccurately (Hume 1993a: 352). Its largely hostile and uncomprehending reception, on which Hume's anonymous publication of his own Abstract in 1740 had no effect, left Hume permanently regretful of his haste in publishing so young.

In 1741 and 1742 two volumes of Essays, Moral and Political appeared. These met with some success and in 1745 Hume applied unsuccessfully for the chair of Physical and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University. His irreligious reputation was the cause of his failure to be appointed, and the controversy caused him to publish another anonymous pamphlet, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, in which he defended himself against this charge.

In 1748 the *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, later called *An Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, appeared under Hume's own name. This was a rewriting of Book I of the *Treatise*, in a more elegant form, with significant omissions, and one significant addition (section X, 'Of Miracles', which probably contained material originally intended for the *Treatise* but excised when Hume thought to gain the recommendation of Bishop Butler).

In 1751 *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume's revision of Book III of the *Treatise*, was published. He also

published *Three Essays Moral and Political* (1748) and *Political Discourses* (1752). In 1752 he again failed to secure a university appointment, being rejected for the Chair of Logic at the University of Glasgow. However, he was appointed to the post of keeper of the Advocates' Library, where he remained until 1757, and which provided him with the resources and opportunity to embark on his six-volume *History of England*, published in parts in 1754, 1756, 1759 and 1762. This, above all, established his literary reputation. During this time Hume also wrote the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (the main target of which was the argument from design for the existence of God), which he did not publish in his lifetime, presumably out of a concern not to add to his irreligious reputation, and the *Natural History of Religion*, which he did publish in 1757, as part of his controversial *Four Dissertations*, though he can hardly have thought its approach would endear him to the religious authorities.

From 1763 to 1766, in Paris, as private secretary to the British ambassador, Hume was lionized by the French literary establishment, was a favourite of the fashionable ladies, and developed friendships with Diderot, D'Alembert, d'Holbach, Helvetius, Buffon and, unfortunately for Hume, Rousseau. On Hume's return to England in 1766 Rousseau, fleeing from persecution in Switzerland, accompanied him. Later Hume was forced to defend himself in print against Rousseau's unjust accusations about their relationship.

After 1767 until his death he corrected his *History* for new editions, and continued to work on his *Dialogues*. His philosophical work was now sufficiently known for him to be abusively attacked by James Beattie, a pupil of Thomas Reid (1710–1796), whose work was successful enough to drive Hume to a public disowning of the *Treatise* as a 'juvenile work', and an insistence that only the *Enquiries* should be regarded as expressing his opinions.

On his deathbed, Hume composed his brief autobiography 'My Own Life', published in 1777. In this, his final word on the matter, he refers to the lack of success of the *Treatise* as 'proceeding more from the manner than the matter' (Hume 1993b: 352).

Hume died in 1776, at peace, and, as he says in his autobiography, 'detached from life', considering that 'a man of sixty five, by dying, cuts off only a few years of infirmities'. His only expressed regret was that he could not now live to enjoy his growing literary fame (Hume 1993b: 356).

Themes and Arguments in Hume's philosophy

The subtitle of the *Treatise of Human Nature* is '*An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into Moral Subjects*'. In fact, Hume intended a five-volume work, applying the experimental method of reasoning successively to the five 'moral subjects', or aspects of human nature, comprised in the subjects of the understanding, the passions, morals (in the modern narrower sense), politics and criticism. But the work as we have it is in fact divided into three Books, on the understanding, on passions and on morals. Disappointed by the public reception of the *Treatise*, Hume abandoned his original plan, and attempted to gain a literary reputation by other means.

Book I, 'Of the Understanding', is the most difficult and intellectually ambitious of all Hume's writings. It is concerned with the origin of our 'ideas', the material of our thoughts, and the character and limitations of our intellectual activity. It is divided into four Parts.

In Part I Hume introduces the basic vocabulary and principles he will be appealing to throughout the rest of his work. He begins with a terminological innovation, introducing the term 'perception' to denote the basic elements of his system, the items that are 'before the mind' whenever any mental activity is going on. He divides perceptions into 'impressions' (corresponding to feeling or experience) and 'ideas' (corresponding to thinking). He also distinguishes between 'simple' and 'complex' perceptions. With this terminological apparatus Hume then formulates the most fundamental principle of his system, the so-called Copy Principle, the principle that every simple idea must be a copy of, that is, must resemble and be causally derived from, a simple impression. It is this that defines him as an empiricist. A second division within the

class of perceptions which Hume draws in Part I is that between perceptions 'of sensation' and perceptions 'of reflection'. This division does not loom large in Part I, but its significance becomes clear in Part III, where it turns out to be a crucial component in Hume's account of the origin of the idea of necessary connection – in fact, the idea of necessary connection turns out to be an idea of reflection. The distinction is also of fundamental importance in Books II and III, whose subject matter, the passions and moral sentiments, are impressions of reflection.

Another division in Part I is that between ideas that are general, or abstract, and those that are particular. This is a division previously made by Hume's empiricist predecessor, John Locke, but Hume rejects Locke's account of abstract ideas and endorses and elaborates instead Bishop Berkeley's, according to which 'all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annexed to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them' (1978: 18). Hume ranks Berkeley's theory very highly. Its significance for him is that it turns out that the only way he is able to account for our ideas of space, time, existence and causation is as Berkeleian abstract ideas.

Three other fundamental elements of Hume's philosophy are introduced in Part I. The first is the Separability Principle: 'Whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination' (Hume 1978: 18).

The second is the Conceivability Principle: 'Whatever is clearly conceiv'd may exist, and whatever is clearly conceiv'd, after any manner, may exist after the same manner' (Hume 1978: 233). Or, more briefly: 'Nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible' (Hume 1978: 19).

Together these principles imply that if any objects are distinct they can exist separately – either can exist without the other. And it is this consequence Hume appeals to in rejecting the possibility of real connections between distinct existences, which rejection in turn underpins his rejection of necessary connections between causes and effects, his rejection of the notion of substance (except

as applicable universally to anything that can be conceived) and his rejection of a simple self distinct from its perceptions. In some commentary (Wright 1983, Strawson 1989) Hume has been described as a 'sceptical realist', whose scepticism is in fact limited to our possession of positively contentful ideas of these things, but who does not deny their existence in the world. This is inconsistent with the role of the Separability Principle (understood as a principle about the distinctness of objects, as opposed to ideas) just outlined (for further discussion see the third chapter of this volume and Bennett 2001).

The final fundamental element of Hume's thought introduced in Part I is his statement of his three principles of the association of ideas: resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect, which, he believes, account for the order in which our ideas follow one another in our minds, and are also involved in the explanation of our coming to have beliefs in matters of fact beyond our memory and senses and in the origin of the problematic ideas already mentioned.

In Part II of Book I Hume attempts to provide an account of the ideas of space and time and also discusses the ideas of existence and external existence.

His account of the ideas of space and time is as abstract ideas, derived from the 'manners of appearance' in which our perceptions array themselves in spatial and temporal relations (Hume 1978: 35). Of these ideas, that of time is of vital importance in Hume's later account of identity as a fiction of the imagination, which in turn is employed both in his account in Part IV of our belief in an external world and in his account of our belief in an enduring self.

The other important discussion in Part II is Hume's account of our ideas of existence and external existence, that is, existence independent of the mind. The former Hume identifies as an abstract idea, so that the idea of existence 'when conjoined with the idea of any object makes no addition to it' (Hume 1978: 67). Hume's account of external existence in Part II anticipates his extended discussion in Part IV, to which he refers the reader. Here, he insists that we can have no idea of anything 'specifically

different from' (Hume 1978: 67), that is, wholly unlike, ideas and impressions, and propounds his dictum: 'To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see, all this is nothing but to perceive' (Hume 1978: 67).

This hints (by the use of the transitive verb 'perceive') at a central feature of his position, namely, his reification of perception.

Part III of Book I, 'Of knowledge and probability', is also of fundamental importance to Hume's philosophy. Its topic is the explanation of our belief in the existence of a world extended beyond our senses and memory. Because of the way he approaches this topic Hume is led into a discussion of the notion of cause and effect and the resultant Humean account of causation has remained a paradigm of philosophical analysis ever since. Its fundamental contention is that though the idea of necessary connection is an essential component of our idea of the cause–effect relation, there is no necessary connection between the things we call causes and effects themselves. The idea of necessary connection is, in fact, copied from a feeling that arises when a transition is made in thought from the idea, or impression, of the cause to the idea of the effect. Our mistaken belief that causes and effects are themselves necessarily connected is a 'fiction of the imagination', which results from the mind's 'propensity to spread itself on external objects' (Hume 1978: 167).

Our belief that every event must have a cause is to be explained similarly, Hume asserts. It is not in fact a necessary truth that every event has a cause.

Part III is also notable for what has traditionally been taken to be the formulation by Hume, in section VI, of what has come to be known as 'the Problem of Induction'. When we infer to the unobserved from the observed, as when we infer from the past to the future, is our procedure rationally justified, in the sense that our beliefs about the observed provide us with evidence for our beliefs about the unobserved? Whether Hume does pose this question in section VI, and, if so, whether he answers it, are questions that have been much debated amongst Hume scholars. The question Hume himself formulates is 'Whether we are determined by reason to make the transition [from an observed cause to its effect], or by a

certain association and relation of perceptions?' (Hume 1978: 88–9).

His answer is emphatic:

> Not only our reason fails us in the discovery of the ultimate connection of causes and effects, but even after experience has informed us of their constant conjunction, 'tis impossible for us to satisfy ourselves by our reason, why we should extend that experience beyond those particular instances which have fallen under our observation.
>
> (Hume 1978: 91–2)

The traditional interpretation of this in the mid-twentieth century, originating perhaps with Russell (1912) (see also Flew 1961, Stove 1965, Bennett 1971, Stroud 1977) was that Hume is here expressing scepticism about induction. As Stroud states what he takes to be Hume's conclusion: 'Past and present experiences give us no ... reason at all to believe anything about the unobserved ... As far as the competition for degrees of reasonableness is concerned, all possible beliefs about the unobserved are tied for last place' (Hume 1977: 52–4).

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Hume scholarship since the publication of Stroud's book has been the refutation of this reading of Hume (see Broughton 1983; Beauchamp and Rosenberg 1981; Cannon 1979; Baier 1991; Loeb 1991, 1995a, b, 2002; Garrett 1997, 2005; Owen 1999). It has become clear as a result of the work of the scholars listed, and others, that Hume is no sceptic about induction; indeed throughout his writings, both in Part III of the *Treatise* and elsewhere, he takes it for granted that induction is justified. According to an influential trend in recent scholarship (originating perhaps with Broughton 1983, but developed by Garrett 1997; Owen 1999; Loeb 2002) his target in the crucial section of Part III is rather the view that the transitions we make in inductive reasoning (what he himself calls 'probable argument') are themselves the product of reasoning. His concern is not with the warrant for our inductive practices but with their origin (taking it for granted that inductive reasoning is justified, his enquiry at this point of course assumes that if reason 'determines' us it must

do so through the medium of sound argument). However, scholars who agree on this still dispute about the details. In particular, there is dispute about the notion of reason that Hume has in view. Some think that all Hume is arguing is that if 'reason' is interpreted in a narrow, rationalistic way, which conforms to the deductivist assumption that only valid deductive arguments are any good, then reason has nothing to do with our formation of beliefs about the unobserved on the basis of the observed (Broughton 1983; Beauchamp and Rosenberg 1981; Baier 1991). Others (most emphatically Garrett 1997) take him to be arguing that reason, in the more inclusive sense in which Hume himself uses the term, that is, to cover both demonstrative and probable argument, is not the causal source of our inductive inferences.

Accompanying the recognition that Hume is no sceptic about induction another important development in recent scholarship (due particularly to Loeb 1991, 1995a, b, 2002; Garrett 1997) has been the recognition of the significance of the distinction Hume draws (Hume 1978: 117) between two senses of 'imagination': a wide, normatively neutral sense, in which the term is used to designate the faculty by which we form our fainter (non-memory) ideas, and a narrow, disreputable sense according to which the imagination excludes our demonstrative and probable reasonings. Although our probable inferences are activities of the imagination, therefore, this is not inconsistent with their legitimacy, since they are not exercises of the imagination in the narrow sense. However, as Hume proceeds it turns out that much else in our intellectual life is. It is on this basis that Hume is rightly called a sceptic and this development takes place in Part IV, 'Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy', (anticipated by the discussion of our belief in a 'necessary connexion' between causes and effects in section XIV of Part III, where this belief is ascribed to our narrow imaginative propensity to 'spread our minds on the world').

The first section of Part IV, 'Of scepticism with regard to reason', contains an argument that reason can never give the slightest grounds for belief, because consistently followed it destroys all belief. Only 'trivial qualities' of the (narrow) imagination sustain belief. The second section of Part IV, 'Of scepticism with regard to

the senses', contains Hume's discussion of the nature and causes of our belief in an external world. Hume here argues that this belief is a product of the narrow imagination. In section IV he goes on to argue that belief in an external world is opposed by reason, that is, that 'there is a direct and total opposition betwixt those conclusions we draw from cause and effect and those that persuade us of the continued existence of body'. Part IV also contains Hume's discussion 'Of personal identity', in which the object is again to explain, via the mechanism of narrow imagination, our possession of a false natural belief, the belief in the existence of a unitary enduring self.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Hume himself is prepared to say (in the Abstract) 'the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical' (Hume 1978: 657). In the final section of Part IV he attempts to put the scepticism of the *Treatise* into focus and assess the relationship of his philosophy to traditional scepticism. It is notable that Hume here makes no reference to section VI of Part III, but only to section XIV and sections I and IV of Part IV. His general position – that the preceding parts of the *Treatise* show both the irrefutability and practical insignificance of philosophical scepticism – he perhaps expresses best in the Abstract:

> Almost all reasoning is there [in the *Treatise*] reduced to experience and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit. Nor is this all, when we believe anything of external existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind. Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reasoning only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian were not nature too strong for it.
>
> (Hume 1978: 657)

However, the cool detachment of this summary gives little indication of the passionate intensity of the final section of Book I. Here Hume, beginning in 'despair', and fancying himself 'some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite

in society, has been expelled from all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate' (Hume 1978: 264), eventually arrives at a position he can live with only by resolving to pursue philosophy in a 'careless manner' (Hume 1978: 273), diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as his philosophical convictions (and only in virtue of this thoroughgoing diffidence justified in pursuing his investigations into the 'science of man' [Hume 1978: xv]), and prepared to regard philosophy as something to be engaged in when the inclination takes him, and to be abandoned without regret, when, and for so long as, his bent of mind turns away from it to the pleasures of everyday life.

Book I of the *Treatise* contains Hume's discussion of ideas. Books II and III go on to discuss impressions of reflection, 'those other impressions ... called secondary and reflective, as arising from the original impressions or from their ideas' (Hume 1978: 276). As for the original impressions, or 'impressions of sensation', the study of these, Hume says, 'belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral' (Hume 1978: 8). Thus Hume regards the *Treatise* in its entirety as discussing all the elements of the mental world that are the proper objects of the student of moral philosophy

Book II is concerned with the impressions of reflection Hume calls 'the passions' – our emotions, feelings and motives. Hume's discussion of these prepares the ground for his moral theory in Book III. It does so, first, by introducing the notion of sympathy – a mechanism which converts ideas into impressions and causes our emotional lives to reflect those of others; and, second, by arguing for Hume's famous anti-rationalist thesis, that 'Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (Hume 1978: 415).

Book III builds on Book II by developing an anti-rationalist theory of morals. 'Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent action. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality are therefore not conclusions of our reason' (Hume 1978: 457). Consequently, 'vice and virtue are not matters of fact, whose existence we can infer by reason' (Hume 1978: 468). Feelings or sentiments of praise and blame are pains

and pleasures – impressions of reflection – produced by the operation of sympathy on observers of the consequences of virtuous or vicious actions. Hence the capacity for moral distinctions is 'founded entirely on the peculiar fabric and constitution of the human species' (Hume 1975: 170).

After the *Treatise*, as we have already noted, Hume restated, and to an extent revised, the matter of Book I in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the first *Enquiry* as it is often called.

Two uncontroversial differences between Book I of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* may be noted. The first is the greater focus on causation as the chief topic in the latter, and the brevity of the discussion of the sceptical arguments of Part IV of the *Treatise*. (The argument of section I of Part IV is dropped completely and the discussion of scepticism with respect to the external world, the topic of sections II and IV of Part I, is reduced to its bare essentials.) This shift in focus is already heralded, however, in the Abstract, which identifies the argument concerning causation as the chief argument of the book. The second evident difference between Book I of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* is the role assigned to the principles of association in the former. These are not repudiated in the *Enquiry*, but Hume's enthusiasm for them is reduced.

Another notable difference between Book I of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* is the omission from the latter of any discussion of personal identity. But this difference is accounted for by the Appendix, in which Hume states himself dissatisfied with his discussion of the topic in Book I, and declares the whole matter 'a labyrinth' (Hume 1978: 633).

In other respects the first *Enquiry* most obviously differs from Book I of the *Treatise* by addition, rather than by omission. In particular, it contains the two sections 'Of Miracles' and 'Of a particular Providence and of a future state'. But the former was probably originally intended for the *Treatise* itself, and the latter contains no change in Hume's philosophical position. What the two sections do is to make quite clear the irreligiosity of Hume's position; no doubt after it had become clear to him that his attempt in the *Treatise* to render his work inoffensive to religious

opinion had failed. The argument 'Of a particular Providence and of a future state' is extended and elaborated in the posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 1998).

Book III's moral theory is restated in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which differs less obviously in content from the corresponding book of the *Treatise* than the first *Enquiry*, though there are differences of emphasis and a notable downplaying of the role of sympathy. Book II is unenthusiastically summarized in Hume's little-read *Dissertation on the Passions.*

Precursors, influences and effects

First among Hume's precursors to be mentioned, of course, must be Locke and Berkeley, his British Empiricist predecessors.

Locke expresses the general position they have in common with Hume, which is the justification of the standard grouping of the three as 'the British Empiricists', in these words in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1961):

> Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer in one word, from experience.
>
> (*Essay* II, i.2)

Berkeley writes:

> It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways.
>
> (Berkeley 1949: 41)

Hume's Copy Principle is the most succinct statement of this position.

How much more, in the detail of his arguments, Hume owed to the other two is a matter of controversy. Clearly, in his discussion of personal identity, Hume had Locke's ground-breaking account in mind, though how closely his discussion is intended as a response to Locke can be debated. Berkeley's influence on Hume's discussion of abstract ideas has already been noted. The extent of his influence in other areas, Hume's discussions of space and time, and the external world, for example, is more controversial. But Hume's general attitude to Berkeley is made clear in a footnote in the first *Enquiry*:

> most of the writings of that very ingenious author form the best lessons of scepticism, which are to be found either among the ancient or modern philosophers, Bayle not excepted ... [T]hat all his arguments, though otherwise intended, are, in reality, merely sceptical, appears from this, that they admit of no answer and produce no conviction.
>
> (Hume 1975: 155)

From a self-avowed sceptic, the praise could not be more fulsome.

Another undoubted influence on Hume was Newtonianism. Hume would have encountered Newtonian science at Edinburgh during his university years, and would have had ample opportunity during the period of voracious reading he undertook thereafter to go further into the Newtonian system of ideas. And, in fact, in his *History of England* Hume refers to Newton in the most complimentary terms.

In the *Treatise* itself Hume never refers explicitly to Newton by name, but it is impossible to miss the deliberate allusion in his description of the principles of association of ideas as 'a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to show itself in as many and as various forms' (Hume 1978: 12–13).

The importance of the influence of Francis Hutcheson (1694–1747) on Hume was argued by Norman Kemp Smith in his

monumental work *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941). Kemp Smith maintained that it was Hutcheson's philosophy which opened out to Hume 'the new Scene of Thought' of which he speaks in his letter of 1734 (Kemp Smith 1964: 41–2), and speculated that in the order of composition Books II and III preceded Book I.

Hutcheson was an exponent of a 'moral sense' theory of ethics. He held that there was an inner sense, which enabled us to discern good and evil. This inner sense was a feeling and did not rest on reason: thus our judgements of good and evil are not based on reason, but feeling.

Hume's ethics clearly parallels Hutcheson's and is inspired by it, though there is not total agreement between the two (a significant difference being Hume's employment of the concept of sympathy). What is controversial is the extent of Hutcheson's influence on Book I of the *Treatise*. Kemp Smith's belief in the importance of this influence is part of his account of Hume's philosophy in general, as a form of naturalism, one that involves the thorough subordination of reason to feeling. The justice of this description will be considered later.

Whether or not Hume's philosophy is to be described as naturalism another possibility is to describe it as scepticism; and since this is Hume's own self-description, all that can be in question is the sense in which it is correct.

Here the relationship of Hume to the sceptics of antiquity and to the great French sceptic Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) needs to be considered.

The relationship of Hume's philosophy to ancient scepticism is clearly of significance. Hume refers to two schools of ancient scepticism: the Pyrrhonian and the Academic, rejecting the former and endorsing, in the *Enquiry* (Hume 1975: 61), the latter. The Pyrrhonist movement took its name from Pyrrho of Elis, who was reported to have secured happiness through putting his scepticism into practice. This practical aspect of their scepticism was very important to the Pyrrhonists.

What we know about the Pyrrhonists we know mostly through the writings of a later member of the school, Sextus Empiricus

(late second century AD). In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* Sextus defines scepticism as:

> an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that owing to the equipollence of the objects and the reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'unperturbedness' or quietude.
>
> (Sextus Empiricus 1933–49: PH1 8)

This definition identifies the three elements in Pyrrhonism which are relevant to Hume's understanding of it and his attitude towards it: the opposing of appearances and judgements, the suspension of judgement and the consequent state of tranquillity or unperturbedness.

The Pyrrhonian activity of opposing appearances and judgments, and generally of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition to force a 'dogmatist' to suspend judgement, is illustrated by Sextus in various examples. Its purpose was not to establish any position, but rather to show that no position was more worthy of acceptance than any other and so to create a suspension of judgement.

Suspending judgement for the Pyrrhonists meant living without belief (dogma), but the Pyrrhonist does not deny appearances. As Sextus explains: 'we do not overthrow the affective sense-impressions which induce our assent involuntarily; and these impressions are "the appearances". And when we question whether the underlying object is such as it appears we grant the fact that it appears' (PH1 19).

It is clear that the Pyrrhonists thought themselves entitled, despite suspending judgement, to engage in all the normal activities of life. As Sextus writes: 'Adhering, then, to appearances, we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive' (PH1 17).

Sextus is here responding to the challenge that a life without belief is unliveable. This objection was the heart of Hume's own rejection of Pyrrhonism: without belief there is no basis for action.

The third notion central to the Pyrrhonist philosophy is that of tranquillity (*ataraxia*). According to Sextus such tranquillity is a consequence of suspension of judgement (*epoche*). This is again a point on which Hume disagrees with the Pyrrhonists. The perplexity resulting from opposing appearance to judgement (or, in Hume, the narrow imagination to reason), he thinks, gives rise not to tranquillity, but to a 'sensible uneasiness' (Hume 1978: 205) from which the mind 'naturally seeks relief' in a rejection of one of the two opposing principles. In the absence of such a resolution the consequence is not tranquillity but 'despair' (Hume 1978: 264).

The other form of ancient scepticism with which Hume was acquainted was Academic scepticism, the form of scepticism to which Cicero (106–43 BC), Hume's favourite ancient author, was most sympathetic. The most important figure in the history of Academic scepticism was Carneades (214–129 BC). The Academic sceptics rejected the possibility of certain knowledge, but their scepticism was not as radical as that of the Pyrrhonists. In practical life Carneades proposed a theory of probability as a guide to life. He distinguished three levels of probability: the probable, the probable and undisputed and the probable, undisputed and tested. According to Cicero these probabilities provide the Academic philosopher 'with a canon of judgement both in the conduct of life and in philosophical investigations and discussion' (Cicero 1933: 509). In Part III of Book I of the *Treatise*, after the arguments about cause and effect which used to be read as the clearest indication of Hume's scepticism, there occur three sections on probability and a section on 'Rules by which to judge of causes and effects', and in the Abstract of the *Treatise* Hume writes:

> The celebrated Monsieur Leibnitz has observed it to be a defect in the common systems of logic, that they are very copious when they explain the operations of the understanding in the forming of demonstrations, but are too concise when they treat of probabilities and those other measures of evidence on which life and action entirely depend, and which are our guides even in most of our philosophical speculations ... The author of the *Treatise of*

> *Human Nature* seems to have been sensible of this defect in these philosophers, and has endeavoured as much as he can to supply it.
>
> (Hume 1978: 646–7)

The notion of probability is also central to the section 'Of miracles' in the first *Enquiry* and Hume's discussion draws heavily on his treatment of proofs and probabilities in the *Treatise*, which is repeated, more briefly, in the *Enquiry*.

A further important influence on Hume's thought in general, and on his scepticism in particular, was the great French sceptic, Pierre Bayle.

Apart from the general influence exerted by Bayle on his understanding and treatment of scepticism, two places in Book I of the *Treatise* where Bayle's influence is particularly visible are the discussion of space, time and vacuum in Part II, and section V of Part IV in which Hume argues that the hypothesis of an immaterial soul substance is no more intelligible than that of a material soul substance; both are products of narrow imagination.

In the latter discussion Hume uses arguments from the article in Bayle's *Dictionary on Spinoza*, in the course of a teasing comparison which is intended to show that the theologians' 'doctrine of the immateriality, simplicity and indivisibility of a thinking substance is a true atheism, and will serve to justify all those sentiments, for which Spinoza is so universally infamous' (Hume 1978: 240). Perhaps the most significant feature of this argument is the extent to which it reveals Hume's commitment to the reification of perceptions.

Of all the topics discussed in Hume's philosophy perhaps the most important is causation, and in this connection the influence of Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) is crucial (for an extended investigation to which the summary below is greatly indebted see McCracken 1983).

In Book I of the *Treatise* Malebranche is mentioned by name only twice: in section XIV of Part III, 'Of the idea of necessary connexion', and in section V of Part IV, 'Of the immateriality of the soul'. But the text to which the former reference is attached provides convincing evidence of the attention with which Hume read

Malebranche. Arguing for his conviction that the power by which a cause produces its effect is perfectly unknowable Hume writes: 'There are some, who maintain, that bodies operate by their substantial form; others by their accidents or qualities; several, by their matter and form: some by their form and accidents, others by certain virtues and faculties distinct from all this' (Hume 1978: 158). Malebranche writes: 'There are philosophers who maintain that second causes act by ... their substantial form. Many by Accidents and Qualities, some by Matter and Form, others by Form and Accidents, others still by certain virtues, or of qualities distinct from all this' (Malebranche 1700: 156, quoted in McCracken 1983: 257).

Malebranche was an Occasionalist. He denied that anything was a true cause except the infinite will of God. Anything else, however constantly conjoined with any other object, is a mere secondary cause or occasion on which the one true cause, divine power, acts to bring about its effect.

The argument that Malebranche gives for this doctrine starts from his definition of a true cause: 'A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect' (Malebranche 1980: 450, quoted in McCracken 1983: 261). But, Malebranche insists, there is never perceivable such a necessary connection between any two finite beings. Therefore, it is only God who is a true cause since it is a contradiction that He should will and that what He wills should not happen. Thus in the whole of the created world there is no true causal connection.

> We are, of course, disposed to suppose that we can see that this is not the case and that we can see the force in one body communicated to another. But, Malebranche asserts, we are mistaken: Your eyes, in truth, tell you, say, that when a body at rest is struck by another it begins to move. ... But do not judge that bodies have in themselves some moving force, or that they can communicate such a force to other bodies when they strike them, for you see no such thing happen as that.
>
> (Malebranche 1968, vol. 10: 48, quoted in McCracken 1983: 259)

The cause of our mistake is that a constant association of two things in our experience so acts on our brains as to create a habit of expectation, so that whenever we see one of the objects we form an expectation of the other; and this habit of expectation, the work of the imagination, we mistake for a necessary connection between the two things. This, according to Malebranche, is why everyone concludes that a moving ball which strikes another is the true cause of the motion it communicates to the other, and that the soul's will is the true cause of movement in the arms – because it always happen that a ball moves when struck by another, and that our arms move almost every time we want them to.

Hume, of course, was no Occasionalist, and made his opposition clear at every opportunity. But even given just this sketchy outline of Malebranche's views we can conclude that the extent of his agreement with Malebranche is considerable: like Malebranche he insists that in defining causation there is a necessary connection to be taken into account, and so rejects any mere regularity analysis of causation of the type that latter day 'Humeans' have put forward: like Malebranche he argues that no necessary connection can be discovered between any two finite things because there is no contradiction given any two distinct things, that one should exist and the other not; like Malebranche he denies that we can ever perceive the operation of any power or productive principle; like Malebranche he thinks, nevertheless, that we universally hold the mistaken belief that such finite items as the movements of two billiard balls are necessarily connected; and, finally, like Malebranche he explains this mistake as resulting merely from the operation of the imagination, acted on by experienced constant conjunctions, which creates a habit of expectation which the mind externalizes as a necessary connection between the constantly conjoined objects. Where Hume parts company with Malebranche is only in denying that his notion of 'true causation' has any applicability, and he does so only because he rejects innate ideas, and, therefore, denies that we have any idea of God's will which can enable us to discover any more of a necessary connection between it and God's actions, than between any finite will and the actions of its possessor. Thus

he writes in the context of his discussion of the idea of necessary connection:

> The principle of innate ideas being allowed to be false, it follows that the supposition of a deity can serve us in no stead, in accounting for that idea of agency, which we search for in vain in all the objects, which are presented to our senses, or which we are internally conscious of in our own minds. For if every idea be derived from an impression, the idea of a deity precedes from the same origin; and if no impression, either of sensation or reflection, implies any force or efficacy, 'tis equally impossible to discover or even imagine any such active principle in the deity.
>
> (Hume 1978: 160)

Finally, in looking at influences on Hume's thought, we should not ignore Descartes (1596–1650). The indirect influence of Descartes on Hume, through Malebranche, one of his followers, is undeniable, as we have just seen, but the extent of Descartes' influence is far greater than this indicates. As Thomas Reid (1941) wrote, Hume shared, along with Malebranche, Locke and Berkeley, a common 'system of the understanding' which 'may still be called the Cartesian system'.

The one great point of similarity between all these philosophers is their conception of philosophy as beginning with epistemology, the theory of knowledge. For all of them the primary question the philosopher must answer concerns the nature and limits of human knowledge. This conception of philosophy is the viewpoint that defines what the textbooks call 'Modern Philosophy'. Descartes, unlike earlier philosophers, asked not just what the world is like, but how we can know what it is like. He thought also that he had provided an account of how this question could be answered, by starting from the one immediate, indubitable datum of consciousness he identified by the Method of Doubt, the Cogito, 'I think therefore I am', and 'working out' to an external world, via indubitable principles of inference (such as that the cause of an effect must have at least as much reality as the effect). His successors, however, found his appeal to such principles unconvincing and thus were left to confront the epistemological problem for themselves.

Hume refers to the Method of Doubt as a species of antecedent scepticism, scepticism antecedent to all study and philosophy, and explains his rejection of it in the first *Enquiry*. Such antecedent scepticism,

> Inculcated by Des Cartes and others as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgement [he says] recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful.

But, he goes on,

> Neither is there any such original principle ... above all others that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not), would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction on any subject.
>
> (Hume 1975: 149–50)

Another point of difference between Descartes and Hume lies in their metaphysics. Descartes maintained that the mind was an immaterial substance 'really distinct' from and independent of body and the notion of substance here is a fundamental concept for Descartes, as it is for his Rationalist successors Leibniz (1646–1716) and Spinoza (1632–1677). Hume decisively rejects it, and with it dualism in the Cartesian form. For the notion of 'substance', as independent existence, he claims, applies to everything that can be conceived, since there are no real connections and everything is, therefore, 'really distinct', in Descartes' sense, from everything else. 'Substance' is, therefore, at least an empty term (and consequently of no use to anyone), and possibly a meaningless one. The mind, in particular, is not an immaterial substance, but a 'bundle of perceptions' and the Cartesian 'I' is a fiction. Thus, whether or not Hume's basic principles are Cartesian, the position he finally arrives at could not be more radically opposed

to that of Descartes. His position is, in fact, the final stage in the development of empiricist thought about substance, beginning with Locke's uneasiness with the notion of an unobservable 'something, we know not what' underlying the observable qualities in things, followed by Berkeley's emphatic rejection of the notion of material substance and his attempted accommodation of the concept of the substantial self under the guise of a 'notion' rather than an idea. In this respect Hume's position marks the final emancipation of modern philosophy from that dependence on the Aristotelian and scholastic sources on which Descartes' philosophy was perceived by his successors to rest so unconvincingly.

Finally, a third point of contrast between Descartes and Hume in respect of their attitudes to non-human animals should be noted. Descartes notoriously held that non-human minds were merely automata, without souls, whose behaviour could be given a purely naturalistic, even mechanistic explanation. Man, on the other hand, could never be completely part of the natural world because he possessed free will and reason. Hume, by contrast, insists that all human life is naturalistically explicable, and insists that we can speak as legitimately of the 'reason' of animals as we can of that of man. 'No truth appears to me more evident than that beasts are endowed with thought and reason as much as men' (Hume 1978: 176). In both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* he has a section entitled 'Of the Reason of Animals', and in both he insists on a

> touchstone, by which we may try every system in this species of philosophy: when any hypothesis, therefore, is advanced to explain a mental operation, which is common to men and beasts, we must apply the same hypothesis to both; and as every true hypothesis will abide this trial, so I venture to affirm, that no false one will be ever able to endure it.
>
> (Hume 1978: 177)

His 'own system concerning the nature of the understanding', he argues, receives an 'invincible proof' when put to this test, for though it is sufficiently evident when applied to man, 'with respect to beasts there cannot be the least suspicion of mistake' (Hume 1978: 178).

So far in this section we have been looking at the relation of Hume to his predecessors, but in order to appreciate fully Hume's philosophical importance we need also to attend to his relation to his successors. In Britain Hume's philosophy attracted, as well as a great deal of abuse, the respectful attention of Thomas Reid, and his moral philosophy, specifically, inspired the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, and in the twentieth century the emotivism of the Logical Positivists. But by far the most important effect of it was, as he himself put it, to wake Imanuel Kant from his 'dogmatic slumber' (Kant 1977: 5) and to stimulate him to write his *Critique of Pure Reason.* In Kant's view, 'since the origin of metaphysics so far as we know its history, nothing has ever happened which could have been more decisive to its fate than the attack made upon it by David Hume' (Kant 1977: 3).

The particular stimulus to Kant's awakening was Hume's treatment of causation and his denial of any necessary connection between cause and effect. Kant describes Hume's achievement as follows:

> He challenged reason, which pretends to have given birth to this concept of himself, to answer him by what right she thinks anything could be so constituted that if that theory be posited, something else must necessarily be posited, for this is the meaning of the concept, of course. He demonstrated irrefutably that it was entirely impossible for reason to think a priori and by reason of concepts such a conbination as involves necessity. ... Hence he inferred that reason was altogether deluded with reference to this concept.
>
> (Kant 1977: 3)

Kant thought that Hume was right to think that knowledge of particular causal connections could not be known a priori, that is, could only be discovered in experience. However, he thought that Hume went wrong in supposing that this was true also of the general causal maxim that everything has some cause. In Kant's view this was a necessary truth, knowable a priori. Nonetheless, Kant accepted Hume's view that the causal maxim was not something whose denial was so self-contradictory; he insisted that it was not true simply in virtue of conceptual relationships, or the meanings of words, and so was, in the now current terminology he

introduced, a 'synthetic' rather than an 'analytic' truth. Hence, he claimed, the causal principle was a 'synthetic a priori' truth. And, as such, Kant thought, it was representative of all metaphysics. For metaphysics properly so-called, consists, he thought, of nothing but a priori synthetic principles and so the possibility of metaphysics becomes the question: 'How are a priori synthetic propositions possible?' (Kant 1977: 21).

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is devoted to answering the question of the possibility of metaphysics framed in this way, and is a work aptly described by a modern commentator as 'of an intellectual depth and grandeur that defy description' (Scruton 1995: 134).

So long as Kant was thought to have 'answered Hume', Hume's philosophy, despite its historical influence, could be thought of as superseded. But in the twentieth century the Logical Positivists (most importantly Carnap, Schlick and Ayer), partly under the influence of Ernst Mach, rejected the Kantian philosophy of the synthetic a priori and reasserted Hume's empiricism. They took as the guiding principle of their philosophy the famous concluding paragraph of Hume's *Enquiry*:

> When we run over our libraries persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our own hand any volume – of divinity, or school metaphysics, for example – 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.
>
> (Hume 1975: 165)

Where they had advanced on Hume, they thought, was only in being able to marry his empiricism with the powerful new logic of Frege and Russell.

Thus, Hume is a figure of undeniable importance. Whether right or wrong, his influence brought about, through Kant, a revolution in the way philosophy was conceived (what Kant, in fact, called a 'Copernican revolution') and both his general approach and particular doctrines are still relevant to present-day philosophical debate.