

Class Eleven - Hume's *Enquiry*, Sections I-III

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Some Context

- **David Hume:** Scottish philosopher, historian and essayist.
 - Lived from 1711–1776
 - * For reference, the meditations were published in 1641, so, when Hume is writing, it's about 100 years later.
 - * Also of note, Newton's *Principia* was published in 1687.
 - Considered the last of the three great British Empiricists, preceded by John Locke (1632-1704) and George Berkely (1685-1753).
 - * **Empiricism** is the view that knowledge is principally based on *sensory experience*, contrasting with **rationalism**, the view that knowledge is principally based on *reason*.
 - Descartes was a rationalist, along with the other great Modern rationalists, Spinoza (1632-1677) and Leibniz (1646-1716).
 - Was not particularly famous in his lifetime as a philosophy—known more as a historian and essayist.
 - Did not hold a university professorship, and was shot down from a professorship opportunity due to being perceived as an atheist (which he clearly was, at least in the weak sense of “a-theism”).
- **The *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:** Published in 1748.
 - Contains many of the same philosophical topics and ideas as the earlier and much longer *Treatise of Human Nature*, published in three volumes from 1739-1740, though the latter contains several topics not included in the *Enquiry* (for instance, a discussion of personal identity that we'll read).
 - Hume came out with several new editions of the *Enquiry*, meticulously making small changes in the text throughout his life.

2 Some Preliminary Metaphilosophical Remarks

- **Two Sorts of “Moral Philosophy”:** Hume starts off the *Enquiry* by making a distinction between two kinds of “moral philosophy,” by which he simply means “the science of human nature”:
 - **The “Easy and Obvious” Kind:** Considers us principally as active beings and aims to show us how to be virtuous.
 - **The “Acurate and Abstruse” or “Prfound and Abstract” Kind:** Considers us principally as reasoning beings and aims to understand the general principles “which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action, or behavior,” (1-2).

Hume's *Enquiry* is of the latter sort, and he feels the need to defend it a bit preliminarily because many are inclined to dismiss it as “metaphysics” (a dirty word!).

- **A Defense of the Second Kind of Moral Philosophy:** Hume first offers the following two reasons:
 - **Necessary for Exactness of the First Kind:** Moral philosophers of the first type could only be pursued with “a sufficient degree of exactness in its sentiments, precepts, or reasonings” if it is based on a philosophy of the second type (4).
 - **Intrinsically Interesting and Illuminating:** Even if it’s not practically useful, it can still function as “the gratification of an innocent curiosity,” and “to bring light from obscurity

However, he acknowledges “the justest and most plausible objection against a considerable part metaphysics, that they are not properly a science; but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which, being unable to defend themselves on fair ground, raise these entangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness,” (5).

- **Necessary to Counter Dogmatic Metaphysics:** “Accurate and just reasoning is the only catholic remedy, fitted for all persons and dispositions; and is alone able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom,” (6).
- **The Influence of Newton:** Newton “determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets [and all other material bodies] are governed and directed. The like has never been performed with regard to other parts of nature,” (8). So, whereas Newton articulated the general principles governing the *external* world, and Hume sees himself as aiming to do something similar with respect to the *internal* world of the mind.
- **Questions:** How does Hume’s conception of philosophy relate to that of Descartes? Consider the contrast between conceiving of philosophy as provide a *foundation* for science and conceiving of philosophy as *itself* a kind of science. What sort of conception are we drawn to? Do we think that Hume would accuse Descartes of attempting to defend “popular superstitions” by “raising entangling brambles to cover up and protect their weakness”?

3 The Origins of Ideas

- **Impressions and Ideas:** Hume breaks down all “perceptions” of the mind into two classes:
 - **Impressions:** “[A]ll our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will,” (11).
 - **Ideas:** “[T]he less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned,” (10-11).
- **Interesting Point of Note:** It seems that this distinction is a matter of degree: whether something counts as an impression or an idea is simply a matter of how “lively” it is.
- **Comparison to Descartes:** Compare this to Descartes’s breakdown of thoughts into three kinds (Third Meditation, page 30)
 - **Images/Ideas:** When I imagine something such as the sky, an angel, or a chimera, we say I have an *image* or *idea* of one of these things.
 - **Volition and Emotions:** When I am want to eat cake, am determined to eat cake, or fear that I’ve eaten too much cake, these are *volitions* (actions) or *emotions* (affections).
 - **Judgments:** When I think that two plus three equals five or that I exist, these are *judgments*.

Hume, in effect, classifies *all* of these things as “perceptions.” He doesn’t make any categorical distinctions between them, as Descartes does. Why not?

- **Hume as a Scientific Observer:** Hume, thinking of himself as a natural scientist. As such, his attitude towards his own mental states is essentially that of an observer. His questions, therefore, don't take the form of asking does one *do* when one, for instance, judges, but what does one *find*.
- **Further Comparison to Descartes:** For Descartes some ideas—like that of thinking—are *innate*, coming from nothing but our own nature, and some ideas—like that of God—are adventitious but not
- **Inventing Ideas:** Like Descartes (recall both the painter analogy in Meditation One and the key part of the argument for God in Meditation Three), Hume claims that the creative power of the mind “amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience,” (11).
 - **Example:** “When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, *gold* and *mountain*, with which we were formerly acquainted,” (11).

Unlike Descartes, Hume applies this principle completely generally.

- **A One Sentence Refutation of Descartes's Argument:** “The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom,” (11).
 - **Question:** What do we think Descartes would say in response?
- **Simple Ideas Must Come from Impressions:** Simple sensory ideas—for instance, the idea of the color of blue—can't be acquired other than by way of having the relevant sensory impression.
 - **An Interesting Exception:** Hume acknowledges a possible counter-example to this principle: someone who's seen a great variety of shades of blue, and has samples all lined up with a missing shade as follows:



He thinks that we could credit this person with the *idea* of this shade, even though they never had the impression of it.

* **Question:** What do we think?

- **An Empiricist Metaphilosophical Principle:** “When we entertain [. . .] 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
 - **Question:** This principle is really going to be the driving force of the whole skeptical inquiry. What do we make of it?