

Class Five - Hume's Empiricism and View on the Self

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Some Context

- **David Hume:** Scottish philosopher, historian and essayist.
 - Lived from 1711–1776
 - Considered the last of the three great British Empiricists, preceded by John Locke (1632-1704) and George Berkeley (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*.
 - Was not particularly famous in his lifetime as a philosopher—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 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).
- **Inventing Ideas:** 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).
- **Inventing the Idea of God:** “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).
- **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.

- **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 suspicion,” (13).

3 Hume on Personal Identity: The Negative Point

- **The Supposed Idea of Self:** “It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner,” (1).

- ▶ **Note on the Word “Self” and Other Words:** Of course, there’s a philosophically innocuous way of using the word self. For instance, when I say that “I invited myself to the party” there’s not these metaphysical commitments that come with this ordinary usage. It is specifically when philosophers talk about “*the self*” that there are these metaphysical commitments built in. (Recall the dialogue with Nagasena and King Melinda). Other words you might find playing the same role:

- * The subject
- * The “I”

Once again, there are perfectly unproblematic ordinary uses of these word (well, maybe not “*the I*” but certainly “I”), but they are often used in philosophical contexts to purport to designate something that’s potentially philosophically problematic.

- **An Observation (or lack thereof):** “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception,” (1).

- **An Argument:**

1. If there is a self, it must be something continuous to which the various impressions are somehow attached.
2. There is no impression of any such thing—there are only impressions of the discontinuous and impermanent sensations.
3. If there is no impression of the self, there is no ground to think that there really is such a thing.
4. There is no ground to think that there really is such a thing as the self.

- **A Similar Argument in the Mahā-Nidāna Sutta:**

Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently originated, subject to destruction, to passing away, to fading away, to cessation. The same applies to painful and neutral feeling. So anyone who, on feeling a pleasant feeling, thinks “This is my Self,” must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think “My Self has departed!” The same applies to painful and neutral feeling. Thus, whoever thinks “My Self is feeling” is regarding as Self something that in this present life is impermanent, a mixture of pleasure and pain, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain “My Self is feeling.”

4 Hume on Personal Identity: The Positive Point

- **The Imputed Nature of the Mind and Its True Nature:** “The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies.’ It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects. [. . .] [W]e suppose the whole train of perceptions to be united by identity [. . .] [but] identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them,” (4-5).
- **The Basic Picture:** It’s hard not to get a sense that the basic picture that we get here is very similar to what we got in the Indian Buddhist philosophy we looked at last week. We can draw the following basic distinction between two levels of reality:
 - Ultimate, foundational, reality: Constituted by the various impressions that we actually have.
 - * This is at least *epistemologically* fundamental. Whether it is *metaphysically* fundamental, Hume is not so clear.
 - Conventional reality: Constituted by the ideas—many of which are mere conceptual imputations—that arise in dependence upon the impressions that we have.