

Chapter Four

Hume's Theory of Knowledge

Life and Times of David Hume

David Hume, the last of the three great British empiricists, was born on 26th April, 1711 at Edinburgh, Scotland. He was born seven years after the death of Locke (1632 – 1704) and when Berkley (1685 – 1753) was a young man of 26. His mother, Katherine Falconer, a daughter of Sir David Falconer, was a woman of a singular merit. His father, Joseph Home, was a gentleman. David adopted the spelling 'Hume' when he left Scotland in 1734 to avoid mispronunciation by the English. Hume's early education was successful and he attributed his success to his mother who undertook his care. Describing his early education, Hume says: "I passed through the ordinary course of education with success, and was seized very early with a passion for literature which has been the ruling passion of my life and the great source of my enjoyment."¹

Hume's mother, Katherine Falconer, came from a family of lawyers and so the young Hume was lured toward the profession. But as it was not his fancy, Hume abandoned it for study of philosophy and general learning. He matriculated at Edinburgh University in 1723 at the age of 12. It was here that he acquired a "grounding in the classical authors, logic and metaphysics, natural philosophy, ethics and mathematics."² It is on record that Hume left Edinburgh University without taking a degree. Though Hume was not so wealthy as evidenced from his family background, he had sufficient means to support himself in his study of philosophy and general learning. Hume later went to business

at Bristol. In 1734, after unsuccessfully trying to be a businessman in Bristol, he went through an intellectual crisis and in a moment of illumination, he found his true vocation. Hume “went to France, resolved to devote himself to literary pursuits and to make a consistent frugality compensate for his lack of fortune”³

It was during these years which he spent in France, 1734 – 1737, that he wrote his famous work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. This work was published in three volumes in 1738 and according to Hume, the work fell 'dead-born from the press'. The work did not attract public applause. Hume said that the work did not elicit even “a murmur amongst the zealots”⁴ He was down-spirited and he exclaimed that “never literary attempt was more unfortunate.”⁵

In 1745, Hume applied for the chair of ethics and pneumatic philosophy at the University of Edinburgh but “his reputation for skepticism and atheism helped to make his application unsuccessful.”⁶ That same year, he landed himself into a lucrative but unsatisfactory position of a tutor to a lunatic, the Marquess of Annandale with whom he stayed one year, directing and guiding him until the Marquess became hopelessly insane. Later, Hume became the Secretary to Lieutenant-General James St Clair, and took on the rank of a Judge-advocate. It was in 1749 that Hume returned to Scotland and lived in the country at Ninewells. In 1748, Hume revised the first book of the *Treatise* under the title *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*. The second edition appeared in 1751 and Hume gave it the title which it bears now, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. This book had the effect of waking Kant from dogmatic slumber. That same year, Hume published *An Enquiry*

Concerning the Principles of Morals which was more or less a recasting of the third part of the Treatise.

In 1752, Hume published several political essays and began his celebrated History of Britain. The celebrity which had eluded him in his early literary endeavors in philosophy came to him as a historian, and by the time he had finished the *History of Great Britain* (1756), *History of England Under the House of Tudor* (1759) and *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Accession of Henry VII* (1761), he had become a world famous figure. Hume later returned to Edinburgh in 1766, became an Under-Secretary of State in the following year and retired two years later due to ill-health. He lived in his native city for the rest of his life. In 1776, Hume died of a bowel cancer. His work, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which had been written before 1752, was published posthumously in 1777, and under Hume's name in 1783. Hume's autobiography edited by his close friend, Adam Smith, was also published in 1777. It must be noted that Hume influenced philosophical thought in a deeper way that it is very hard to get his equal in the history of philosophy.

Background to Hume's Theory of Knowledge

To a considerable extent, the society and the environment in which Hume lived, was in no small measure responsible for his line of thought. In his days, rationalism was all over the atmosphere. The rationalistic metaphysical systems of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Malebranche based their philosophy on reason alone. It is a given among the rationalists that our senses do deceive us. And so they distrusted the senses as sources of knowledge. They maintained that

the senses cannot furnish us with reliable knowledge; only reason can do just that. These philosophers applied deductive reasoning in proving the truth of propositions concerning the nature of the universe, God and human soul. Hume was dissatisfied with the approaches of his predecessors on certainty of human knowledge. Therefore, "Hume wishes to base his philosophy on the experimental method and to study human nature by applying the empirical method of the experimental sciences."⁷

Actually the basic claim of empiricism is that all human knowledge is derived from sense perception. It must be noted that both Locke and Berkeley, the predecessors of Hume, held to the claim of empiricism but none of them was consistent with it. Locke's imperceptible and unknowable substance; Berkeley's spiritual substance is inconsistent with the claim of empiricism. Hume was influenced by the empirical school of philosophy of Locke, Shaftsbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson and Butler. These philosophers viewed with contempt the imposing system of rationalism. Another notable impact on Hume was the skepticism of the French thinkers. It is good to note Hume's contact with the works of Francis Hutcheson as related by Lavine:

Hume had discovered the works of Francis Hutcheson ... who had argued that moral principles are not based upon the bible as Christianity says, nor are they based upon reason, as Plato and Socrates had said. Our moral beliefs, said Hutcheson, rests only on our feelings, or sentiment of approval or disapproval.⁸

Hume went further to assert that moral beliefs are neither divine nor rational but that they only express our feelings to all our beliefs.

According to him, all the achievements of sciences – astronomy, physics, chemistry and physiology – are nothing but sentiments and feelings that we perceive over and over again in an orderly fashion which makes us believe them to be true. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume stated that his purpose is to “study the science of man and to explain the principles of human nature.”⁹

Hume was tremendously impressed by the achievements of Newton in the natural science. He acknowledged the extent to which Newton's success depended on his employment of the experimental method. So Hume said that the time had come to involve this same method to philosophy which he believed would record a comparable success. “Earlier thinkers, he [Hume] grants have made a start in this direction, he mentions, and has obviously been influenced by the works of Locke, Shaftsbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson and Butler.”¹⁰ These thinkers were against continental rationalism and they had made some attempt to base their theories on empirical facts about human beings. But for Hume “none had made a systematic attempt to work out an empirical science of man, and none had found any general principles by which the subject could be unified as Mechanics had been unified by Newton's Laws on Motion.”¹¹ Hume was determined to harmonize Newton's experimental method with British empiricism in order to produce a true science by which the hypothesis of rationalistic metaphysicians could be scrutinized.

Hume's particular conception of philosophy as an empirical 'science of man' is to him the true emergence of modern philosophy. The dispositions that shaped the philosophy of Hume can be summed up thus: (a) that all our ideas are acquired from impressions of

sensation; (b) that we cannot conceive of anything different from what our experience gives us; (c) that a matter of fact can never be proved a priori: it must be discovered by or inferred from experience. In order to achieve this task, Hume “proposes to do this by consulting experience.”¹² It is based on this frame of mind that Hume's extreme empiricism was developed.

Knowledge Acquisition

As a thorough empiricist, Hume traces all knowledge back to some original basis in experience. Any knowledge outside the realm of sense experience is an impossibility for Hume. According to Hume, our experience is made of perceptions, a term he employed to designate any mental contact whatever. He divided perceptions into impressions and ideas. Hume's theory of knowledge involves the method of tracing back ideas to their original impressions and that becomes for him, a logical test for the soundness of concepts. Let us now take a closer look at his theory of knowledge.

Hume sets out in Section I Part I of Book I of the *Treatise* to trace the origin of all our ideas. Hume asserts that “all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impression and ideas.”¹³ He maintains that everything about human perception must be based on impression and ideas. This is the foundation for his theory of knowledge. This is also for Hume, a test for a true knowledge. Any claim of knowledge that is not derived from impression is not rationally justified. Impressions and ideas have the same source, that is, sense perception. Sense perception is a direct source of impression and indirect source of ideas. They are almost the

same. The only difference between them lies in their degree of force and vivacity with which they strike upon the human mind.

Those perceptions which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.¹⁴

During sense perception, the direct contact with the object of sense perception is what gives us the impression of the object. As I am now with my pen, I have a very strong perception of my pen. This is what Hume describes as impression. But by the time I leave my study room, I will have the idea of my study room; I will have the idea of the pen furnished by the impressions of my sense experience. This is why Stumpf in his discussion on Hume said that “The original stuff of thought is an impression”¹⁵ So the origin of ideas is nothing but the impressions we have from sense perception. Harold Noonan observed that Hume's understanding of the origin of *ideas* “intends to serve as the foundation of his [Hume's] philosophy.”¹⁶

We have noted that our ideas are characteristically less forceful than our impressions, but the question of the scope of our ideas has not yet been addressed. It is Hume's claims that when we consider this line of thought, we may likely conclude that “there are no substantial restraints on the range of ideas we can form.”¹⁷ Hume further explains:

Nothing, at first view, may seem unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters, and join incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects.¹⁸

Hume said that when we carefully look at the scope of our ideas, we will observe that all the ideas we have are derived from the materials supplied by the senses. However, he notes that we do sometimes conceive an idea of a golden mountain. How come about this idea since there is nothing in real life like a golden mountain? In this particular case, Hume explains that it is likely that we must have previously seen a mountain and also a metal of gold. He went further to say that such ideas like a golden mountain or a flying horse is the product of the mind's "faculty of compounding, transposing, or diminishing the material afforded us by the senses and experience."¹⁹ This implies that it is the work of our imagination to join two ideas which we originally have through impression, of mountain and a metal of gold or a horse and wings to give us a golden mountain or a flying horse. This boils down to Hume's position that "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones."²⁰ This is also known as "Copy Principle"²¹.

In order to substantiate his claim about the origin of ideas and that there can be no idea without an impression, Hume argues:

A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds. Restore either of them that sense, in which he is deficient; by opening this new inlet for his sensations, you also open an inlet for the ideas; and he finds no difficulty in conceiving these objects.²²

This line of thought of Hume is plausible when we juxtapose it with the realities of life. A person who is born blind can never have an idea of colour. One who is deaf from birth does not know what a sound is. These are some of the practical examples to show that without an impression there can be no ideas. Hume maintains that the

understanding of the origin of ideas will help us to “render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasoning, and drawn disgrace upon them.”²³ Hume therefore makes a recommendation:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea, 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 suspicions.²⁴

It is evident that for an idea to have any meaning, according to Hume, it must be derived from an impression or a combination of impressions. It is based on this understanding that Hume subjected metaphysical realities like substance, God, self, etc to test. Now having known that all our ideas are derived from impression, the questions now is: how can we explain what we normally call thinking or how can we explain how ideas group themselves in our minds? The answer to these questions will now lead us to Hume's discussion on the association of ideas.

The Association of Ideas

According to Hume, our ideas are not related to each other by a mere chance. There is a principle of the association of our ideas. When the mind receives impressions, those impressions can reappear in two different ways. Firstly the impression “can reappear with a degree of vividness which is intermediate between the vividness of an impression and the faintness of an idea.”²⁵ Hume said that the memory is the faculty by which we use to repeat our impression in this way.

Another faculty by which we repeat our impression is the imagination. He said that in this second way, the impression “can reappear as mere ideas, as faint copies or images of impressions.”²⁶ In the same way in which he described the difference between impression and ideas, in terms of vividness, he also described the difference between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination. Hume went further to make another difference. Memory “preserves not only simple ideas but also their order and position ... the imagination, however, is not tied down in this way. It can, for instance, combine simple ideas arbitrarily or break down complex ideas into simple ideas and then rearrange them.”²⁷

Even though the imagination can freely combine ideas, it does so according to the principle of association of ideas. Hume said that there is in man certain associating qualities by which one idea introduces another. He maintains that: “The qualities, from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner conveyed from one idea to another, are three, viz., Resemblance, Contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect.”²⁸ He referred to these three qualities as natural relations. It is the belief of Hume that the connection of all our ideas to each other could be explained by these qualities stated above. Stumpf reports:

A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original (resemblance): the mention of one apartment in the building naturally introduces an enquiry ... concerning the others (contiguity): and if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forebear reflecting on the pain which follows it (cause and effect).²⁹

It must be observed that among these three qualities, “the notion of cause and effect was considered by Hume to be the central element in knowledge.”³⁰ Hume therefore asserts that since the causal principle is the foundation of knowledge, any flaws in the principle goes to prove that we can have no certainty of knowledge.

The Operations of the Understanding

In Part I of the *Enquiry*, Hume began with the following words: “All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas and Matters of Facts.”³¹ We shall now focus our analysis on how we can ascertain the falsity or truth of our propositions; how we can ascertain the validity of human knowledge.

Relations of Ideas and Matters of Facts

The category of relations of ideas, according to Hume, covers all true propositions that cannot be denied without self-contradiction, and all false propositions that do imply a contradiction. Omoregbe observes that “the truth or falsity of the propositions which assert relations of ideas depends on the meaning of the terms employed.”³² For Hume, the assertions made in Mathematics, Geometry and Arithmetic cannot be proved nor disproved by experience nor can they be denied without involving oneself in self-contradiction. Also analytic propositions cannot be denied without self-contradiction. For instance, 'The husband has a wife'; the idea of having a wife is implied in the idea of a husband. This type of propositions is necessarily true.

Omoregbe went further to say that “the truth or falsity of propositions which assert matters of fact depends on experience. Experience can confirm or falsify the assertions made by such propositions.”³³ Hume is of the view that when we are not reflecting on a relation between ideas, any proposition we may form can be paired with an equally intelligible contrary claim. Assertions made by science are examples of matters of fact. They can be proved or disproved by experience. To deny such propositions does not involve self-contradiction.

Causal Reasoning

Hume believes that the only form of reasoning that is potentially capable of informing us of the existence of objects and powers that are not directly revealed to us by the senses and our memory is causal reasoning. In Hume's view, any time we make conclusions from what we have observed to what we have not observed, the conclusion is nothing but a causal one. As I am now sitting in my study room, I hear a sound from the neighborhood, and I conclude that it must be a car driving into my compound. I have drawn conclusion even without observing the source of the sound to determine whether it is actually a car or not. Hume explains:

The hearing of an articulate voice and rational discourse in the dark assures us of the presence of some person: why? Because these are the effects of the human make and fabric, and closely connected with it. If we anatomize all the other reasonings of this nature, we shall find, that they are founded on the relation of cause and effect, and that this relation is either near or remote, direct or collateral.³⁴

So it is quite clear that most of our everyday conclusions and decisions are based on causal reasoning. “Without such reasoning, our stock of beliefs about matters of fact would be massively impoverished.”³⁵ Nonetheless, our causal reasoning, we must note, “can only be discovered with the assistance of experience.”³⁶ Following this line of thought, it means that from a purely a priori point of view, it will be arbitrary and presumptuous to posit an effect without any reference to experience. Hume therefore concludes that “all our reasonings concerning matters of fact are founded on the relation of cause and effect ... all our reasonings and conclusions in respect of causal relations are founded on experience.”³⁷

The Rationality of Causal Inference

Here, Hume makes it clear that the conclusions which we normally draw from our experience of the operations of cause and effect “are not founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding.”³⁸ Our causal inferences are based on the proposition that the future will be like the past; that an object which produced a particular effect will be true on future occasions with similar effects. This line of reasoning, according to Hume, “is not supported by any good argument or chain of reasoning.”³⁹ It follows that for Hume, causal reasoning cannot generate rationally justified conclusions.

For us to hold to our causal reasoning, we need to justify the supposition that the course of nature will remain unchanged. This is the only way of “converting deductively invalid causal argument into arguments whose premises do entail the truth of their conclusions.”⁴⁰ Now if we agree with Hume that all our causal inferences are founded

on experiential regularities, then we also have to accept that our causal inferences cannot be rationally justified unless we are justified rationally in believing that the course of nature will remain unchanged. For a person to be justified that his belief is rationally justified, he must be able to show that the belief is true or likely to be true. If this is not done, it is judged as epistemic irresponsibility. Although Hume had argued that causal inferences concerning matters of facts are not justified, it has been observed that “it is natural for us to base our beliefs and expectations on experience.”⁴¹

The Idea of Necessary Connection

Having looked at the causal reasoning and the rationality of our causal inference, let us now look at Hume's conception of the idea of necessary connection. It is obvious that our knowledge is basically on causal reasoning. We believe that the sun will rise tomorrow; we also entertain the belief that having observed that lemon tastes bitter, we conclude that the next lemon will also be better. This kind of argument presupposes a necessary connection between a cause and its effects. This is what Hume sets to investigate in Sections I, II and III of Part III of Book I of the *Treatise* and in the Sections 7–11 of the *Enquiry*.

There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of power, force, energy, or necessary connection . . . We shall, therefore, endeavor, in this section, to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms, and thereby remove some part of that obscurity, which is so much complained of in this species of philosophy.⁴²

That right-angled triangle must be equal to the square of the hypotenuse or that bricks of certain size will break panes of glass, are

derived from causal relations. We come to these conclusions by experience of past events. It must be noted here that Hume denied that we can have a priori knowledge of causation. For Hume, we have to “turn to empirical evidence to discover the effects of particular causes and to find the sources of the idea of necessary connection.”⁴³ Hume's view on the necessary connection is a relation between cause and its effects in which the cause necessarily produces the effects. But since for Hume, all ideas are derived from impression, then, from what impression do we get the idea of necessary connection between cause and effect? To the question of necessary connection Hume explains:

When we look about us toward external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other ... there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, anything which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection.⁴⁴

The point Hume wants to make clear here is that we have no idea of necessary connection. Our idea of necessary connection is not derived from any impression but from the repeated observations of instances of the cause-effect link. “They [cause and effect] seem conjoined, but never connected.”⁴⁵ Our idea of necessary connection is not something of which we can find a priori knowledge; also it is not derived from sensory impression or from an impression gained by reflecting on the operations of the mind. Hume now decided to the imagination as the source of the idea of necessary connection. “Hume argues that the impression of necessary connection is produced by the imagination after we have experienced a constant conjunction between two types of

events.”⁴⁶ When we observe fire and heat for the first time, we do not think them to be necessarily connected. But after series of observing fire and heat together with heat preceding fire, we conclude that fire is the cause of heat. Hume said that this type of conclusion cannot be justified by reason; we just find it natural to think in this way. He argues: “Our idea, therefore, of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity, observable in the operations of nature; where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other.”⁴⁷

Hume points out that there is nothing in the cause that necessitates the effects. No matter how many times we observe oxygen, there is nothing in it to show that when mixed with hydrogen it will give us water. There is no analysis of fire to tell us that when a person's finger comes in contact with it, that it will burn. Hume, therefore concludes that our idea of necessary connection is derived from our habit of associating two events together.

Endnotes

1. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles Hendel, (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 3
2. Harold W. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 2
3. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 5*, (New York: Continuum, 2003), 258.
4. Hume, as quoted in Alan Bailey & Dan O'Brien, *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (New York:

- Continuum, 2006), 3
5. Hume, cited in Samuel Stumpf & James Fieser, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 6th ed. (New York: Mc Graw-Hill, 2003, 2003), 267
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 7. Joseph Omoregbe, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy, Vol. 2*, (Lagos: JOJA Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1991), 72
 8. T. Z. Lavine, *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 148
 9. Ibid.
 10. V. C. Chappell, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1963), xv.
 11. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. J. C. Macnabb, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 24.
 12. Chappell, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, xviii.
 13. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 45.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Stumpf et al., *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 269.
 16. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge*, 51.
 17. Bailey et al., *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 38.
 18. David Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. Selby-Bigge; revd. P. Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 18.

19. Hume, cited in Stumpf, et al., *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 269.
20. Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 19.
21. Bailey et al., *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 39.
22. Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 15.
23. Ibid., 21.
24. Ibid., 22.
25. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, 268.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 54.
29. Hume, as quoted in Stumpf, et al. O *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 270.
30. Ibid.
31. Hume, quoted in Chappell, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 325.
32. Omoregbe, *History*, Vol. 2, 74.
33. Ibid.
34. Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 27.
35. Bailey, et al. *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 48.
36. Ibid., 50.
37. Ibid.

38. Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 32.
39. Bailey, et al. *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 51.
40. Ibid., 52.
41. Ibid., 64.
42. Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 61 – 62.
43. Alan Bailey & Dan O'Brien, *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 64.
44. David Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. Selby-Bigge; revd. P. Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 63.
45. Ibid.
46. Bailey, *Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 74.
47. Hume, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 82.