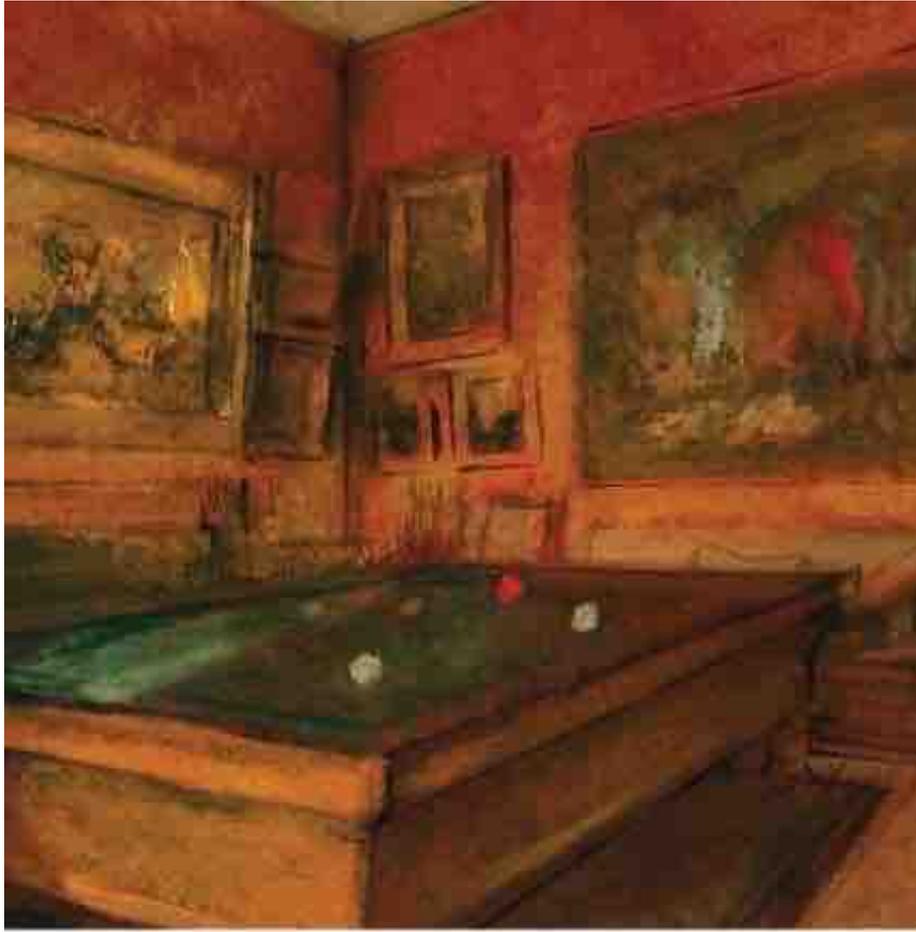


David Hume's An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding



David Hume An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



He employed a rigorous style of empirical thinking and the way he deduced what he advocated to be the way to having correct understanding of things is through reasoning by analogy. All throughout the book, the theme of cause and effect resulting to experience, recurred in all of his ideas, and it is through this means of analogy, by applying ones understanding of experience to something newly encountered, that he applied what he thought was the correctness of knowledge in human thought and the natural world.

In the first pages, he acknowledged the existence of a Creator by whom everything in the universe is dependent upon. But in the middle of the book, he went on to apply his method of analogy and causation to God. According to him, every effect must have a cause that brought it to existence. For example, the footprint on the sand near the sea must have been caused by a person who walked on the sand.

This was his way of rigorously applying his empirical thinking which is limited to what is 'observed and experienced' and then to discard everything that does not conform to this method. But then, he went on to say that the existence of God cannot be justified because even though we see the creation (which is the effect), we had no direct actual experience of its Cause (God), so how can we prove the logic of His existence?

This is where the limitation of logic and rigid empiricism is shown, though Hume will not accept it. Reason will always have its limitation, as much as Faith as how Hume subjected it with criticism will have its limitation as well. Now that in this book, Hume established how human understanding can be subjected to many factors that will deem it susceptible to many kinds of errors, so too, does his method of reasoning by experience and analogy can be subjected to similar flaws.

Despite the comparison of what we know of objects and experiences applied to newly encountered objects and experiences, that does not negate the fact that each are distinct from the other with their own unique qualities. In the case of the Creator - he applies analogy, but he disregards that the Creator is distinct and His Attributes are different from His creation, and therefore for him to make an analogy in the context of the creation is unreasonable. Thus, Hume becomes a victim of logic by the fact that he failed to see the difference between what and whom he is trying to compare, because he reduced the notion of 'qualities' to abstract ideas existing only in the human mind.

Much criticism can be attributed to religious interpretations as practiced by so-called religious people, but the depth of faith and wisdom coming from a belief on a Creator will always make a logical sense to humanity. What Hume dealt with is narrowly confined to issues of language, but the expression of language cannot be rid of its subjectivity and sophistry on the part of human beings with the way they express and understand it, in contrast to what reality and the actual world really is.

Human understanding can indeed be flawed, but this flaw allows room for humanity to adapt to an ever-changing world. It has to grapple with continuous change, which may lead to a downward spiral of conflict and chaos or growth, since the way humans think (as influenced both by their innate nature and outside forces) lead them to act on many different ways towards their fellow beings and with the world around them. On the other hand, if empirical thinking, as what Hume employed in this book is applied in an absolutist sense and make it manifest not only in human thought but in belief, and then subject everything to the limited role of language and reasoning by analogy, including the understanding of the Creator Himself, humanity will be devoid of values and depth of wisdom.

It is universally allowed by modern enquirers, that all the sensible qualities of objects, such as hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, etc are merely secondary, and exist not in the objects themselves, but are perceptions of the mind, without any external archetype or model, which they represent. If this be allowed, with regard to secondary qualities, it must also follow with regard to the supposed primary qualities of extension and solidity; nor can the latter be any more entitled to that denomination than the former. The idea of extension is entirely acquired from the senses of sight and feeling; and if all the qualities, perceived by the senses, be in the mind, not in the object, the same conclusion must reach the idea of extension which is wholly dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. Nothing can save us from this conclusion, but the asserting, that the ideas of those primary qualities are attained by Abstraction, an opinion, which, if we examine it accurately, we shall find to be unintelligible, and even absurd. An extension, that is neither tangible nor visible, cannot possibly be conceived: and a tangible or visible extension, which is neither hard nor soft, black nor white, is equally beyond the reach of human conception.

Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable something, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worthwhile to contend against it.

Language, thought, and experience are thus, among many, are only parts of a complex reality that humans possess, and irrespective of the perception and resulting expression of these human faculties, there is an external world that *exist independent* of human beings.

Hume was pointing that the material world cannot possibly exist without human perception consisting of a collection of qualities which were acquired through experience. These qualities are described to objects perceived in the material world, but at the same time, they are abstract in nature and only exist in the mind. Hume contends that the perceived world is only a collection of qualities that humans attribute to what they perceive, and the independence of the external world as existing apart from the perceiver seems to be only an illusion. This reminds me of another passage from a book entitled *Consciousness* by a Neuroscientist, J. Allan Hobson,

If a tree falls in the middle of a forest, does it make a sound? - George Berkeley

The immediate answer will be 'yes', but, 'what sound does it make if there is nobody to hear it?' So in this case, we have a world which is centered and continuously subjected to human perception - that in Hume's book, is not acknowledged to be existing as independent of human, nevertheless flawed perception and understanding.

David Hume, in this book, allowed me to re-evaluate and re-confirm on a much investigative level, the ways and the limitations of human understanding. He was a frank and brutally to-the-point writer, certainly unconventional, not afraid to present alternative modes of thinking and looking at things, and he has to be commended on his empirical method which is useful in the Science disciplines.

When we reason a priori, and consider merely any object or cause, as it appears to the mind, independent of all observation, it never could suggest to us the notion of any distinct object, such as its effect; much less, show us the inseparable and inviolable connexion between them. A man must be very sagacious who could discover by reasoning that crystal is the effect of heat, and ice of cold, without being previously acquainted with the operation of these qualities.

If we reason a priori, anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in their orbits. It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another.

However, Hume admits that there is one objection to his account: the problem of "The Missing Shade of Blue". In this thought-experiment, he asks us to imagine a man who has experienced every shade of blue except for one. He predicts that this man will be able to divide the color of this particular shade of blue, despite the fact that he has never experienced it. This seems to pose a serious problem for the empirical account, though Hume brushes it aside as an exceptional case by stating that one may experience a novel idea that itself is derived from combinations of previous impressions.

Hume accepts that ideas may be either the product of mere sensation, or of the imagination working in conjunction with sensation. According to Hume, the creative faculty makes use of (at least) four mental operations which produce imaginings out of sense-impressions. These operations are compounding (or the addition of one idea onto another, such as a horn on a horse to create a unicorn); transposing (or the substitution of one part of a thing with the part from another, such as with the body of a man upon a horse to make a centaur); augmenting (as with the case of a giant, whose size has been augmented); and diminishing (as with Lilliputians, whose size has been diminished)

Hume discusses how the objects of inquiry are either "relations of ideas" or "matters of fact", which is roughly the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. The former, he tells the reader, are proved by demonstration, while the latter are given through experience. But here arises a question, why do we suppose that multiple repetitions of an experiment justify us in a necessary law? He shows how a satisfying argument for the validity of experience can be based neither on demonstration (since "it implies no contradiction that the course of nature may change") nor experience (since that would be a circular argument). So there is no certainty of experience to ensure knowledge through cause and effect.

When it is asked, What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning matter of fact? the proper answer seems to be, that they are founded on the relation of cause and effect. When again it is asked, What is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation? it may be replied in one word, experience. But if we still carry on our sifting humor, and ask, What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience? this implies a new question, which may be of more difficult solution and explication.

All reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely, demonstrative reasoning or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence. That there are no demonstrative arguments in the case seems evident; since it implies no contradiction that the course of nature may change, and that an object, seemingly like those which we have experienced, may be attended with different or contrary effects.

If we be, therefore, engaged by arguments to put trust in past experience, and make it the standard of our future judgement, these arguments must be probable only, or such as regard matter of fact and real existence, according to the division above mentioned. But that there is no argument of this kind, must appear, if our explication of that species of reasoning be admitted as solid and satisfactory. We have said that all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect, that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience,

and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question.

For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities. If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance.

For Hume, we assume that experience tells us something about the world because of habit or custom due to our imagination, the observation of constant conjunction of certain impressions across many instances. This is also, presumably, the "principle" that organizes the connections between ideas. And this principle can be changed any time because there is no logical reason or empirical justification for it to be necessary.

The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse, as by the shock of two billiard balls, he could not pronounce that the one event was connected: but only that it was conjoined with the other. After he has observed several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them to be connected. What alteration has happened to give rise to this new idea of connexion? Nothing but that he now feels these events to be connected in his imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other. When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other's existence: A conclusion which is somewhat extraordinary, but which seems founded on sufficient evidence.

It seems evident that, if all the scenes of nature were continually shifted in such a manner that no two events bore any resemblance to each other, but every object was entirely new, without any similitude to whatever had been seen before, we should never, in that case, have attained the least idea of necessity, or of a connexion among these objects. We might say, upon such a supposition, that one object or event has followed another; not that one was produced by the other. The relation of cause and effect must be utterly unknown to mankind. Inference and reasoning concerning the operations of nature would, from that moment, be at an end; and the memory and senses remain the only canals, by which the knowledge of any real existence could possibly have access to the mind. 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. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent inference from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexion.

Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses. We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our natural powers in the production of any effect. There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the chief part of speculation.

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; 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.

On Miracles, is the last chapter in the Enquiry, Hume argues that as the evidence for a miracle is always limited, as miracles are single events, occurring at particular times and places, the evidence for the miracle will always be outweighed by the evidence against — the evidence for the law of which the miracle is supposed to be a transgression. There are, however, two ways in which this argument might be neutralised. First, if the number of witnesses of the miracle be greater than the number of witnesses of the operation of the law, and secondly, if a witness be 100% reliable (for then no amount of contrary testimony will be enough to outweigh that person's account). And both cases can't happen.

He visibly draws on knowledge of a wide range of classical and contemporary thinkers, whose views are often interwoven and more easily assimilated in combination.

Hume declined any resemblance to religious school metaphysics and favoured a limited sceptic approach to science depending on circumstances.

Hume is unquestionably an empiricist philosopher, and he strives to bring the rigor of scientific methodology to bear on philosophical reasoning. His distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact is absolutely crucial in this respect. Anything we can say about the world is a matter of fact, and thus can be justified only through experience and can be denied without contradiction. Relations of ideas can teach us about mathematical truths, but cannot, as some rationalist philosophers would have, teach us about the existence of our selves, an external world, or God.

Hume is a naturalist because he suggests that nature, and not reason, leads us to believe the things we do. Habit has taught us that we are safe in making certain inferences and believing certain things, and so we don't normally worry about them too much. We cannot prove that there is a world external to our senses, but it seems to be a relatively safe assumption by which to live. Rather than try to justify our beliefs or identify the truth, Hume seeks simply to explain why we believe what we believe.

The Enquiry is decidedly a book about epistemology and not about metaphysics. That is, Hume is concerned about what and how we know, and not at all about what is actually the case. For instance, he does not deal with the question of whether there actually are necessary connections between events, he simply asserts that we cannot perceive them. Or perhaps more accurately, Hume argues that, because we cannot perceive necessary connections between events, the question of whether or not they actually exist is irrelevant and meaningless.

Hume is an ardent opponent of rationalist metaphysics, which seeks to answer questions such as whether or not God exists, what the nature of matter and soul is, or whether the soul is immortal. The mind, according to Hume, is not a truth-tracking device, and we misuse it if we think it can bring us to metaphysical conclusions. A Humean science of the mind can describe how the mind works and why it reaches the conclusions it does, but it cannot take us beyond the confines of our own, natural, reason.

Hume's stated method is scientific, of careful observation and inference from particular instances to general principles. The drive of scientific inquiry is to dig deeper and deeper so as to uncover a very few, very simple principles that govern all the complexities that we observe. Newton's genius gives us three very simple laws that can explain and predict all physical phenomena. Hume wishes to perform a similar feat for human understanding (the word "understanding" is used by Hume to describe most broadly the several faculties of human reason). The hope is that Hume will derive a similarly small and simple number of principles that can explain and predict the processes of human thought. His method will be to proceed from simple observation of how the mind works and how we use it in everyday life, and to infer from his observations increasingly general principles that govern our understanding until he reaches a bedrock of simplicity and clarity.

In this respect, Hume follows very much in the empiricist vein of philosophy and owes a large debt to "John Locke". Locke moved against rationalist philosophy, best exemplified by "Descartes", which relies heavily upon rational intuition. The empiricist tradition asserts that experience, and not reason, should serve as the basis of philosophical reasoning.

The motivation for Hume's project is made apparent in his complaint that the "accurate and abstract" metaphysics that he is pursuing is frequently looked down upon and disdained. The difficulty and counter-intuitive nature of these inquiries often lead to errors that may seem absurd and prejudicial to future generations. Even today, there is a great deal of debate as to whether there has been any real "progress" in philosophy: we may have refined our discussions and dismissed some bad ideas, but in essence we are still mulling over the same problems that concerned Plato and Aristotle. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that we are no nearer a satisfactory and final answer than the ancient Greeks. Hume hopes that scientific observation can uncover the principles that underlie our reasoning so that we can be more immediately aware of faulty logic and more easily guided along the correct path.

For instance, Hume's emphasis on observation goes directly against Descartes' rationalism, which disparages observation in favor of pure reason. Hume hopes that his empiricism will open the way for a carefully defined method that will not allow for such disparity amongst philosophers.

Hume also suggests that his work must be epistemically (epistemic: of, relating to, or involving knowledge; cognitive) prior to the new science that he so lauds. The scientific method is a product of careful reasoning, and is thus subject to the laws of human understanding. While science seems to be in far better shape than philosophy, it

too can benefit from his work. In this way, Hume differs from his predecessor, Locke. Locke sees himself as laboring on behalf of the new science, clearing away some of the linguistic rubble that might lead to confusion. While Locke humbly sees himself as simply clearing a path for science, Hume believes that his own work must lay the groundwork upon which science can rest. If he can uncover the precise laws that govern our reasoning and inferences, this should help us draw the right conclusions in our scientific investigations.

Hume brings to bear three important distinctions. The first, and most important, is the distinction between ideas and impressions. This distinction is original to Hume and solves a number of difficulties encountered by Locke. A proper discussion of Hume's footnote would take us too far afield, but we should remark that Hume's criticism of Locke is exact and powerful. The distinction between impressions and ideas might seem quite obvious and of no great importance, but Hume is quite clever to identify the full importance of this distinction. An empirical philosophy asserts that all knowledge comes from experience. For Hume, this would suggest that all knowledge comes from impressions, and so ideas are set up as secondary to impressions.

The second distinction, between complex and simple impressions or ideas, helps draw out further the power of the first distinction. A simple impression might be seeing the color red, while a complex impression might be seeing the totality of what I see right now. A simple idea might be the memory of being angry while a complex idea might be the idea of a unicorn (composed of the idea of a horse and the idea of a horn). Complex ideas and impressions are compounded out of the simple ones.

Hume, we should note, is silently implying that every term must be connected with some idea. In the eighteenth century the philosophy of language had not yet flourished, and it was not clear how difficult it might be to determine precisely how words, ideas, and reality link up. Hume's suggestion that all terms can be analyzed into simple impressions anticipates Russell, who argues that we can analyze all terms into simple demonstratives like "this" or "that." Hume's suggestion comprehends a picture of language according to which the words we use are a complex and opaque expression of a simpler underlying language which proper analysis can bring out.

There are a number of objections we might want to raise to Hume's distinctions and the way they are introduced, but we will touch on only a few briefly. First, we might ask how strictly we can distinguish between impressions. Hume argues that ideas can be vague, but that impressions are exact and that the boundaries between them are clearly defined. Is the boundary between the impression of a 57" stick and a 58" stick that clearly defined? There is some level of vagueness in our impressions that Hume does not acknowledge. We could also point out that while we are experienced in distinguishing colors, we are not so good with some other sensations. For instance, we often have trouble distinguishing between tastes.

Second, we might object to Hume's implicit philosophy of language. It seems closely linked to the idea that simple impressions are clearly defined and infallible. It is far from clear, however, why it should be desirable or possible to reduce all our language to simple impressions. What, we might ask, is the simple impression from which is derived the word "sake," for example?

Third, we might ask Hume to be clearer in his distinctions. For instance, are dream images impressions or ideas? Most likely they are ideas, since they consist of a mixture of imagination and memory. However, dreams are (arguably) phenomenally indistinguishable from waking experience: we cannot prove that we are dreaming from within a dream. Thus, all our impressions from within a dream are as real to us as we dream them as waking impressions are to us when we experience them.

In subsequent sections, Hume presents an argument for why we believe in causation and induction. It is because, he says, observing one event invariably follow another creates in our minds the expectation that it will always be so. But, as he demonstrated earlier, there is no rational basis for this belief. Oddly, in the final sections Hume proceeds as if this belief is justified, and offers critiques of miraculous and natural religion.

But Hume's argument seems to go much farther, and the more optimistic later sections are the result of his either not recognizing the strength of his earlier arguments or deliberately obscuring it. In the critical section, "Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding," Hume demonstrates there is no rational reason to expect future events to follow the same pattern as those in the past. To have confidence in induction, and thus science and most philosophy, is therefore a matter of faith rather than reason. There is no rational way to understand the world.

In order to understand Hume's message, we have to understand the historical context of the book. In the 17th century

mechanical science took over the scepter from christian scholastic philosophy. For centuries, scholars had tried to grasp reality by building axiomatic-deductive systems of knowledge, according to the philosophy of Aristotle. In other words, philosophers could understand the world from their armchairs.

Galileo demolished this worldview, and for this he was thanked by the Church of Rome with an appropriate sentence of life long house arrest. What Galileo did, was to observe the behaviour of Nature in carefully controlled experiments. From then on it was clear that Aristotle's philosophy was falsified on all accounts: the discovery of the vacuum; the observations of comets and supernovae and of planetary satellites - both happening in supposedly unalterable heavenly spheres; Aristotle's assumption that heavier objects fall faster; etc.

In 1687 Newton published his Principia and with this synthesized all the discoveries in physics and astronomy of the past 100 years in one universal system, comprising 'just' 4 laws (three laws of motion and universal law of gravity). With Newton, the Western worldview changed drastically: the only role for God was a master watchmaker, who created this universe and set it running. But more importantly, for philosophy at least, was the change of our conception of truth. Newton induced a grand system from particular observations; and induction was never before used as a scientific method.

Thinkers like John Locke (in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding) and Berkeley (in his Principles of Human Knowledge) would ponder the question of what knowledge is. How do we know what's true knowledge? According to Locke, there is an objective reality out there, but our intellect is too limited to grasp it - the best we can hope for are scientifically informed opinions. Someone like Berkeley even went so far to say that there's no such thing as objective reality: all our sensations and reflections are mental constructs, ultimately build by God.

A second key element in understanding Hume, is the discovery in the 18th century of the works of Sextus Empiricus - an ancient Greek sceptic philosopher, who found a contradiction in the method of induction. When we induce, we derive universal statements from particular observations. But there's no way to guarantee that the next observation will NOT contradict our current (universal) conclusion. So either we have to make all the observations - past, present and future - which is impossible, or we have to admit that induction is not true knowledge.

It is in this historical situation (the 17th century developments in physics and the re-discovery of the works of Sextus Empiricus) that we have to situate David Hume. Now, what does Hume say about the question of what true knowledge is?

Hume begins by explaining what causation is. According to Hume, causation is nothing but custom. When one billiard ball bounces against another, we only notice the movement of the first ball, the temporary bond between both balls and consequently the movement of the second ball. In other words: we see events following each other, nothing more or less. Now, human beings observe from the time they're born onwards certain events following each other. Ever since I can remember, I have seen objects fall to the ground when let loose. This forms in my understanding the custom of "object let loose, followed by fall". This is - according to Hume - causation.

Next, Hume has to explain what learning is. For him, learning is observing experiences and generalizing from these experiences to expectations about the future. In other words: learning is induction. We induce general conclusions (and predictions and expectations) from all the experiences we have observed. But this brings us to the 'induction problem' of Sextus Empiricus: by definition induction is unreliable as a foundation for true knowledge, since we can never with certainty form infinite conclusions from the finite data available to us.

But there is an important distinction here (known as Hume's fork), which is based on Hume's explanation of our ideas. According to Hume, we perceive (simple) ideas via our senses and then connect these ideas into associations (i.e. complex ideas) via reflection. The relationship between ideas can be known by reason alone, a priori. The ideas themselves cannot be known by reasoning a priori, only after they have been generated via our sensual perceptions - a posteriori. In other words: mathematical and logical ideas - ideas about relationships between concepts - can be known a priori, while scientific ideas can be known only by observation.

Since a priori reasoning cannot inform us on certain knowledge about the reality - this requires sensual perceptions - we cannot attain true knowledge about the world. Like Locke, Hume asserts that science can approach this ideal, but we as human beings are limited by our intellectual capabilities. In other words: reason powers are gradual and there's only a difference of degree between us and animals. This point is extremely important, since - unlike today where this is a generally accepted statement - in Hume's time human beings were seen as the epitome of Nature's Great Chain of Being.

So by closing this book and being convinced by Hume - as we all should be - we have become sceptics: induction is our only means of acquiring factual knowledge about the world, but this method is philosophically flawed. Now what?

Well, causation and determination have become problematic ever since the discovery of quantum mechanics - in which uncertainty and indeterminacy are principles (!) - but this doesn't bring us any further, since an indeterministic, uncertain world is - by definition - not knowable. The search goes on...

But, with Hume, we should at least be happy that we have given ourselves criteria by which to judge the truth claims of others. So even though we have given up the aim of attaining certain knowledge about the world, we have acquired a resistance to the truth claims of others. As Hume so humorously writes, every book of someone claiming to illustrate how the world works: "Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, is a philosophical breath of fresh air and a justly revered and studied work. Full of crystal-clear thinking on a variety of subjects, though most focused on the necessity of understanding the limits of our reason and the necessity to understand the experiential learning/customs we share with the rest of the fauna of the natural world, the final three sections specifically, "Of miracles," "Of a particular providence and of a future state," and, "Of the academical or skeptical philosophy," are for me the most potent and interesting.

Full of profound thoughts that still baffle and challenge the mind to this day, some notable quotations include the deceptively simple:

"The wise man proportions his belief to the evidence,"

and the more polemical:

"When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; 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 does maintain on this principle and while he is not afraid of going into abstract reasonings and doubts for mere pleasure of doing so; he is always willing, rather he insists we keep coming back to our daily life to check validity of our conclusions.

He goes on to prove that all our knowledge is derived from experience and that no associations among experienced elements (for example, cause and effect) can thus be *surely* derived on different elements. Then he says it is done by all animals on impulse and life will not be possible otherwise. He is not blind to fact that we, in daily life, proportion our faith in these associations to probability.

He presents a wonderful argument against miracles continuing on same line of reasoning. He argues that all miracles seemed to have happened in long past and always in most barbarian circumstances. It is more probable (and thus easier to believe) that a testimony telling us of occurrence of a highly improbable, almost impossible event (which all miracles are by very definition) should be false (innocently or otherwise)

He is greatly economical with words and conjures a lot in those hundred odd pages. The language is beautiful and thoughts contained them of great value. Despite the wisdom, he is humble, like Socrates, and desires to be told where he is in error. In fact, a couple of times he mentions the possibility that there may be some points he hadn't considered in some particular subject. Neither does he pretend to have established a perfect system of thought.

Section 1: On the different species of philosophy

In this section Hume distinguishes philosophy for the sake of philosophy from applied philosophy. He wishes to argue for a more scientific approach to exploring "human understanding."

p. 2 If they can discover some hidden truths which may contribute to the instruction of posterity.

p. 5 defines metaphysics as the "absolute rejection of all profound reasonings

p. 6 of any art or profession: "a spirit of accuracy carries all of them nearer their perfection, renders them more subservient to the interests of society"

p. 8 the mind is endowed with several powers and faculties, that these powers are distinct from each other, that what

is really distinct to the immediate perception may be distinguished by reflexion: and consequently, that there is a truth and falsehood, which lie not beyond the compass of human understanding. There are many obvious distinctions of this kind, such as those between the will and understanding, the imagination and passions, which fall within the comprehension of every human creature; and the finer and more philosophical distinctions are no less real and certain, though more difficult to be comprehended.

Section 2: Of the origin of ideas

In this section, Hume distinguishes thoughts and ideas from sensory impressions.

p. 13 the less forcible and lively are commonly denominated Thoughts or Ideas--- impression- all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned.

p. 13-14 creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the sense and experience.

p. 16 When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion."

Section 3 Of the association of ideas

In this brief section, Hume proposes three categories for defining association between ideas: resemblance, contiguity in time or place and cause or effect-- three principles of connexion

p. 18 But that this enumeration is complete and that there are no other principles of association except these, may be difficult to prove to the satisfaction of the reader, or even to a man's own satisfaction. All we can do, in such cases, is to run over several instances, and examine carefully the principle which binds the different thoughts to each other, never stopping till we render the principal as general as possible

Section 4 Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding

Part 1

Relations of ideas: geometry, algebra, arithmetic

Propositions of this type are discoverable by the mere operation of thoughts, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe

Matters of Fact

p. 20 All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect- near or remote, direct or collateral

What is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory?

p. 20 causes and effects are discoverable, not by reason but by experience

p. 24 the utmost effect of human reason is to reduce the principles, productive of natural phenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience and observation

Part 2

What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning matter of fact?

-founded on the relation of cause and effect

What is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation?

-experience

What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience?

-all influences from experience suppose that the future will resemble the past and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities

Section 5 Sceptical solution of these doubts

Part 1

p. 36 Reason is incapable of such variation. The conclusions which it draws from considering one circle are the same which it would form upon surveying all the circles in the universe.

All inferences from experience are effects of custom, not of reasoning.

Part 2

Belief

p. 39 nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain

p. 41 customary conjunction of the object with something present to the memory or senses

p. 42 Sensible objects have always a greater influence on the fancy than any other; and this influence they readily convey to those ideas to which they are related, and which they resemble.

Section 6 Of probability

p. 47 There are some causes, which are entirely uniform and constant in producing a particular effect; and no instance has ever yet been found of any failure or irregularity in their operation... but there are other causes which have been found more irregular and uncertain

p. 48 Though we give the preference to that which has been found most usual, and believe that this effect will exist, we must not overlook the other effects, we must not overlook the other effects, but must assign to each of them a particular weight and authority, in proportion as we have found it to be more or less frequent.

Section 7 Of the idea of necessary connexion

p. 50 There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain than those of power, force, energy or necessary connexion, of which it is every moment necessary for us to treat in all our disquisitions.

p. 51 all our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, or, in other words, that it is impossible for us to think of anything, which we have not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses

p. 52 external objects as they appear to the sense, give us no idea of power or necessary connexion

p. 62 one object connected with another -- they have acquired a connexion in our thought and give rise to this influence, by which they become proof of each other's existence

Section 8 Of liberty & necessity

Part 1

p. 66 the economy of the intellectual system or region of spirits

p. 67 Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent influence from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexion

p. 74 It seems almost impossible, therefore, to engage either in science or action of any kind without acknowledging the doctrine of necessity, and this inference from motive to voluntary actions, from characters to conduct.

p. 76 particular objects are constantly conjoined together, and that the mind is carried, by a customary transition,

from the appearance of one to the belief of the other.

p. 78 By liberty... we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will

p. 79 There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than in philosophical disputes, to endeavor the refutation of any hypothesis, by a pretence of its dangerous consequences to religion or morality.

The brilliance of Hume's criticism of causal inferences requires no exposition. It remains one of the great achievements of epistemology.

Even if Kant and later thinkers improved upon it - without exactly refuting it - the skeptical logic retains an undeniable, raw, powerful immediacy.

Whether Hume was a full-blown atheist or not (my guess is that he was), the text leaves very little wiggle room for "the religious hypothesis."

The skeptical treatment of vulgar superstitions and educated follies is equally valuable, since human hubris, maleducation and gullibility remain the true masters of modern societies.

Hume's essayistic style is constantly verbose and not exactly scintillating on every page, but it is consistently lucid, analytical, honest, well-argued - and passionate where it counts.