

**The origins of secular psychology:  
Hume and the naturalizing of Moral Philosophy**

by

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Abstract.

David Hume's philosophy, traditionally seen as radically skeptical, is, rather, a form of skeptical realism. Hume's purpose was to create a science of human nature based on the scientific method of Newton. The essential ingredients of this Newtonian method were observation of all relevant data, including data from introspection, and strict avoidance of untestable speculative hypotheses. It is argued that, largely for religious reasons, Hume's work was misinterpreted and dismissed as skepticism, with the result that subsequent philosophies of human psychology were left with the alternatives of calculation or speculation.

INTRODUCTION

The conventional reading of David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1778) both by religious moralists of his day and by the logical positivists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused almost exclusively on Book I, and saw the *Treatise* as a skeptical attack on the illusory certainties, not only of rationalism, but also of common sense, and ordinary language. Since the middle of the last century, however, some Hume scholars, building on the work of Norman Kemp Smith (1941), have interpreted Book I as a naturalistic account of human perception and cognition (Garrett, 1997; Read & Richman, 2007), and given equal attention to the similarly naturalistic treatments of human emotion and morality in Books II and III (Baier, 1991, 1994). As compared with the "skeptical" reading, these "naturalistic" ones seem far more in keeping with Hume's stated intention, both in the *Treatise's* subtitle, "Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into the Moral Subjects," and in the explicit identification of his method with Newton's commitment to describing the behavior of gravity

without indulging in speculation about the nature of its cause. (*T.1.3.14\**; S-B, 159)<sup>1</sup>.

The explicit references to “experimental method” and to Newton’s physics not only support a naturalistic reading of the *Treatise*, but also suggest that we see Hume’s project, for all its literary and philosophical qualities, as an early attempt to apply scientific methods to psychology, ethics and political theory. In so doing, however, we need bear in mind that Hume’s idea of the experimental method was considerably different from that of contemporary science. In 18<sup>th</sup> century the word “experiment” had not yet taken on technical connotations and it referred more broadly to experience and to the condition of being present to witness a phenomenon (Experimental, 2009, Def. A.1.a.). Quantitative methods and controlled manipulation of variables were not seen as essential, and Hume did not think such methods as feasible in the human sciences (*T. Introduction*; S-B, xviii -ix). What was essential was a commitment to the principle of experience and to the avoidance of untestable, speculative hypotheses about the natures or essences of the phenomena in question (*T.1.3.14\**; S-B, 159). For Hume, the experimental method meant strict observation and careful description of phenomena; his idea of data included observations of his own mental processes, and he invited readers to verify his assertions by making comparable observations of their own.

This kind of scientific approach to the study of human nature, however, has had relatively little influence on the subsequent development of moral philosophy and psychological science. “Common sense” philosophers like Reid, and German Idealists like Kant, each with a commitment to unverifiable hypotheses – in both the Humeian and contemporary senses – mistook Hume’s skepticism about transcendental doctrines for skepticism *tout court* and focused the attention of posterity on the epistemological issues in Book I and away from the positive contributions of the *Treatise* as a whole. And subsequently, the

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<sup>1</sup> In references to Hume, ‘T’ refers to the *Treatise*, the numerals following the ‘T’ refer to Book, Part, and Section numbers, and the S-B number identifies the page in the Selby-Bigge edition.

\*A version of this paper posted previously erroneously had this citation as *T.1.3.6*.

study of human nature has tended to bifurcate into a philosophic tradition that pays little or no attention to questions of verification, and a narrowly scientific mode that insists, not only on the *method* of experience and observation but also on the quantities and laboratory *techniques* of the physical sciences (Slife & Williams, 1995).

#### BOOK I: OF THE UNDERSTANDING

The title defines the subject matter: Book I is about *Understanding*, not about *Skepticism*. While Hume's experimental method makes him skeptical of inappropriate uses of reason, he considers the arguments for absolute skepticism to be, themselves, examples of such inappropriate reasoning (*T.1.4.1*; S-B, 180-87). Reason, which he defines as the comparative assessment of ideas (*T.13.11*; S-B, 125), is useful in mathematics and other disciplines where the objects under study are abstract and defined by the mind alone. When the objects of interest are matters of fact, and their natures discernable by investigation, experience is essential for understanding (*T.1.3.6*; S-B, 86-7).

The text does, certainly, give rise to occasions for thinking of Hume as a skeptic: most dramatically in his absolute refusal to speculate about the causes of perceptions. But, in Book I, Hume is focused on the human mind – his own being his most familiar example – and, in his mind, he finds only *Impressions* and, their less vivid copies, Ideas – collectively, *Perceptions* (*T.1.1.1*; S-B, 1. For a discussion of Hume's "copy principle," see Landy, 2006; Garrett, 1997). The causes of those perceptions lie outside his data set and, he argues, anything said about such causes, in this context, would be unverifiable speculation. This does not mean he thinks that those causes don't exist or are not knowable with tolerable, if not perfect, accuracy. Later, in Book III of the *Treatise*, he will assert, quite clearly, that an entity must exist prior to its being perceived (*T.3.1.1*; S-B, 468), and he gives guidance for reasoning about "matters of fact" in later sections of Book I, itself (*T.1.3.4*; S-B, 173-6).

Far more important than what he doesn't say about the causes of perceptions, is what he does say about the law-like ways in which the mind

associates perceptions with one another. From observations of his own mind and the speech and writing of others, he concludes that the mind tends to form connections between ideas on the basis of three *principles of association*: similarity, contiguity and causation. In the case of impressions, he says, associations are made on the basis of similarity alone. (*T.2.1.4*; S-B, 282-3). Of the associative principles, the most important is that of causation, which he defines, on the one hand, as a *constant, temporally ordered, conjunction* of impressions, occurring repeatedly and without exception, and on the other, the mind's involuntary assumption of a '*necessary connexion*' [*sic*] between constantly conjoined events (*T.1.3.14*; S-B, 155-6). For Hume, either constant conjunction or '*necessary connexion*' constitutes the actual definitions of causality (*T.1.3.14*; S-B, 169-70).

The sense of a "necessary connexion," on the basis of which we make inferences from the appearance of one object to the existence of an (as yet unobserved) other, is, for Hume, an aspect of the innate structure of the mind – both in humans and in non-human animals (*T.1.3.16*; S-B, 176). Such inferences, he says, are supported not by formal reason but by a feeling of belief (*T.1.3.5*; S-B.86). He acknowledges that such feelings, grounded in our experiences of constant conjunction, are never as sure as the reasoning that tells us a line is the shortest distance between two points (*T.1.3.3*; S-B, 79); but Hume clearly trusts them, for both practical and philosophical purposes, and he is not at all reluctant to fill the *Treatise* with causal assertions about events in the external world. Thus, neither pure thought nor the simple feeling of belief is entirely to be trusted, but on balance, the two, together, are seen as reasonably accurate.

## BOOK II: OF THE PASSIONS

Balance, in fact, is the key to Hume's account of human understanding, which, by encompassing feeling, as well as reasoning, avoids becoming either mechanistic (reducing cognition to blind instinct) or rationalist.

We find a similar balance in his treatment of the emotions, though, here it is the balance of natural and social factors: one that avoids the extremes of positivist

reductionism, on the one hand, and social-constructionist relativism, on the other.

One of the most remarkable things about the early sections of Book II is how frankly un-skeptical Hume shows himself to be, as soon as he leaves the subject of epistemology. The passions, like the understanding, originate with impressions, but in this context Hume is far less concerned with maintaining his agnosticism about the causes of impressions. Here, in the very first section, he appears quite comfortable saying that original or sensory impressions, “arise from natural and physical causes”: either within the body or from contact between sense organs and external objects (*T.2.1.1*; S-B 275).

The modifier, “original”, here, is to be contrasted with secondary impressions, which he sees as having mental antecedents: secondary impressions occur when ideas acquire an emotional charge – such as the feeling we call *belief*, or the nostalgia that might accompany a memory – which emotion causes the idea to become as vivid as, and thus the equivalent of, any sensory impression. Hume says such secondary impressions are “impressions of reflexion [*sic*]:” they arise out of reflection on, or ideas about, earlier impressions (*T.1.1.2*; S-B, 7-8).

Reflection is a crucial concept for Hume’s discussion of the passions (Baier, 1991). Some passions, like the immediate pleasure we take in a beautiful vista or painting or the disgust that causes us to recoil from foul odors, are original impressions, but the majority are more elaborate. Most passions, and certainly those of greatest interest to Hume, are secondary impressions involving complex relationships of ideas and original impressions – passions which have distinct causes, objects, subjects and qualities (*T.2.1.5*; S-B, 281-6). This complex theory of passions reflects Hume’s sense that human nature, and therefore also human emotion, is intrinsically social. Thus, Hume thinks that the original (in his sense) aesthetic joy a person has when admiring a structure, like Venice’s Basilica San Marco, is always mixed with a certain feeling of pride at being able to view and appreciate such a world famous sight (*T.2.1.5*; S-B, 287-8). And, the pleasure one gets from hearing a beautiful violin solo is, likewise, always mixed with love – usually in the form of admiration – for the composer and performer (*T.2.2.1*; S-

B,329). It is this profoundly social aspect of most passions that provides the basis for Hume's discussion of morality in Book III.

### BOOK III: OF MORALS

Hume, like Spinoza before him, recognized that the conventional model of morality, in which reason controls passion, could not be correct, because reason alone cannot motivate action; motivation requires passion, feeling, or sentiment (*T.2.3.3*; S-B, 413). For Spinoza, rather than reason, it was the affective “*love of reason*” (*Ethics*, 5p32c), that motivates ethical behavior. Hume, while agreeing with his predecessor that human nature includes an innate love of knowledge or curiosity (*T.2.3.10*; S-B,448-54), argues that *sympathy* is the motivation for moral judgment and action (*T.2.1.11*; S-B,316. & *passim*). When witnessing any act deemed virtuous, whether it be an act of justice or benevolence, the judgment that assesses the act’s virtue arises from our innate sympathy for the recipient of the action. We are pleased by such actions, even when we gain no direct benefit from them, because it is an aspect of human nature to sympathize (identify) with the recipient and we participate in his or her pleasure.

Virtues and virtuous behavior, thus, are human qualities and actions that give us pleasure and cause us to love (admire, respect, etc.) the possessor of that quality; vices and vicious acts, in turn, are those that inspire hatred (fear, disgust, contempt, etc.) (*T.3.1.2*; S-B, 471). Following these definitions, Hume’s list of virtues includes things not seen as virtuous by conventional moralists. Thus, pride, if well justified and well concealed, is a virtue, both because it is a pleasant feeling in itself, and because it motivates forms of excellence, which gives pleasure to both self and others. Physical beauty and natural abilities are also seen as virtues because of the pleasure they give rise to (*T.3.3.4*; S-B,606-14). Conventional moralists’ objections that such things can’t be virtues because they aren’t volitional are moot for Hume, because in his notion of causality (the constant conjunction of two events together with their necessary connection in the mind), the notion of abstract free will is not coherent or intelligible.

Sympathy, however, is not the only way that humans respond to each other; particularly in relations with relative strangers, sympathy can be overwhelmed by conflicts between opposing interests, in ways that require the establishment of social conventions and institutions -- compliance with which, in Hume's view, constitutes justice. Hume, like Hobbes before him, expresses his conception of the interwoven rights and obligations entailed in a system of justice, by means of a story about the origins of society itself. His story differs from Hobbes's famous tale of humanity emerging from a state of natural freedom and war of each against all by the creation of a social contract establishing the sovereignty of society. (*Leviathan*, Chaps. 13 & 14.) For Hume, society comes before the contracts and develops, first in the mutual attraction of the sexes and in the social bonds formed for the care of offspring (*T.3.2.2*; S-B, 486). This is the origin of both sympathy and society, as the advantage of cooperative endeavor is so obvious that the circle of cooperation enlarges naturally to take in cooperation with others living near enough to be known and trusted. Conflict, in Hume's story, arises only out of disputes about transferable property, and then mostly in interaction with strangers, for whom we feel less sympathy than we do for those close to us (*T.3.2.2*; S-B, 489). It is in this situation that artificial conventions and contracts become necessary for the peaceful exchange of transferable property (*T.3.2.2*; S-B, 492). And, it is only at this stage of social development, that justice and fairness are required and valued. These, Hume refers to as the "artificial virtues," though he is careful to point out that they are only artificial in the sense of being artifacts. In a larger sense, they, too, are natural, because, they are necessary for the maintenance of the social context that is essential to human nature itself and because it is natural for humans to create them (*T.3.2.1*; S-B, 484).

#### CONCLUSION

Hume, the empirical philosopher, thus places experience at the center of each of the three aspects of human nature addressed in the *Treatise*. But, in each

case the experience in question is that of a being with given natural propensities. In his account of the understanding, the experience of constant conjunction of objects or events only becomes causality because the mind naturally posits a necessary connection between them. Passions, of course, are feelings, which is to say experiences, but the peculiarly human ones – pride/ humiliation and love/hatred – are shaped by a natural human tendency to social comparison. And in morals, while each person's sympathy is based on his or her own experience, the sympathetic sentiment that results from one's own experience with that of another, is an innate aspect of human nature.

Hume's experiential empiricism is quite different from positivists' technical empiricism, with its ideal of knowledge unshaped by the knower. But his notion of experience is consistent with Newton's science, which, while eschewing speculation about unverifiable hypotheses about the causes of nature's law-like regularities, is nonetheless, absolutely committed to the causal explanation of observed phenomena. As such, it is equally far from transcendental certainties and the relativistic notions of social construction. Thus, Hume, like Spinoza before him, represents a path not taken in western, scientific culture. Interpreted as skepticism by the agents of religion and secular authority, in much the same way that Spinozism was taken for atheism, Hume's *Treatise*, represents a synthesis that did not hold; and in its absence the subsequent history of western thought, including the development of contemporary psychology, would be largely shaped by the conflicting forces of utilitarian calculation and dogmatic speculation.

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