

Remote Learning Module for 17 April 2020

Lecture Notes: David Hume. His Life & Times

Last time we completed our tour of Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, tracing the sequence of implications we find there, ranging from nominalism to empiricism to immaterialism to phenomenalism to realism. We saw in particular how Berkeley deployed his critique of abstract ideas in order to collapse Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and how, once these distinctions are collapsed, both inferential and representational realism appear untenable. Today we'll take a brief look at the crown prince of British Empiricism, David Hume, whose critique of the very idea of causality as necessary determination would come to waken Kant from his dogmatic, Leibnizian slumbers, and whose distinction between sensory impressions and empirical ideas would come to shape the Logical Positivism of the early 20th century.

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— Curriculum Vitae —

(1) David Hume was born on the 26th of April in 1711 (barely a year after Berkeley had composed his *Principles*) in Edinburgh, Scotland. His family, although not especially wealthy, descended from Earl of Hume. His father died when David was but two years of age, leaving him, along with his older brother and sister in the care of their mother, Katherine. Being only a second son, his prospects for making his way in the world were limited; he was thus expected to enter the legal profession, but finding the study of law “nauseous,” and having received a small patrimony, he was able to dedicate himself to literature and philosophy rather than the pursuit of law. He demonstrated considerable intellectual acumen quite early in life, and thus, barely eleven years old, began his studies at the University of Edinburgh, where he developed proficiency in Latin and Greek, and encountered both classical literature and modern philosophy.

(2) Eschewing legal studies, Hume spent his teenage years concentrating on philosophical speculation against the background of his religious training in Scottish Calvinism, a contrast that probably had much to do with his lifelong antipathy towards organized religion. Finding that he could live more freely and more cheaply in France, he eventually moved to La Flèche, in Anjou, where Descartes and Mersenne had been schooled by the Jesuits in the 17th century. Here he became acquainted with a variety of Post-Cartesian rationalists, most notably, Malebranche. When he'd reached his 23rd birthday, he began composing his magnum opus, the *Treatise of Human Nature* in Anjou; he completed the work three years later, and in 1737, returned to England in order to publish his new “Scene of Thought.”

(3) Although the *Treatise* did not sell as poorly as Hume would later remember (saying that it “fell deadborn from the press”), it did arouse “a Murmur among the Zealots” sufficient to inhibit his efforts to secure a university position (first at Edinburgh and six years later at Glasgow); he would never enter the academic life. After a brief stint as a tutor (finding his pupil to be quite insane), he served as a minor diplomat in Austria and Italy in the service of his cousin, James Saint Clair. Later, in 1763, he returned to France as private secretary to the British

Ambassador. Like Leibniz before him, Hume enjoyed Parisian intellectual society immensely, as well as developing a great fondness for French wine, women, and song.

(4) In the years just prior to his move to Paris, Hume completed his massive, six volume *History of England* whilst working as Librarian to the Edinburgh Faculty of Advocates. This work was an enormous success (it remained standard in British education until it was supplanted by Winston Churchill's *History* in the 20th century), the proceeds of which provided him with enough financial security to carry on with his philosophical writings. His *Essays Moral and Political* was in turn an instant success. All the same, even after gutting several of the more controversial sections of his *Treatise*, he was not able to make much headway in gaining acceptance of his rigorously skeptical empiricist philosophy. Adapting various portions of his masterwork into shorter publications, he went on to bring to light his *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and the even shorter *Abstract*.

(5) None of these works proved very successful, however. Contrariwise, Hume's countryman, James Beattie's *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; in Opposition to Sophistry and Skepticism* went to five editions. For the frontispiece, Joshua Reynolds painted Beattie (over the title, "The Triumph of Truth"), sitting with his book, watching an angel casting three demons, one of them Hume, into the bottomless pit of hell. Hume would later call Beattie a "silly, bigoted fellow."

(6) Undaunted, Hume returned to Edinburgh in 1769, and, using the proceeds from his *History* and "soft" philosophical essays, built a house in New Town, where he lived out his remaining years. He maintained a correspondence that include Montesquieu, Benjamin Franklin, and Immanuel Kant, all of whom recognized the power of Hume's intellect, and how the Scottish, so-called, Common Sense Realists had completely misunderstood the problem of knowledge as Hume posed it in *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*.

(7) Hume's last work, the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, was published posthumously. The product of a lifetime's antipathy towards organized religion, the *Dialogues* features three interlocutors, Demea (who proffers an *a priori* demonstration of Deity from the impossibility of infinite causal regress), Cleanthes (who presents an *aposteriori* proof from Design), and Philo, the Skeptic. Philo's response to Demea trades on one of Hume's most celebrated phrases: "There are no necessary connections among matters of fact." Since existence claims are factual, there can therefore be no *a priori* proofs for the existence of anything, much less a god or gods. Moreover, Philo contends, if there is a necessary being, then the Universe itself is sufficient. With respect to Cleanthes' argument from design, Philo contends that the analogy on which the argument depends (a divine artificer must be like human artificers) doesn't at all require ascribing attributions like "eternal," "infinite," or "incorporeal" to the divine designer; rather, the universe may have been issued by a long-dead god, or a team of gods, or the universe may be but one among many "botched and bangled" efforts by a designer much like a human being—bodily and prone to error. Moreover, citing the Conservation of Mass, Philo observes that Matter must be self-organizing, leaving no work for a creator to accomplish. And, even if the Design Argument succeeds, all we get is that "the universe, sometime, arose from something like design"; every other theological claim follows "by the utmost license of fancy & hypothesis."

(8) Never an academic, but a man of letters and minor political affairs, Hume was enormously popular in the literary world; his conversations in the Paris *salons* were often the talk of the

town. He was thought to be sociable, witty, kind, and devoid of envy. The French called him *Le bon David*; he would even become known among the Scots as *Saint David* (an irony that surely would have brought him considerable mirth). He never married, but was said to have had *many women friends*. He died in Edinburgh New Town of intestinal cancer in 1776, saying that he accepted death as total annihilation in the Epicurean tradition.

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On Monday, we'll begin our review of Sections I – VII of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which, ever mindful of the fate of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, he presents only as an *introduction* to his philosophy. Be well everyone, and, remember: social distancing, while it may inhibit our perceiving one another directly, does save lives, thereby keeping us firmly in the realm of the perceivable, where, as we shall see next week, causes, however disentangled from necessitation, may continue to connect us one with another.