

Hume in the Enlightenment Tradition

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David Hume was the outstanding philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment, so his place in the Enlightenment tradition might seem to be secure. But things are not so simple. One problem is uncertainty concerning the connection between the Scottish Enlightenment and what is normally designated more simply and authoritatively as *the* Enlightenment – the Enlightenment of the French *philosophes*. The latter is commonly recognized as the chief formative influence on the modern world, even to the extent of defining the meaning of modernity as the progressive unfolding of “the Enlightenment project.” The former, in contrast, has often been cast as a mere fringe phenomenon, the appropriate preserve only of dedicated Scotticists, such that to connect it to Hume is to dignify a merely provincial intellectual movement.

The Scottish Enlightenment is no longer dismissed, but the long neglect from which it suffered has not been without effect. That it was a major intellectual phenomenon, a significant component of the wider eighteenth-century European Enlightenment – and recognized as such at the time – is no longer seriously doubted. That Hume was its outstanding philosopher is likewise accepted. But that the interpretation of Hume's philosophy suffers when not conducted with an eye to this background is not similarly accepted. The problem does not lie with specialists in Hume's philosophy, most of whom are well acquainted with the context in which Hume worked. It lies, rather, with the everyday practice of average modern philosophy departments. In the everyday setting, Hume's philosophy is standardly tied to a limited array of contemporary philosophical problems. These problems – essentially epistemological and metaphysical – are treated in abstraction from any sense either of their place in Hume's overall philosophy, or of the philosophy's place in the wider intellectual movements of his day. Moreover, in the same corridors, the Enlightenment is typically judged to be essentially concerned with critical social theory and social improvement rather than with “the problems of philosophy.” The result is that Hume the philosopher and the Enlightenment seem to be connected only by an accident of history.

Plainly, this view depends on certain stereotypes. The first, philosophical, stereotype is that philosophy is essentially epistemology and metaphysics; its history, their history. The originators of modern philosophy thus divide into rationalists and empiricists, competing schools of thought divided on the question of the sources, nature, and extent of our knowledge. Hume belongs in the latter camp, but as a purely destructive

thinker who even destroyed empiricism itself. The most influential source of this opinion is Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. We read there that "Hume . . . developed to its logical conclusion the empirical philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, and by making it self-consistent made it incredible." In the history of modern philosophy, then, Hume is a philosopher who "represents, in a certain sense, a dead end" (Russell 1995: 634).

The second, historical, stereotype portrays the Enlightenment as a constructive movement, a beginning, the well-spring of almost everything that we think of as modern: scientifically minded secular society, democratic in form, and committed to the idea of social progress through technological innovation, the progress measured by reference to a foundation of natural values. So it is a beginning with respect to principles of social and political organization, and of the good life. Its central figures – the French *philosophes* Voltaire, Condillac, Montesquieu, Diderot, d'Alembert, and (somewhat problematically) Rousseau – were thus social critics and reformers rather than epistemologists, and so not *properly* philosophers at all. (Hence the enduring popularity of identifying them by the French term "*philosophe*": the Anglophone reader knows to interpret the term to mean, not "philosopher" – its literal meaning – but "socially critical public intellectual.")

These two stereotypes jointly imply that Hume's philosophy and the Enlightenment, although roughly concurrent, are essentially distinct. The former is a destructive demolition of epistemological and metaphysical orthodoxies, the latter an optimistic, progressive, social reform movement; the one is politically neutral intellectual endeavour of high seriousness, the other politically engaged social activism. Thus the one is studied in departments of philosophy, the other in departments of history and cultural studies. Students of the latter may come across occasional references to something called "Hume's philosophy," but students of the real thing will not allow mere social history to distract them from the logic of Hume's central arguments. In short, those inducted into these stereotypes will recognize that Hume's philosophy and the Enlightenment are "distinct existences."

The stereotypes are, however, misleading on both fronts: the former relies on a selective and contentious handling of Hume's work, the latter on ignoring the philosophical origins of canonical Enlightenment views. To begin with Hume. To recognize in his work a powerful concern with epistemological questions is to state the obvious; but to think of it as *essentially* epistemology and metaphysics is something else altogether. It depends on a dubious understanding of the relation between these two concerns, and so fails to see what Hume's examination of our rational powers is meant to open up. As a result, it requires ignoring (or demoting) most of what he actually wrote. Hume's philosophical corpus is effectively reduced to his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, written in his early twenties – and, indeed, only to the first of its three books. Bertrand Russell again: "What is important and novel in his doctrines is in the first book, to which I shall confine myself" (Russell 1995: 635). Following Russell's lead, "properly philosophical" attention confines itself to the first book and its themes, consulting Hume's later productions only in so far as they help to clarify the arguments developed there. This means, in practice, consulting them only rarely, because they are lesser achievements. Russell again: "He shortened the *Treatise* by leaving out the best parts and most of the reasons for his conclusions; the result was the *Inquiry into*

Human Understanding" (Russell 1995: 634). Russell's judgment is extreme; but in the force of its opinion, not in its basic perspective. It remains the case that, for most modern analytic philosophers, the "distinctively Humean" contributions to philosophy are found in the *Treatise*, and mainly in Book 1. The mature works play, at best, supporting roles.

Hume and his contemporaries would have been astonished by this radical narrowing of focus. But, for Russell as for others, the justification for this selectivity is taken to have been given by Hume himself. This is because in his short autobiography, "My Own Life," written shortly before his death in 1776, Hume describes his later decision to rework the *Treatise* as proceeding from his belief that the public dissatisfaction with the work stemmed "more from the manner than the matter" (*Essays*, p. xxxv). This comment has been taken to mean that the views expressed in the later reworkings of the *Treatise* contain nothing new. Hume's further comment that his "love of literary fame" was his "ruling passion" is then invoked to explain why the various reworkings were written at all (*Essays*, p. xl). The *Treatise*, as he put it, "fell dead-born from the press" (*Essays*, p. xxxiv), so, the story goes, the young man anxious for literary fame rewrote them in more popular style – and content. He thus gained the fame he craved by diluting the strong liquor of the *Treatise*, and serious philosophers must now charitably ignore his weakness of character and return to the pure source of his original philosophical opinions and arguments.

This is a pretty tale, no doubt – it just isn't true. In the first place, it is inconsistent: it begins from the premise that the later reworkings differ only in manner, but ends up affirming that there are differences in content after all. The "love of literary fame" is then invoked to explain away this awkwardness – despite it nowhere being explained why this ruling passion does not similarly infect the *Treatise*! Secondly, it depends on an arbitrary use of sources: it requires taking "My Own Life" at its word, while ignoring Hume's explicit "disowning" of the *Treatise* in the "Advertisement" he appended to the final edition of his philosophical works (containing the *Enquiries* but not the *Treatise*) – despite the fact that both were written at roughly the same time, shortly before his death. Thirdly, it depends on a naïve approach to "My Own Life," simply ignoring the real possibility that it was intended, not as a kind of "death bed" confession, but as a deliberate provocation – as his own way of not apologizing for his life and opinions, and of announcing the absence of any fear of death. Fourthly, it depends on completely misconstruing Hume's reference to "literary fame," taking it to mean *merely* literary (and thus non-philosophical) ambition, when Hume's point is simply that he wanted to be *esteemed for his writings*, whether those writings were philosophical, historical – or "literary." Finally, it completely ignores the fact that most of the philosophical opinions *least* digestible to Hume's contemporaries appear in the later works! This popular interpretation is, in short, a shambles.

Once this interpretative picture is undone, there no longer remains any justification for taking Hume's writings so selectively. The full range of his concerns – epistemology, psychology, moral, political and economic theory, religious criticism, and politically charged history – can be reinstated without prejudice. To do so immediately reveals that Hume's concerns and tendencies are much like those of any of the French *philosophes*. No wonder, then, that he was often their welcome dinner-guest! If, then, we set aside (for the time being) the allegedly destructive character of his philosophy,

focusing instead on the spread of his interests and the decidedly secular, empirical, and sociological air of his social and political essays, it is clear that he at least breathes the same air as the major French Enlightenment figures.

The other obstacle to placing Hume in the Enlightenment context is the failure to identify the French Enlightenment's own intellectual origins. The fact is, however, that its most distinctive figures understood themselves to be applying to the social world the intellectual breakthroughs – epistemological breakthroughs included – of the modern natural philosophers. They saw themselves as social critics who were *extending* the revolution in scientific doctrine and method. The truly great men of this development were English, so their heroes were, by and large, English scientists and philosophers: Bacon, Newton, and Locke.

The acknowledgment was first made by Voltaire, in his early *Letters on England* (first published in 1733), a work inspired by his British exile in the late 1720s. Voltaire there contrasts the freedom and enlightenment of English life with the oppressive feudal situation in France. The specifically intellectual case is made in chapters on Bacon and Locke, and by a comparison between the careers and achievements of Descartes and of Newton (Voltaire 1733: chs. 12–14). Although brief, these chapters exercised a significant effect on the imagination of the *philosophes*, and, by extension, on the self-image of the Enlightenment. Most importantly, they provided the template for d'Alembert's "Preliminary Discourse" to the *Encyclopedia* (1751) – the *locus classicus* for the French Enlightenment's self-understanding. The "Preliminary Discourse" is an introduction to the themes and motivations of the *Encyclopedia*. Its central part is a potted history of intellectual progress since the Renaissance, and it is in this section that English scientists and philosophers loom large. The story there has the familiar ring of Enlightenment history: of great men who rescued intellectual endeavour from the darkness and superstition imposed on it by ignorance and priestcraft.

Of these great men, "the immortal Chancellor of England, Francis Bacon, ought to be placed at the head" (d'Alembert 1751: 74). He is commended, first, for making known "the necessity of experimental physics, of which no one was yet aware," and secondly, for his resolutely humanistic focus: "Hostile to systems, he conceives of philosophy as being only that part of our knowledge which should contribute to making us better or happier, thus apparently confining it within the limits of the science of useful things, and everywhere he recommends the study of nature" (d'Alembert 1751: 75). The key was his anti-metaphysical temper, from which flowed both his experimentalism and his concern with practical human benefits. Newton's greatness, in contrast, lay in his actual scientific achievement: he "gave philosophy a form which apparently it is to keep." No less than Bacon, he also resisted metaphysical speculation, and insisted on the limits of human knowledge:

That great genius saw that it was time to banish conjectures and vague hypotheses from physics, or at least to present them only for what they were worth . . . But perhaps he has done more by teaching philosophy to be judicious and to restrict [it] within reasonable limits. (d'Alembert 1751: 81)

Locke then provided Newton's system with its necessary foundations:

he undertook and successfully carried through what Newton had not dared to do, or perhaps would have found impossible. It can be said that he created metaphysics, almost as Newton had created physics . . . In order to know our soul, its ideas, and its affections, he did not study books, because they would only have instructed him badly; he was content with probing deeply into himself . . . [thereby presenting] mankind with the mirror with which he had looked at himself. In a word, he reduced metaphysics to what it really ought to be: the experimental physics of the soul. (d'Alembert 1751: 83–4)

So, for d'Alembert, the legacy of the English philosophers is, first, the knowledge of the basic workings of the natural world; secondly, the recognition that the sure path to what can be known lies in the empirical methods shared by the learned and the common people alike; and, thirdly, the conviction that the proper yardstick of intellectual progress is human benefit. This is the explicit message of both Bacon and Locke. Scientific revolution thus holds out the prospect of moral and political reformation. Moreover – as Voltaire's *Letters* shows – these benefits are not merely speculative: they can be directly observed by comparing liberal, enlightened England with illiberal, anti-intellectual France. In short, French Enlightenment critique is founded on English natural science.

Nevertheless, d'Alembert does not neglect one famous compatriot. Descartes, he says, by applying algebra to geometry – “one of the grandest and most fortunate ideas that the human mind has ever had” – proved himself a great geometer. As a philosopher, however, “he was perhaps equally great, but not so fortunate” (d'Alembert 1751: 78). He made many errors, but nonetheless deserves special praise for his method of doubt, by which he made himself the destroyer of old myths and prejudices. “Descartes,” d'Alembert observes,

dared at least to show intelligent minds how to throw off the yoke of scholasticism, of opinion, of authority – in a word, of prejudices and barbarism. And by that revolt whose fruits we are reaping today, he rendered a service to philosophy perhaps more difficult to perform than all those contributed thereafter by his illustrious successors.

Moreover, he adds, even Descartes' errors were useful, because they undermined philosophers' dogmatic convictions, teaching them “to distrust their intelligence,” and creating in them “that frame of mind that is the first step towards truth.” (d'Alembert 1751: 80)

Descartes' method of doubt is thus the means by which all the inherited institutions and mores of French society can be called into question: it removes all appeal to traditional authority, and thereby places all contending explanations – whether scientific, moral, political, or religious – on an equal footing. It says: all views must confront the tribunal of doubt, and allegiance is owed only to those views that can survive the test. Thus construed, the method of doubt is a call to radical social reevaluation and reform. Descartes thereby becomes an *ally* of the highly praised Englishmen. His errors require that praise for him must be qualified, but his truly great achievement is that, more sharply than the Englishmen, he has drawn out the radical potential of the new science. The upshot is that scientific revolution and social reform can be seen as enterprises linked by a common method, and (adding the English component) by a common measure, the benefit of human society. Metaphysics

is the first casualty. "Philosophy," d'Alembert concludes, has learnt that "it is designed principally to instruct. For that reason the taste for systems – more suited to flatter the imagination than to enlighten reason – is today almost entirely banished from works of merit" (d'Alembert 1751: 94).

The message is plain. The reforming project of the *philosophes* is the continuation of the intellectual revolution begun in the natural sciences. That revolution had emphasized the need for a critical method; it had returned human knowledge from the clouds of metaphysical speculation to the solid ground of empirical observation; and it had established that the proper aim of intellectual endeavor is the improvement of human life. English scientists and philosophers best developed this viewpoint, and in England the fruit of their efforts is visible. The task, then, is to extend this revolution, geographically, by realizing it across the Channel, and intellectually, by applying it to the assessment of human institutions. The starting-point for this enterprise – the French contribution – is the Cartesian method of doubt, which shows that, contrary to traditional views, all social institutions are not inheritances from an antique divine endowment, but human creations – and as such subject to all the frailty and foolishness of the human frame. Social radicalism is the consequence of the modern empirical temper fortified by the method of doubt.

Unfortunately, the *philosophes* themselves erected an obstacle to this conception of their activity. Their recurring appeal to "Reason" has made their revolution appear to be embedded in French rationalist doctrines, and so to belong to a thought-world alien to the English world of ideas. Some distinctively rationalist themes did play a role in their thinking; nevertheless, the best conclusion is that their appeal to "Reason" was not essentially rationalist, but an appeal to what is *rationally justifiable*. "Reason" is thus, first and foremost, a short-hand way of referring to the new scientific outlook itself; and, given their attachment to English experimentalism, it can even be a term for broadly empiricist philosophy (Diderot 1754: 44–5). So "Reason" itself can be thought of as the philosophy of Locke sharpened up by the method of doubt: the sensual origin of all ideas, and so the non-existence of any innate source of intellectual authority; the limitation of rational powers to experience; the improvement of our practical condition as the goal of intellectual endeavor; the limitation of religion in this spirit; the separation of morals and politics from theology, and the emphasis on thinking for oneself and on political freedom. To this should be added a further element of Locke's philosophy, passed over in silence by d'Alembert, but made much of by Voltaire in the *Letters*: his proposal that matter might think (Locke 1690: 4.3.6). Locke's account of the workings of the mind amounted to "sensualizing" the intellect – explaining its workings in terms borrowed from the description of sensory processes – and so providing a starting-point for a materialist theory of mind. Thus the radical materialist theories of Diderot, d'Holbach and La Mettrie all acknowledged Lockean debts. French Enlightened "Reason" is shorthand, then, for a philosophy based on experimental principles, sympathetic to materialism, and opposed to all entrenched authority. These themes are all present in Locke, so in this sense French Enlightened "Reason" is continuous with the best of English "experimental" philosophy.

This brings us back to Hume. If we turn to his earliest attempts to explain the inspiration and general thrust of his philosophy – in the opening pages of the *Treatise* – it is apparent that he is presenting himself in recognizably similar terms. The famous

subtitle, “An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects,” announces its continuity with the experimental natural philosophy, and its aim to develop the experimental account of human functioning begun by Locke. In the Introduction, these connections, and their specifically *English* character, are made explicit. Hume observes that, in the modern world just as in the ancient, breakthroughs in moral philosophy have followed those in natural philosophy after a lapse of around a hundred years. Just as Thales preceded Socrates by a full century, so there is a full century between Bacon and “some late philosophers in *England*, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing, and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of the public.” These “late philosophers” – Locke and a selection of intellectual inheritors, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler – are united in contributing to the development of a new moral science in the spirit of the new natural science (T Introduction 7). By placing himself in this tradition, Hume places himself in precisely the position endorsed by the *philosophes*: an inheritor of the revolution in natural science engaged in completing that revolution by the creation of a new science of the human. In this light, the *Treatise*’s epigraph falls into place: “Rare the happy times when we can think what we like, and are allowed to say what we think.” If this epigraph graced the title-page of a work by Voltaire, its pronounced Enlightenment air would be obvious: it rejects authoritarian control of opinion and affirms toleration of diverse views. Not only, then, does Hume place himself in the Enlightened tradition of English “experimental” social thought, he also affirms the anti-authoritarian, tolerant attitude so much emphasized by the *philosophes* themselves. Plainly, then, the *Treatise* presents itself as a contribution to Enlightenment. Why then has it not generally been recognized as such?

Two, related, factors have already been mentioned: the very selective reception by modern philosophers, and the tendency to interpret Hume’s arguments as uncompromisingly destructive. A third cause, however – all the more striking given its context – has been the artificially narrow interpretation of what Hume means by his subtitle. His “attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects” has commonly been understood to mean that it is nothing more than the introduction of the experimental *method* (e.g. Passmore 1980: ch. 3). To see the problem here, consider how we would respond if we came across a new book subtitled “a scientific approach.” We would expect that the author would indeed attempt to follow an appropriately scientific method – but we would also expect more than that. We would expect the author to endorse, by and large, what science had *achieved* by following it. (Why else adopt the approach?) On reflection, we would also expect that the author accepted the necessity of the method because the truth about the natural world is *difficult to achieve*. The disciplined methods of science are to be followed because the meaning of the world does not lie open to casual survey; progress in knowledge requires disciplined methods that restrain flights of fancy. To adopt a scientific approach is thus, typically, also the adoption – even if the provisional or qualified adoption – of science’s achievements and background assumptions.

Hume emerges as a true son of the Enlightenment when it is recognized that he does endorse these views. First, the *Treatise*’s Introduction explicitly affirms that nature’s secrets are difficult to discover. He takes up the prominent Newtonian theme that the philosopher must eschew “hypotheses” (dogmatic first principles) and the search for “occult

qualities" (hidden powers or essences that explain the *why* of things), and must instead stay within the bounds of what is observed, appealing only to "manifest qualities" and to general descriptions of observed regularities – "laws of nature." The improvement of philosophy depends on being experimental in this sense, and does so because the hidden properties of things can never be known. All these themes had been endorsed by both Newton and Locke; in fact, in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke even insists that experimentalism's limits must be observed because the alternative – the attempt to discover the essences of natural bodies – is simply "lost labour" (Locke 1690: 4.3.29).

Hume accepts all of this. He even repeats Locke's phrase, observing in the Introduction that we have often "lost our labour" in the pursuit of metaphysical certainties. The central passage, however, endorses the Newtonian denial of knowledge of hidden essences, in a passage that seems to be a rewriting of Newton's remarks in the *Opticks*:

For to me it seems evident, that the essence of mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations. And tho' we must endeavour to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, 'tis still certain we can never go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original principles of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical. (T Introduction 8; cf. Newton 1730: 401–2)

Here we see experimental method and the unknowability of the essences of objects treated as two sides of the same coin. Experimental method is necessary because nature has hidden secrets that will *remain* secrets because human capacities cannot penetrate beyond experience – that is, beyond appearances. The enemy of experimentalism is thus "hypothesis, that pretends to discover . . . ultimate original principles." It is *because* nature's secrets lie beyond human experiential powers that the experimental method is necessary. Hume's chosen method thus reflects his acceptance of experimental natural philosophy's starting-point: that nature's essences and powers lie beyond our capacity to know.

What then of experimental *moral* enquiry? Its subject matter is the human being: specifically, the workings of the human mind. Since the essence of that mind is hidden, all forms of armchair theorizing must give way to an examination of the human being in action: the mind can be studied only by studying its observable effects. Hume sums up the point in the Introduction's concluding remarks:

We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures. Where experiments of this kind are judiciously collected and compared, we may hope to establish on them a science, which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension. (T Introduction 10)

The science will be of superior utility simply because it treats of us ourselves. It will not be inferior in certainty for several reasons. In the first place, because it will respect the limits imposed by experimentalism, and not pretend to discover “ultimate original principles.” It will explain the mind’s workings only in the sense of “explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes” in the manner of Newton’s laws of motion: it will be a science composed wholly of “manifest principles.” Secondly, it will not be inferior in certainty simply because it *cannot* be: *all* sciences are built on this foundation. “Even *Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties”(T Introduction 4).

This is a striking claim, and not to be misunderstood. Hume is not saying that the “science of man” provides the logical foundations of the other sciences, but that it reveals the *limits* to other forms of enquiry. As such, the claim hints at the wider implications of the experimentalists’ denial of access to essences, and thus at conclusions to be reached in the body of the work itself. It is implicitly to acknowledge that experimentalism denies that human beings possess any mental faculty capable of knowledge of essences, and therefore that the human being is not, in the sense intended by Aristotle, the “rational animal.” Experimentalism denies that human beings are distinguished from animals by their possession of Reason, in the metaphysical tradition’s sense of a faculty that orients them towards the truth about reality, by enabling them to grasp real essences of things and therefore ultimate principles that explain the *why* of the world. Experimentalism thus also denies that tradition’s conception of the human being as the half-animal, half-divine “glory, jest, and riddle of the world” (Pope 1966: 251). In its place it erects a sober, unheroic naturalism in which truth-discerning metaphysical Reason is replaced by the limited capacity of reasoning in the service of the everyday utility of a naturally active being.

The implication – fully recognized in the Introduction – is that, if all the sciences are grounded in the powers and faculties of human beings, then they can no longer be thought simply to aim at truth. They must instead reflect the vagaries of human psychology: logic will not explain the steps to knowledge of the world, but simply “the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty”; moral philosophy will not discover real, objective goodness but “our tastes and sentiments”; political theory, in like manner, will limit itself to the practical study of “men as united in society, and dependent on each other.” The value of these enquiries is that they “tend either to the improvement or ornament of the human mind” (to the “useful and agreeable,” as he will later put it). In the end, then, Hume’s proposal for “a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new” is a proposal to replace the impossible pursuit of ultimate truths with a system of *useful* principles – their usefulness deriving from their foundation in the (manifest) principles of human nature.

The Introduction thus aligns the *Treatise* with social critics and reformers who apply the new physical science to the human condition; colludes with them in rejecting the metaphysical tradition’s conception of Reason; and therefore also rejects everything built upon that foundation: all traditional authorities, religious authority not least. Finally, it proposes to replace those old metaphysical dreams with a new system of empirical studies which aim at usefulness for human lives. These are precisely the themes

emphasized by the *philosophes*. The conclusion must be that the *Treatise's* Introduction has all the air of an Enlightenment manifesto.

Presumably, Hume knows what he is doing; so the content of the *Treatise* must justify its manifesto. So what doctrines does it affirm – explicitly or implicitly – to justify its publicity? At this point we need a brief synopsis of the *Treatise* as a whole, to bring out the radical nature of its central themes.

Book 1 opens with a very brief, but very bold, set of claims about the contents and functioning of the mind. Ideas are pale copies of vivid impressions. (Vivacity is not clarity and distinctness – the modern criterion of truth – but attributable to bodily processes: cf. Descartes 1641: II, 37ff., 52; Locke 1690: 2.29.) Ideas are thus limited by their origin in impressions, and this limits the kinds of theories we can accept. Our ideas of space and time provide an illustration. They remain image dependent, and so we must rule out theories and ideas which violate the limits thus imposed: such as theories of infinite divisibility, and the idea of a vacuum. Whatever the ultimate nature of reality, the mind has limits which theories cannot escape. Ideas are naturally connected by associations, which are processes of the imagination rather than rational connections, and this explains our vulnerability to errors in conceiving and in reasoning. Associations themselves may be supposed to be deviant motions in the brain (T 1.2.5.20). Beliefs are vivid conceptions, not rational conclusions. Beliefs about the future arise from transferring past experiences to the future. Where past experience has been uniform, the future will be believed to be likewise uniform, and conforming events will therefore be thought to arise necessarily. The idea of causation, so central to philosophical (scientific) explanation, thus arises instinctively, and depends on no insight into why things happen. Where uniformity in experience is lacking, the relative frequencies of contrary experiences will determine expectations (through a Newtonian opposition of forces), and these we express as probabilities. Reason has nothing to do with these processes: any attempt to show that it does depends on a circular argument. So “reasoning” in this sense (making inferences from experience) is really a kind of instinct. It is possessed by animals no less than by humans. The traditional powers of Reason are entirely resolvable into either sense-perceptions or (inertial) habits – and so into non-intellectual powers (T 1.3.7.5n, 1.3.14).

Furthermore, reason undermines all our beliefs because relying on it generates an infinite regress, but we escape total skepticism because human nature opposes reason's tendencies. Our belief in the reality of the external world is due to inertial tendencies (“smooth transitions”) of the imagination, which connect up all fleeting but resembling impressions to create the belief in enduring objects; but the modern scientific explanation of them depends on an unstable compromise between imagination and reason. Ancient science went astray by reading into nature the emotions we observe in ourselves. The problem for modern science is that (given empiricism's implication that ideas are images) the primary–secondary qualities distinction on which it is built is incoherent. Disputes between dualists and materialists about the nature of thought show dualism to become enmired in paradoxes, so the materialist alternative – that thought is matter in motion – is the more plausible of the two (T 1.4.5.32–3). Our idea of the self, which may seem an obstacle to materialism, is nothing more than a construct of experience, put together by associative processes. So the human condition seems to be an unhappy one, since reason and the other processes of human nature tend

frequently to conflict. In particular, the life of the rational enquirer seems doomed to misery: reason is a very leaky vessel, ill-fitted to resist the storms and shoals of life. Nevertheless, the philosophical life, if pursued with the diffident spirit of the true skeptic, is to be preferred to superstition and its attendant vices.

Thus Book 1's sometimes dramatically skeptical conclusions emphasize the limits and uncertainty of all that we claim to know. This means its purposes are essentially epistemological and psychological. It is an extended attack on the rationality of human functioning. Hume's aim is not, however, simply destructive, because he denies that we either are or ought to be rational animals in the traditional sense, and so lost if Reason should be undermined. His aim is, rather, to shift our conception of ourselves: in modern terms, to naturalize human nature by showing it to fit patterns of explanation consistent with a scientific materialism. His method reflects early modern orthodoxies: he dethrones the old emperor, Reason, and places us under "the empire of the imagination" (T Abstract 35). In the early modern context, the meaning of this is plain, since it was widely accepted that the imagination is the faculty – shared by animals and humans alike – that unites the disparate deliverances of the different senses. According to a then-standard definition, its operations depend on brain processes (Chambers 1728: II, 375); and most philosophers of the period understood it in the same terms (Descartes 1641: II, 19, 22, 51, 59; Hobbes 1641: 20; Malebranche 1674–5: 3; and (implicitly) Leibniz 1714: 271–2).

The imagination is thus understood to be the mental activity produced by bodily processes, in contrast to the pure mental activity of the faculty of Reason or Intellect. So Hume's claim that we are under "the empire of the imagination" is equivalent to claiming that our mental life is fully explicable according to the effects of bodily processes, as conceived by modern science. It is equivalent to claiming that materialism might be true, because materialist explanations leave nothing unexplained. They leave nothing for an immaterial soul to do, and so leave no explanatory gap that requires appeal to such an entity. (Hume argues exactly this in his posthumously published essay, "Of the Immortality of the Soul" [*Essays*, pp. 590–8].) Hume's explanations effectively reduce our rational powers to just one more consequence of bodily processes, and therefore to no more than one among several kinds of natural *force* to which the human mind is subject (T 1.4.1.1, 12). Hence his conclusion that, "where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us" (T 1.4.7.11). This is to deny reason both autonomy and status. It is therefore to deny that it is a *distinct faculty* of the mind, and so necessarily to reject its traditional status as the ruling faculty in the human being. So, whereas Locke had sought to show the possibility of materialism by "sensualizing" the intellect, Hume goes further and seeks to abolish it. This is the rational kernel in the view that his purposes are destructive; but it needs to be set in the context of his materialism-friendly rejection of any privileged or even independent role for rational activity.

Books 2 and 3 work out the implications of this naturalizing project. In Book 2 our reasoning capacity is subordinated to the internal mechanical responses to external stimuli: the passions. The passions are internal reflections of external perceptions, mediated by ideas, and give rise to further ideas and impressions. Through these processes, the vivacity of images can vary: ideas can mutate into impressions and

back again. So ideas do not stand apart in some separate domain. These changes are initiated by associations, so the account is once again consistent with materialism. Where does reason come into the picture? Hume's famous conclusion is that reason "is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (T 2.3.3.4). Philosophical attempts to govern the passions by reason – in metaphysically influenced religious morals, for instance – are thus doomed. The passions are natural responses to stimuli that shape both our immediate actions, and, by directing our interests, human understanding itself. So they produce in us a natural outlook that directs reason according to the general features of human experience.

The task of Book 3 is to explain the process by which this occurs. Hume gives a historical account of the development of the human mind proceeding hand in hand with the development of necessary social institutions. In contrast to Hobbes's twin arguments that self-interest renders the natural state of human beings dangerous, and that the solution to these dangers is to contract into an authoritarian political order, Hume argues, first, that we possess a capacity for sympathetic identification with the interests of others (a "moral sense") as a counter to our self-interest. Moral values are natural to us, but arise from perceptual, rather than intellectual, capacities. Only morality thus construed can explain the transition from fact to obligation – from "is" to "ought." The circumstances that govern the human situation require forging this moral raw material into new forms: "artificial virtues" such as systems of justice. Justice cannot arise from promises, because its value must be discovered rather than deduced – and in any case reason remains at the mercy of the violent passions that violate just principles for short-term goals. So useful moral institutions like promising and justice systems can develop only by the steady recognition over time that they are useful for all, and so justifiably authoritative for all. The natural virtues reflect the immediate facts of human psychology, but the artificial virtue of justice arises only because historical experience teaches us its utility. Legal rules are, in short, created rather than discovered; and, in line with Enlightenment orthodoxies, the rules themselves are measured according to their *usefulness* for human society. Usefulness is, however, always for some end; and these ends derive not from theology or metaphysics, but from the natural sympathetic regard for the general good.

This rather opinionated summary of the argument of the *Treatise* has picked out materialist tendencies at the heart of its explanations for mental phenomena, and so has brought out important continuities with the more radical of the French *philosophes*. However, it also shows other features that seem to push in different directions: the *Treatise* makes no commitment to materialist dogma; it offers no support for a radical political program; and it presents a moral theory explicitly opposed to the central dogma of materialist ethics, that the origin of ethics is to be found in self-interest. If Hume's project in the *Treatise* is to be fitted into the Enlightenment tradition, then, these apparent problems need to be resolved.

Perhaps the best way to approach the issue is to reconsider Hume's philosophical problematic. The familiar epistemological triad Locke–Berkeley–Hume gets one thing right: Hume's work does reflect Berkeley's critical examination of some of Locke's central doctrines. It is mistaken, however, in limiting Hume's concerns to the issues Berkeley brought to center-stage, and so ignores Hume's engagement with the Cartesians, Bayle, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and of course Cicero. Moreover, it assumes

that Hume's project is simply the extension of the Berkeleian critique, such that Hume's philosophy is, as Russell thought it to be, wholly negative – simply the further erosion of the Lockean project. This latter assumption is the more potent, so it will be helpful if fresh light can be thrown on Hume's project.

Hume's debts to Locke, and to Berkeley's criticisms of Locke, are profound, but it does not follow from these facts that he was merely extending the Berkeleian critique. The Introduction suggests a positive program, and the *Treatise's* title indicates that the program involves broadening the focus from human understanding to human nature. The specific arguments of the book show that the former is to be subordinated to the latter. How then are we to place Hume against his British forebears? The clue is provided by his later remark that Berkeley's arguments "*admit of no answer and produce no conviction*" (EHU 12.15n). Berkeley's criticisms of Locke cannot be faulted on rational grounds, but cannot persuade us. This shows that human nature is too strong for reason. What it doesn't show is: how is that possible? It is *this* question that Berkeley's arguments raise for Hume. Berkeley's critique of Locke did present him with a road that he then traveled to its (dead) end. But he saw that it was a dead end, and also saw that it raised the question of (causal) *psychology*. What are the principles that explain the functioning of the human mind, including why it should go its own way in the face of effective rational critique? What is the nature of human nature?

If one is to be faithful to Lockean experimentalism, the question can be answered only by finding the most satisfactory set of manifest principles. But any philosophy, no matter how dogmatic, can be mined to provide manifest explanatory principles. The philosophy Hume finds most adequate to the task is materialist. And, although he may have made use of other works in the materialist tradition – and certainly found negative inspiration in Malebranche's defense of Cartesianism – it seems to me undeniable that central features of his account of mental functioning derive from Hobbes's materialist psychology. The resemblances are so striking that it seems possible to describe the *Treatise* as a skeptical rewriting of the core Hobbesian project: to found moral and political conclusions on a materialist account of human nature. Hume takes over both Hobbesian doctrines and even order of exposition. This can be brought out by a thumbnail sketch of the opening chapters of *Leviathan*.

Hobbes limits mental contents to what comes through the senses. Sense-perceptions cause motions in the body which are, for us, feelings and ideas. Ideas are internal motions caused by external motions, and so are quite distinct from the objects or motions that cause them. Bodily motions make us attribute our ideas to an external source. The imagination is the repository of images that linger in the body: "decaying" sense. So its contents are pale copies of sense-perceptions. What is called "the understanding" is not a distinct faculty of reason, but simply those *imaginings* due to words. It is common to man and beast. Thought is connected imaginings. Transitions of thoughts reflect past sequences of sensations (past experience): the same initial sensation prompts the imagination to call up the *whole string* of sensations that followed it. This generates expectations about the future. "Trains of thought" even when unguided are not "wild ranging of the mind," but connected by associations. Guided thoughts are governed not by reason but by desires, and concern causes and effects. When concerned with the future, they depend on the thought that like events will follow like actions – they are suppositions about the future based on experience of the past. Reasoning is

just a calculative power; it is not a special faculty that equips us for discovering hidden truths, but a fallible human skill developed through experience. Human actions begin in passions, internal motions in the body caused by internal or external motions, which therefore display predictable patterns. Reason is a “scout” for passion – its eyes and ears – and so its servant.

Hume’s theory of basic human function is a refinement of this Hobbesian picture. He adopts nearly all the main themes of Hobbesian psychology, even to the extent of building his account of our inductive practices and our conceptions of cause and probability out of Hobbes’s account of the origin of expectations from the tendency to transfer past experience to the future. Moreover, Hobbes defends a psychological (non-rational) source of our belief in enduring external objects, and similarly subordinates reason to passion. In short, Hume’s displacement of reason in favor of the non-rational processes of the imagination has its roots in Hobbesian materialist psychology.

In a further respect, however, Hobbes and Hume are sharply at odds. For Hobbes, the passions that drive the material being we are aim at self-preservation; reason its servant, therefore, does the same. The natural condition of human beings thus reflects the logic of self-interest. It is the all-too-miserable condition of permanent possibility of conflict. Escaping it depends on working out the means to *mutual* preservation, the “laws of nature.” These laws can only be made effective by instituting strong central government, and so it is only thereby that human life becomes tolerable. Religion is a threat to this security and so must be subordinated to government. Only when all individuals and institutions are subordinated to absolute political authority can human life flourish.

Locke had rejected this dismal conclusion by insisting that reason does rule in the natural condition. Hume, however, is not tempted by that course. Instead he preserves the passionate psychology but cuts its links with self-interest. For Hobbes this had been a datum, because, although he denied the ancient and established view that Reason should rule in the soul, he accepted its most influential (Stoic) account of the material part of our nature as aimed only at self-preservation. So he accepted, as did almost everyone, that materialism and egoism were natural bedfellows – but he also accepted that they were both true. For Hume, however, a new interpretation of materialism was suggested by Newton’s physics. Since the physical world followed laws of motion based on principles of inertia and gravitation, why could not the mental world be construed in a similar spirit? Shaftesbury and Hutcheson had shown, against Hobbes, that human psychology is not simply self-interested, but includes impartial affections. Hume took over their conclusions, adapted them to Newtonian principles, and so produced a theory in which sympathetic “moral sense” and customary connection – gravitational and inertial psychological principles – underpin an evolutionary account of the development of human laws and institutions. He thereby avoided Hobbes’s authoritarian conclusion while remaining more faithful to their shared commitment to reason’s limited powers. Moreover, since it is Hobbes’s authoritarianism that most separates him from the outlook of the *philosophes*, Hume’s revisions are most congenial to Enlightenment orthodoxies. In short, Hume rewrites Hobbesian philosophy for Enlightened ends.

Of course, Hume differs from Hobbes on another crucial point: he rejects Hobbes’s dogmatism. Explaining why enables us to tie up several loose threads. The important point here is that Hume’s skepticism is not to be opposed to his materialist sympathies, but flows naturally from them. In fact, the necessity for a skeptical outlook can be read

directly out of Hobbes's own arguments. Hobbes had insisted that, because there is no distinct faculty of Reason oriented to discovering hidden truths or essences, the traditional idea of "right reason" must be discarded: there is no "right reason," only your reasonings and mine. However, he simultaneously presents his own theory as if it simply *is* right reason. He does not face the implication of his own position: that his own arguments, no matter how cogent they seem to him, cannot claim to possess some final authority. So a sympathizer with Hobbesian views alert to this problem can be expected to rewrite Hobbes's theory by purging it of its dogmatism – by accepting, indeed, that by the theory's own lights, the truth simply cannot be *known* to be true.

One way of doing this would be to show, by example, the *adequacy* of Hobbes's materialistic styles of explanation, all the while avoiding appeal to any explicitly materialist premises. This would generate a non-rationalist account of human psychology applied to a range of theoretical and practical issues: in short, a new *treatise of human nature*. The "anxiety of influence" might limit the number of explicit references to Hobbes's work – most notably, the omission from the *Treatise's* list of "late philosophers" (T Introduction 7) – but later in life the author might acknowledge that the main problem with Hobbes's philosophy was his inconsistent attitude to reason. So it harmonizes nicely with this suggestion that, in the final volume of his *History of England*, Hume assesses Hobbes's achievement in just these terms. Hobbes's philosophy, he observes, "partakes nothing of the spirit of scepticism; but is as positive and dogmatical as if human reason, and his reason in particular, could attain a thorough conviction in these subjects" (*History*, 1754–78; 6, p. 153). If there is no special faculty of Reason that orients us to truth, then ultimate truths cannot be known. If materialism is true, there is no such faculty – so materialism cannot be known to be true. The best case for materialism is therefore an experimental philosophy that shows the adequacy of materialist styles of explanation. Hume's skeptical philosophy is designed to satisfy just this requirement.

Finally, Hume's skepticism has a political consequence: it rules out the dogmatic radicalism of the *philosophes*, recommending instead a more thorough-going commitment to experimental methods and values. The experimental philosopher must remain, as the *Treatise's* Introduction affirms, within the constraints imposed by a *cautious* examination of human life, and by the *judicious* collection and comparison of experiments; and the consistently skeptical spirit requires us to be diffident of our solutions no less than of our criticisms. The genuinely skeptical spirit is therefore not to be confused with the non-reflexive skepticism of the professional doubter, and for this reason he later provides an explicit rejection of the Cartesian radical doubt. Such forms of doubt, he says, being "*antecedent* to all study and philosophy," are "entirely incurable": they demolish even the foundations on which they hope later to build. So Hume distances himself from the radical critique derived from the Cartesian method. Nevertheless, he does not reject its critical employment altogether. He adds that this method, "when more moderate," can serve to wean us from "all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion" (EHU 12.3–4).

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the difference between Hume and his French contemporaries is a matter of degree rather than of kind, the difference deriving from Hume's more qualified attitude towards the method of doubt. This is not, however, the whole story, since Hume's anti-radicalism can easily be overplayed. After all,

his experimental principles justify committing to the flames all the sophistry and illusion of works in divinity and school metaphysics. But they do not justify comparable incendiarism in practical affairs. Hume's experimentalism pronounces radically on theology and other speculative enterprises; but on the established practices of common life, Hume's evolutionary theory of social development implies that, on the whole, utility *has* been the actual standard of our practices, whatever the flights of fancy offered as explanations for them (EPM 3.29). This is particularly evident in his account of the origins of the system of justice, but it is also implied by his more general account of the customary foundations of social order. In the end, then, it is Hume's more sanguine interpretation of everyday human history – that in this domain nature has always been too strong for metaphysical beliefs, that the “useful and agreeable” have always been socially efficacious – that separates him from his more radical French contemporaries.

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