Hume's Science of Man: Being Skeptical as Natural and Ethical

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Abstract: This paper examines the moral implications of Hume's skepticism with regard to human knowledge and understanding. Rather than curb the boundaries of knowledge, Hume's mitigated skepticism is the key to preserving his appeal to naturalism in his science of man. To illustrate this, I focus on Hume's explanation of immutable substance, moral sentiments, and causality. The enemy of knowledge is superstition, and rather than affirm innate, unintelligible powers in order to explain the inexplicable, Hume's moral high ground is a mitigated, academic skepticism.

Key Words: David Hume, skepticism, naturalism, superstition, causality

David Hume is a prominent figure in British empiricism, a term used today to differentiate between two camps of early modern philosophy: the rationalists and the empiricists.[1] When Hume set out to write *A Treatise of Human Nature* he was responding to the rationalists who argued on behalf of a priori knowledge—namely, knowledge that can be gained independent of experience. Hume, an empiricist, saw the rationalists' claim to innate or intuitive knowledge (i.e. concepts of knowledge gained by means other than sensory experience) to be the foundation of superstition. For Hume, the acceptance of innate or intuitive knowledge was dangerous because it accepted truth claims regarding the external world irrespective of experience. Hume's answer to this was to develop a new line of philosophical inquiry: the science of man. In the development of this science, Hume would discount the spurious claims of the rationalists in order to pursue the kind of

[1] Some of the notable rationalists in early modern philosophy are René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant. Popular empiricists include Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke.

knowledge that was truly knowable and verifiable through experience. To do so, Hume had to start with a clean slate. This meant that notions of God, immutable substance, the soul, morality, and causation were all called into question. Hume's skeptical attitude toward these accepted truths proved to be very unpopular during his time. However, it is through the same virtue of what made Hume so unpopular in the 18th century that makes him so revered today. Hume's skepticism and his heretical fight against superstition are moral imperatives for anyone concerned with human understanding and knowledge acquisition.

At the close of Book I in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature,* he endures what can be properly referred to as an existential crisis in his philosophy. After laying out the proper tools necessary for enquiry into the science of man, Hume finds that there are some principles concerning personal identity that he cannot reconcile. To make matters worse, he laments the present state of mainstream philosophy as it impetuously takes for granted certain fictions of the imagination. Hume thinks that a premature attempt to reconcile the principles would be nothing more than imagining a unifying, simple, and unchanging category when there is in fact no evidence to support such a move. Rather than an attempt at reconciliation of the principles, he retains an attitude of skepticism thereby opening the door to further philosophical enquiry into the science of man. The privilege of skepticism saves Hume from falling into false and dangerous reasoning, and equally distances him from the likes of superstition, which has been permitted to creep into philosophical debate regarding personal identity and the soul. Given that the memory, sensory experience, and understanding are founded on imagination, Hume sees the

upcoming task of philosophy as one that focuses on the science of man such that it might be possible to grasp how much of what is purported to be drawn from nature per se is actually 'just in our heads.'

Although some take Hume's final stance as a skeptic to be indicative of the utter irreconcilability of the two principles in question, and therefore a sign that philosophical enquiry cannot resolve some of the mysteries of the human subject, this is not the case. Instead, what Hume hopes to convey is that skepticism, at times, is our only insurance that we do not fall into dangerous reasoning with regard to nature. In order to illustrate this position, I will begin with an overview of Hume's account of personal identity in Book I, followed by the dilemma of principles as they are laid out in the Appendix, and support my stance on Hume's skepticism by referring to the conclusion of Book I. Ultimately, I will show that Hume's mitigated skepticism preserves his appeal to naturalism, especially within the context of his discussion on moral principles and causality. The underlying message of Hume's science of man is a philosophical aversion to universals, and likewise, the success of Hume's system can be seen through its application to matters of personal identity and moral obligation.

At the close of Book I, in the section on "Personal Identity," Hume observes that many philosophers exhaust themselves with the idea of the self to such a degree that they abandon all reason and method of demonstration in order to maintain the perfection, the simplicity, and the identity of the self. According to these philosophers, our idea of the self is so concrete and inextricable with our consciousness that not even the most extreme of the passions is capable of abating

it. These philosophers also maintain that it is by means of the passions that individuals are more in tune with the self insofar as they are related by varying degrees of pain or pleasure. Therefore, it is through this kind of relation that man is intimately conscious of the self.

This of course does not sit well with Hume. For Hume, there are two types of perceptions: impressions and ideas. The passions are lively impressions derived from experiencing pain or pleasure. Hume is keen to distinguish the direct passions (desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, and fear) from ideas.[2] Whereas Locke used the term "idea" to signify all perceptions, Hume argued that ideas and impressions are different kinds of perceptions.[3] The main departure from Locke is that Hume considers ideas to be less lively counterparts to impressions. In other words, ideas are "the faint images of these [impressions] in thinking and reasoning."[4]

In order for the idea of a unified, perfect "self" to exist, there must be an identifiable impression from which it is derived. According to Hume, however, there is no such impression that can fulfill this idea of self. He states, "If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner.

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[2] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 257

[3] T 1.1.1.1; 7, fn. 2. In Book 1, "Of the Understanding," Hume explains the origin of our ideas. He notes that his use of the terms "impression" and "idea" is different than what is the norm: "I here make use of the these terms, *impression* and *idea*, in a sense different from what is usual, and I hope this liberty will be allow'd me. Perhaps I rather restore the word, *idea*, to its original sense, from which Mr. Locke had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions. By the term of *impression* I wou'd not be understood to express the manner, in which our lively perceptions are produc'd in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves; for which there is no particular name either in the *English* or any other language, that I know of" [original emphasis].

[4] Ibid

But there is no impression constant and invariable."[5] Here Hume is trying to impart upon the reader that according to what experience dictates, impressions are sequential and innumerable. Thus no single impression gives way to an idea that persists continually outside of the regular succession of impressions. Here Hume employs a useful analogy to articulate his sentiment: "[t]he mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations."[6] This kind of analogy of the human mind justifies Hume's famous description of mankind as nothing but bundles of different perceptions. He is intent on demonstrating how it is that human beings have this propensity to ascribe an identity to successive perceptions. By qualifying the collective of perceptions into a single identity, human beings affirm they are "possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives."[7] In order to demonstrate the fallaciousness of this kind of action, Hume describes the mode of operations that leads to ideas of identity relative to thought or imagination and the passions.

If we consider an object for which we have a distinct idea, we are inclined to attribute an identity or sameness to it after experiencing it in an unvaried manner over a given period of time. Thus, the oak tree in front of my house is the same tree this morning that it was yesterday and even three years ago. As I drive down the street on my way to work, I see a succession of trees come into and out of view as I accelerate. Although the trees in front of my neighbors' homes are distinct from one

[5] T 1.4.6.2; 164
[6] T 1.4.6.4; 165
[7] T 1.4.6.5; 165

another and likewise different from the oak tree in front of my own house, they are all related by succession as I drive down the street. The act of the imagination that considers the single oak tree in one instance and the succession of trees in another is, for Hume, so similar that the mind ascribes a single identity to the succession of trees despite their distinctness:

> The relation facilitates the transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage as smooth as if it contemplated one continu'd object. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects.[8]

We cannot help but to continually fall into this mistake of the imagination, and the habit persists even after it is identified. Unable to shake the habit, "[o]ur last resource is to yield to it…[and] in order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation."[9] The "unintelligible" principle that Hume has in mind here is the dogmatically formulated soul. Having illustrated how identity is wrongly ascribed to nonhuman objects by an act of the imagination, Hume proceeds to explain how the identity of the human mind, our notion of self, is arrived at by fictitious means as well.

Hume contends that the mechanisms of the imagination that ascribe identity to nonhuman objects and the mechanisms that formulate notions of self are alike in kind:

> The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and

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[8] T 1.4.6.6; 166

[9] Ibid

> animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects.[10]

We are resolved to describe the identity of a person as a customary association of ideas. In other words, our notion of identity depends on the three relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation — for it is only these relations that induce an easy transition of ideas in the imagination. Because contiguity involves more than one object of the mind, personal identity, therefore, depends solely on resemblance and causation.[11] Regarding the passions, Hume explains that the association of ideas is maintained in a similar manner. He states, "[a]nd in this view our identity with regard to the passions serves to corroborate that with regard to the imagination, by the making our distant perceptions influence each other, and by giving us a present concern for our past or future pains or pleasures."[12]

In the "Appendix," Hume proceeds to clarify the fact that there is no abstract idea of existence apart from our idea of particular objects. As discussed in the conclusion of Book I, the belief in a single personal identity, subsisting unchanged throughout the course of an individual's lifetime, is nothing more than a feeling we get when thinking about past perceptions and their supposed connection in succession. In order to be contented in this feeling, without acquiescing to superstition, it is essential to find a connection between the successive perceptions that constitute thought. The problem for Hume is that he can neither reconcile nor disregard the principles "*that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences,* and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences* (author's

[10] T 1.4.6.15; 169
[11] T 1.4.6.17; 170
[12].T.1.4.6.19; 170

emphasis)."[13] The self is a complex bundle of perceptions, and to work backward from the complex impression of self does not satisfy the reflection of personal identity outside of a single perception. Not keen to accept this Heraclitean understanding of identity as that which is confined to a single instance, Hume is hard pressed to find in principle a connection between distinct perceptions and existences.[14] He is at odds with himself to say the least: philosophically he cannot resolve these two principles, but retains some idea of himself as an individual nonetheless. Hume realizes his predicament and resolves to "plead the privilege of a sceptic," with the hopes that in the future either he or another philosopher "may discover some hypothesis that will reconcile those contradictions."[15] Why does he opt for a skeptical attitude rather than endeavor to resolve the issue?

In the conclusion to Book I, Hume asks how far we ought to yield to the illusions of the imagination. If the bounds of human understanding are incapable of encompassing the knowledge of first principles, then how much stock should we put in the determination of the mind to make such connections for ourselves? Up to this point, his skepticism has exposed the fickleness of some philosophical reason, only to an end that bore no alternative to take its place. In this instance, Hume admits to

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[13] T Appx.21; 400

[14] Fragment 12 of Heraclitus states, "Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow." Other subsequent "river" fragments attributed to Heraclitus are disputed to be later authors' paraphrases of fragment 12. This particular fragment is a perfect thumbprint of Heraclitus' foundational claim that change is fundamental to identity, the idea being that it is precisely the changing water (i.e. the constant flow of water) that makes a river a river. Component parts are in constant flux and yet comprise a unity between them. See Richard D. McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates,* 2nd Edition (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 118.

[15] T Appx.21; 400

the reader that he has gone off the deep end in a bout of "philosophical melancholy,"[16] rejecting all manners of belief and reason:

> No wonder a principle so inconstant and fallacious shou'd lead us into errors, when implicitly follow'd (as it must be) in all its variations. 'Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes and effects; and 'tis the same principle, which convinces us of the continu'd existence of external objects, when absent from the senses. But tho' these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind, yet in some circumstances they are directly contrary, nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu'd existence of matter.[17]

At the prospect of choosing between no reason at all and a potentially false reasoning, Hume's recourse is to that of the latter. The path of no reason at all is apt to become more dangerous to man because it places superstition at the fore of knowledge, and "as superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions."[18] Superstition, or religion, is dangerous insofar as its principles regarding worldly phenomena are based out of an other-worldly omniscience; whereas philosophy, although ridiculous at times, is at least superior in that its principles are (or should be) derived from natural, observable phenomena and therefore capable of critical examination.[19] The blind faith that is required to affirm or maintain a truth of the former gives too much

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[16] T 1.4.7.9; 175
[17] T 1.4.7.4; 173
[18] T 1.4.7.13; 176
[19] In Hume's essay, "Of Superstition and Understanding," he argues that superstition and enthusiasm are "corruptions of true religion." Likewise, whenever present, superstition is the marker of false religion. Therefore in this essay, all reference to religion is to this breed of 'false' religion as defined by Hume. For an interesting take on whether or not Hume's idea of 'true' religion can in fact be called a religion, see Philips, D.Z. "Is Hume's 'True Religion' a Religious Belief?" Chapter 6, in *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, eds. D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1999).

jurisdiction to the subject to act wildly upon the passions. What makes vulgar religion (or no reason) dangerous is the fact that the object of the passions of which the superstitious, religious man acts upon is incapable of being observed empirically, for a deity is an entity that is not of the natural world. It is this realization that drives Hume to consider his current condition so dire. If he cannot, within true philosophical reason, affirm any claims of cause and effect or first causes, if all belief in the reality of observed experience is called into question, and if the limits of human knowledge are in this manner in a state of such restriction, what is keeping him from falling into a posture of religion? If human knowledge is limited to vivacious connections made in the imagination, how far removed is this from succumbing to superstition?

Hume's skepticism ends up preserving his naturalism. Ever faithful to it, Hume resolves to retain an attitude of skepticism with regard to philosophical doubts, as well as philosophical convictions. Only in this way is he able to reconcile the wealth of unknowing that plagues the mind with respect to nature:

> For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction. Human Nature is the only science of man; and yet has been hitherto the most neglected.[20]

Instead of calling it quits at the signs of a dead end, and instead of affirming the imagined idea of a pearly paved road in its stead, Hume is contented to state that the mysteries of nature that have yet to reveal themselves are just that: unrevealed.

[20] T 1.4.7.14; 177

Some forms of skepticism might imply that this is because there is in fact no mystery; however, the reserved or mitigated skeptic in Hume says 'all in good time.' He believes that to find contentment in this reality is the mark of a true and honest philosopher. In a certain respect Hume can be interpreted as arguing for a moral obligation to skepticism: "'Tis easier to forbear all examination and enquiry, than to check ourselves in so natural a propensity, and guard against that assurance, which always arises from an exact and full survey of an object."[21] It may be easier for the human subject to fall back upon fictitious ideas of soul and substance when the habit of the mind yields no other solution, but it is one thing to acknowledge the mysteries in nature, and another thing entirely to succumb to them at the expense of scientific enquiry.

Hume's obligation to skepticism is a template for his views on moral necessity. The famous "ought-is" passage of the *Treatise* marks the conclusion of the first section in the book "On Morals," where Hume applies his experimental method to his science of man. Hume intends to demonstrate that our moral understanding is not something that is derived solely from reason, and he spends the entire first section listing examples that illustrate where human reason fails to account for moral sentiments. Hume concludes the section with an observation. He notes that other authors, in their respective systems of morality, commit a fatal mistake whereby they derive an "ought" from an "is." This of course strikes Hume as absurd because it implies an entirely new set of relations that go unexplained and unjustified; they are simply taken for granted. These "vulgar systems of morality,"

[21] T 1.4.7.15; 178

as Hume calls them, fail in certain respects: neither demonstrative nor probabilistic reasoning have vice or virtue as their object. For Hume, you cannot get an "ought" from an "is" if you are coming from a rationalist point of view, but you can if you consult moral sentiments. The rationalist who claims to derive an "ought" from an "is" cannot account for an obligation of the will a priori, and as we shall see, they ought not place vice and virtue in the abstract.

The first targets of Hume's skepticism are those who assert that there are absolute measures of right and wrong that impose themselves on all rational beings, including God. According to this system, then, morality is something that can be discerned from ideas and the relations of ideas. Hume argues, on the other hand, that moral principles incite human beings to action; they are not merely judgments of the understanding.[22] Hume evidences this by referring to such things as duty, justice, and obligation and their influence on human action. As Hume has reminded us in previous sections of the *Treatise*, reason is a slave to the passions. If passions and actions are active principles, then it follows that they cannot be influenced by reason, an inactive principle.[23] Thus, morals are not a direct object of reason.

If human beings discovered good and evil through reasoning, then it would follow that things such as vice and virtue could be found in relations of ideas and in matters of fact. In the first sense, this would mean that the essence of morality would lie in one of the four relations of resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, or proportions in quantity and number. Hume responds to this by giving us his famous tree example, whereby a seedling from an adult tree ultimately outgrows

[22] T 3.1.1.6; 294
[23] T 3.1.1.7; 294

and overpowers its "parent" tree. Do we condemn the tree or hold it accountable for killing the parent tree? Surely not, and Hume concludes, "all these relations belong as properly to matter, as to our actions, passions, and volitions…[and] 'tis unquestionable, therefore, that morality lies not in any of these relations, nor the sense of it in their discovery."[24] The task for those who wish to remain of the opinion that morality lies in some demonstrable relation is to come up with an entirely new and previously unknown relation. However, in the unlikely event that a new relation is found, Hume explains how it would still not be enough. He states:

> 'Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it. In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, *obligatory* (author's emphasis) on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to show the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-dispos'd mind, it must take place and have its influence.[25]

The "connexion" that must be pointed to is none other than the connection between cause and effect, and as we have already seen in the *Treatise*, this kind of a connection or power remains utterly unknown outside of experience.

The most convincing example given by Hume also serves to demonstrate that morality, or instances of vice or virtue, cannot consist in matters of fact. Hume asks us to think of an act of the will that is considered vicious: murder. If murder is the object of our reasoning in this instance, wherein lies the vice? At what instant does one find vice existent in murder? When I pick up a knife with the intention of using it against a victim? Or is it in the moment the knife makes contact with the victim?

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[24] T 3.1.1.19; 298
[25] T 3.1.1.22; 299

Actually, it is in neither of these instances because both describe actions that are driven by certain passions and motives. It is only after the fact, upon consultation of sentiment that we arrive at notions of vice and virtue. Hume explains:

> You can never find it [extant vice], till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object.[26]

Hume shifts the focus of matters of fact from causes and effects to sentiments. In the act of declaring this or that action as vicious or virtuous the declaration arises out of a sentiment and is therefore a perception of the mind.

As we saw previously, part of Hume's argument against the existence of immutable substance (this includes Hume's arguments concerning God, the soul, personal identity, and how they relate to the issue of necessity) was derived from his claim that ideas and impressions are different types of perceptions. Similarly, this distinction between ideas and perceptions applies to the discussion on morals and causation.

It is a fault in our judgment that we conflate a sentiment of vice or virtue with an idea that it resembles. Though it is possible to derive a feeling of disapprobation from an idea of a particular murderous act, murder is not its direct object; rather, it is the sentiment itself upon reflection of the impression, which is the object. So in order to derive an "ought" from an "is," the moral constriction or prescription must be experienced antecedently from our willingness to conform to it or not. In other words, I do not abstain from murdering the noisy undergraduates in the library

[26] T 3.1.1.26; 301

because reason tells me murder is bad; on the contrary, I do not murder because the sentiments that arise upon my reflection of it lead me to a state of aversion rather than to desire.

This is not to say that Hume does not believe there to be any way of getting an "ought" from an "is," however. He argues that our moral distinctions are derived from a particular "moral sense" that is inherent in all human beings and distinguishable by the particular impression or sentiment that it evokes. Take for example the commandment "Thou shall not kill." Hume argues that we ought not kill because of the moral depravity that ensues from such an act. It is not the case that we avoid taking the life of another being because we reason ourselves out of committing such an act. On the contrary, we abstain from killing because of the effect we feel upon bringing such an image before the mind. It is not a matter of reasoning, but that of feeling. The difference here is key to Hume's system. He explains further:

> [I]t follows, that in all enquiries concerning these moral distinctions, it will be sufficient to show the principles, which make us feel a satisfaction or uneasiness from the survey of any character, in order to satisfy us why the character is laudable or blameable [*sic*]. An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because [*sic*] its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue.[27]

This realization helps to situate Hume's system within the larger context of the skepticism/naturalism debate.

[27] T 3.1.2.3; 303

An "ought" judgment is based on experience. That is, it is the result of the mind's deduction of particular instances rather than an a priori abstraction. Hume states, "[t]ruth is disputable; not taste: what exists in the nature of things is the standard of our judgement [*sic*]; what each man feels within himself is the standard of sentiment."[28] Judgments that are not based in experience have no place in Hume's moral system, just as a priori affirmations of necessary causation have no place in human understanding outside of an observable constant conjunction between similar objects.[29] Thus, Hume places his account of moral distinctions on equal footing with his appeal to naturalism.

In *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, Paul Russell identifies the leading interpretations of the apparent inconsistent and/or irreconcilable motives in the *Treatise*. The riddle itself is best described by one of Hume's earliest critics, Thomas Reid. He states:

> It seems to be a peculiar strain of humour in this author, to set out in his introduction by promising, with a grave face, no less than a complete system of the sciences, upon a foundation entirely new—to wit, that of human nature—when the intention of the whole work is to show, that there is neither human nature nor science in the world.[30]

I believe that Hume provides a justification for this apparent peculiarity in *Enquiries.* In the section, "Of Liberty and Necessity," Hume argues that there is a universal constancy to human nature that is of the same kind and order as that of the natural world. The knowledge that is acquired from both is founded upon experience. As

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[28] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 171
[29] T 1.3.2. 5-6; 53-54; T 1.3.6.12; 64
[30] Thomas Reid, *Works*, Vol. I, reprint (Nabu Press, 2010), 102a, qtd. in Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7

stated previously, Hume's notion of causality or necessity is founded upon the observed constant union and conjunction of like objects. This means that when we attribute necessity to movements of material bodies, we are only right in doing so after observing the sort of constancy and conjunction that are required.

Hume explains causality and necessary connection in terms of intelligibility. Recall that Hume (contra Locke) distinguishes between ideas and impressions, whereby an idea is a weaker, fainter copy of an impression. This is to say that my idea of the color red is different from seeing or experiencing the color red. The former is less vivid than the latter, and more importantly, dependent on the experience of the latter. To say that 'A caused B,' where A is the cause and B the effect, is to affirm that there is a unique quality to 'A' that led to its being the cause of 'B.' Hume finds a problem with this kind of reasoning: it suggests that there is a particular impression of causation. If this were the case, then that particular quality of 'A' would always beget the existence of 'B.' Hume explains why this cannot be so:

> Let us therefore cast our eye on any two objects, which we call cause and effect, and turn them on all sides, in order to find that impression, which produces an idea of such prodigious consequence. At first sight I perceive, that I must not search for it in any of the particular *qualities* (author's emphasis) of the objects; since, which-ever of these qualities I pitch on, I find some object, that is not possest of it, and yet falls under the denomination of cause or effect.[31]

So where does our idea of causation come from? Hume argues that "The idea, then, of causation must be deriv'd from some relation among objects."[32] In other words, there is no inherent quality of a cause that necessitates an effect. Causality can only

[31] T 1.3.2.5; 53
[32] T 1.3.2.6; 53-54

be discussed in terms of its intelligibility—i.e. in terms of experiencing 'B' to follow 'A'—and therefore it has to do with the actual experience rather than the abstract concept of causation. To affirm that causation is an innate quality of objects is to indulge in superstitious, dogmatic forces of nature. It may be easier for the dogmatist to explain natural phenomena in terms of unintelligible forces; however, Hume challenges this in his account of causation and morality.

There is no room for innate powers between objects in Hume's system, at least not the kind of abstract or dogmatic forces invoked by certain philosophers. Only in this manner can there be acceptable contemplations on seeming irregularities in nature. In fact, I believe Hume argues that irregularities are a part of the regular in nature—a fact to which both philosophers and physicians can attest:

> They [physicians] know that a human body is a mighty complicated machine: That many secret powers lurk in it, which are altogether beyond our comprehension...[a]nd that therefore the irregular events, which outwardly discover themselves, can be no proof that the laws of nature are not observed with the greatest regularity in its internal operations and government.[33]

The internal operations of our sentiment provide the basis for moral judgments of good, bad, right, and wrong. First, we have an impression that acts upon the senses. Then a copy of the impression is made in the mind. Our reflection upon the copied idea forms new impressions of desire or aversion. This is not a process of reasoning; some things are better left felt than reasoned alone. Custom allows that particular things produce particular sentiments and therein reside the foundations

[33] EHU 8.67; SBN 87

of moral distinction. We are not moral beings solely because of reason; rather, we are moral beings because we are sentimental.

Hume's skeptical attitude drove him to question the accepted notions of God, the soul, morality, and causality. As a skeptic Hume's main target was superstition, which he saw in affirmations of immutable substance, causality, and the supposed origins of moral action. Hume found that there was nothing inherent in any cause that spoke to its effect; all we have to go on is constant conjunction and contiguity of like objects. This discovery, in a manner of speaking, saved Hume's appeal to naturalism. This observation is easier understood once we see Hume's claim against absolute necessity and immutability as his mitigated skeptic alter ego whose purpose is to serve his naturalist persona. Hume the naturalist discovered intelligible necessity and its customary form. That is why Hume can say that the constant union and conjunction of like objects follows the same mechanistic pattern as the mind's inference from moral sentiments to moral behavior. There is nothing inherent in any act that makes it moral or immoral. There are only moral sentiments that people experience in relation to behavior.

Hume's overhaul of human understanding and how we acquire knowledge is not about placing skepticism and naturalism at odds with each other. For Hume, we cannot have one without the other, and that means being comfortable with seeming irregularities and things that are not immediately explainable by experience. The moment we start to invent invisible forces to smooth the surfaces of a rocky understanding, we fall into dangerous, superstitious reasoning. In short, it is better

to acknowledge human ignorance than to pretend we have all the answers — that is Hume's moral imperative regarding knowledge and human understanding.

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