

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

Logic, Scepticism, and Egoism: Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*



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1

Three Recent Papers

- This talk draws on some main points from three recent papers:
 - “Hume’s Fork, and His Theory of Relations”, forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phen. Research*
 - “Hume’s ‘Scepticism with Regard to Reason’: Its Refutation and Significance”, under review
 - “The Relation between Hume’s Two *Enquiries*”, forthcoming in Jackie Taylor (ed.), *Reading Hume on the Principles of Morals* (OUP)
- It highlights three respects in which Hume’s view seems to have changed substantially.

2

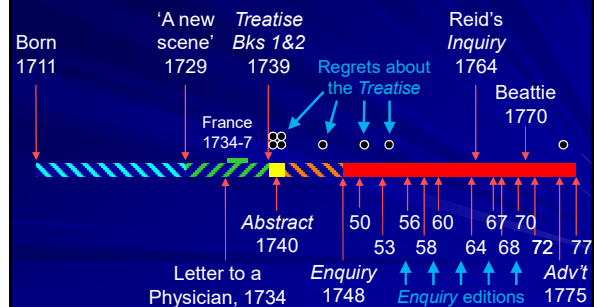
1. Hume’s Disillusion with the *Treatise of Human Nature*

- a) Timeline and textual evidence, from 1739 when the *Treatise* was published, until Hume’s “Advertisement” of 1775.
- b) A change merely in “manner”, or in substantial “matter” also?
- c) Minor candidates for changes in matter.
- d) Three major problems with the *Treatise*: logic, radical scepticism, and egoism.

3

3

A Timeline of Hume’s Life



4

4

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (1)

- **January 1739**: *Treatise* published
- **June 1st 1739**, letter to Kames:
“My Fondness for what I imagin’d new Discoveries made me overlook all common Rules of Prudence”
- **October/November 1739**: *Abstract* written
– Published in March 1740, the *Abstract* suggests a major rethink and restructuring, anticipating the first *Enquiry* in many ways.

5

5

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (2)

- **March 16th 1740**, letter to Hutcheson:
“I wait with some Impatience for a second Edition principally on Account of Alterations I intend to make in my Performance. ... I am apt, in a cool hour, to suspect, in general, that most of my Reasonings will be more useful by furnishing Hints & exciting People’s Curiosity than as containing any Principles that will augment the Stock of Knowledge that must pass to future Ages.”

6

6

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Disillusion with the *Treatise* (3)

- November 1740: *Book III* is published ... together with *Appendix*, confessing errors.
- May 21st 1745, *Letter from a Gentleman*:
"I am indeed of Opinion, that the Author had better delayed the publishing of that Book; not on account of any dangerous Principles contained in it, but because on more mature Consideration he might have rendered it much less imperfect by further Corrections and Revisals." (L 33)

7

7

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (4)

- Spring 1751, letter to Gilbert Elliot:
"I give you my Advice against reading [the *Treatise*]. ... I was carry'd away by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately. So vast an Undertaking, plan'd before I was one and twenty, & compos'd before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. I have repented my Haste a hundred, & a hundred times."

8

8

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (5)

- February 1754, letter to John Stewart:
"I shall acknowledge ... a very great Mistake ... viz my publishing at all the *Treatise* of human Nature, a Book, which pretended to innovate in all the sublimest Parts of Philosophy, & which I compos'd before I was five & twenty. Above all, the positive Air, which prevails in that Book, & which may be imputed to the Ardor of Youth, so much displeases me, that I have not Patience to review it."

9

9

Hume's 1775 Letter to Strahan

"There is a short Advertisement, which I wish I had prefix'd to the second Volume of the *Essays and Treatises* in the last Edition. I send you a Copy of it. Please ... give out no more Copies without prefixing it to the second volume. It is a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie."

Letter to William Strahan, 26th Oct 1775

10

Hume's "Advertisement"

"... several writers [Reid, Beattie], who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work [the *Treatise*]. ... Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces [EHU, DOP, EPM, NHR] may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles."

Enquiry, "Advertisement", 1775

11

11

Manner or Matter?

- Spring 1751, letter to Gilbert Elliot:
"By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete. ... *The philosophical Principles are the same in both*: But I was carry'd away by the Heat of Youth ..."
- "My Own Life", 1776:
"I had always entertained a notion, that my want of success in publishing the *Treatise* of Human Nature, had proceeded *more from the manner than the matter* ... I, therefore, cast the first part of that work anew in the *Enquiry*"

12

12

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

Possible Problems with the *Treatise*

- Associationism – downplayed in *Enquiries*;
- Separability Principle – dropped in *Enquiry*;
- Space and Time – omitted from *Enquiry*;
- Induction – argument improved in *Enquiry*;
- Belief – theory refined in *Appendix/Enquiry*;
- Causality – no mathematical forces in *Treatise*;
- Personal Identity – serious error acknowledged;
- Liberty and necessity – infelicitously explained;
- Argument of *T* 2.3.3 and 3.1.1 – later dropped;
- “Castration”: explicit religious topics removed.

13

13

Three *Major* Problems with the *Treatise*, and Corresponding Revisions

- The **logical theory**, centred around Hume’s theory of relations, is nonsense;
 - It is replaced in the *Enquiry* by Hume’s Fork.
- The argument for extreme “**scepticism with regard to reason**” (*T* 1.4.1) is hopeless;
 - It is entirely omitted from the *Enquiry*, allowing a different treatment of scepticism in general.
- The *Treatise* is fundamentally **egoist**.
 - In the *Moral Enquiry*, Hume attacks egoism.

14

14

2. Hume’s Theory of Relations in the *Treatise*

- a) Hume’s theory is clearly adapted from Locke’s *Essay*, shoehorning Locke’s more extensive taxonomy into just seven categories.
- b) It is motivated in part by a theory of mental operations, ...
- c) ... but mostly by a Dichotomy whose aim is to provide a criterion of demonstrability.

15

15

Lockean Relations	Humean Relations
[“Agreement”, and many specific relations of similarity]	Resemblance
Cause and effect [also “natural”, “instituted”, and “moral” relations]	Cause and effect
Relations of time Relations of place	Space and time
Identity	Identity
Diversity	Contrariety
Proportional relations	Proportions in quantity Degrees in quality

16

16

Locke on the Types of Relation (1)

- Locke (II xxv-xxviii) emphasises:
 - “Cause and Effect” (II xxvi 1-2)
 - “Relations of Time” (II xxvi 3-4)
 - “Relations of Place and Extension” (II xxvi 5)
 - “Identity and Diversity” (II xxvii)
 - “Proportional Relations” (II xxviii 1)
- The last of these categories includes both what Hume calls “degrees in quality” and “proportions in quantity or number”.

17

17

Locke on the Types of Relation (2)

- Locke then says there are “infinite others” of relations (II xxviii 1), notably:
 - “*Natural Relations*” such as “*Father and Son, Brothers ... Country-men*” (II xxviii 2)
 - “*Instituted, or Voluntary*” relations such as “*General ..., Citizen, ... Patron and Client, ... Constable, or Dictator*” (II xxviii 3)
 - Various **moral relations** (II xxviii 4-16)

* Note that Locke does not mean the same by “natural relation” as Hume.

18

18

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Locke to Hume on Relations (1)

- Locke's "diversity" apparently becomes Hume's "contrariety".
- Hume's "resemblance" – which he says enters into all relations – fulfils a similar role to Locke's 'agreement' (II xxviii 19).
- Locke doesn't treat "resemblance" as a single type, but recognises myriad forms of resemblance (e.g. "*Country-men, i.e. those who were born in the same Country*").

19

19

Locke to Hume on Relations (2)

- Hume seems deliberately to subsume Locke's "natural", "instituted" and moral relations under cause and effect:
 - "... all the relations of blood depend upon cause and effect ..." (T 1.1.4.3)
 - "... the relation of cause and effect ... we may observe to be the source of all the relations of interest and duty, by which men influence each other in society, and are plac'd in the ties of government and subordination." (T 1.1.4.5)

20

20

Hume's Dichotomy

- Hume starts *Treatise* 1.3 by dividing his seven types of relation into two groups:
 - The Four "Constant" Relations
 - Those relations that "depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together" (i.e. *resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, proportions in quantity or number*);
 - The Three "Inconstant" Relations
 - Those relations that "may be chang'd without any change in the ideas" (i.e. *identity, relations of time and place, cause and effect*).

21

21

A Taxonomy of Mental Operations

- Hume then argues, rather simplistically and crudely, that his seven relations map neatly onto four different mental operations:
 - *resemblance, contrariety, and degrees in quality* are "discoverable at first sight" (T 1.3.1.2)
 - *proportions of quantity or number* are susceptible of demonstration (T 1.3.1.2-5)
 - *identity and relations of time and place* are matters of perception rather than reasoning (T 1.3.2.1)
 - *causation* is the only relation "that can be trac'd beyond our senses, [to] existences and objects, which we do not see or feel" (T 1.3.2.3)

22

22

	<i>Constant relations</i>	<i>Inconstant relations</i>
Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intuition resemblance contrariety degrees in quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sensory Perception identity situations in time and place
Reasoning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstration proportions in quantity and number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probability causation

23

23

Hume's Dichotomy – the motive

- Hume gives his taxonomy of relations in order to facilitate his arguments:
 - That the Causal Maxim cannot be intuitively certain (T 1.3.3.2);
 - That relations of virtue and vice are not demonstrable (T 3.1.1.19).
- He seems to argue from the principle:
 - Any proposition that is intuitively or demonstratively certain can contain only constant relations.

24

24

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The Failure of the Dichotomy

- Sadly, this is nonsense. There are lots of “analytic” propositions involving identity, relations of time and place, or causation:
 - If A=B and B=C, then A=C. (identity)
 - Anything that lies inside a small building lies inside a building. (place)
 - Every mother is a parent. (causation)
 - Anyone whose paternal grandparents have two sons, has an uncle. (causation)

25

25

The Source of Hume’s Mistake

- Bennett (1971: 250-6 and 2001: 242-4) argues insightfully that Hume confused:
 - *Reducibility* or *Supervenience*: relations that are reducible to the properties of the individual objects themselves.
 - *Analyticity* or *Apriority*: relations that can be known with certainty to apply.
- I believe that Hume was also misled by his tendency to conflate objects and perceptions, which makes Bennett’s confusion very easy:

26

26

A Subtle Distinction

- *Reducibility* or *Supervenience*: relations that are implied by the properties of the individual objects themselves (independently of further information about their situation etc.)
- *Analyticity* or *Apriority*: relations that are implied by our ideas of the objects (independently of other ideas)
 - “Venus is larger than Mars” (reducible but not a priori);
 - “The furthest planet is no closer than the closest planet” (a priori but not reducible).

27

27

Hume Abandons the Dichotomy

- Causal notions like *force* can play a role in abstract (or demonstrative: T 2.3.3.2, E 4.18) reasoning:

“mixed mathematics proceeds upon the supposition, [of] certain laws ... [of] nature ...; and abstract reasonings are employed, either to assist experience in the discovery of these laws, or to determine their influence in particular instances Thus, it is a law of motion, discovered by experience, that the moment or force of any body in motion is in the compound ratio or proportion of its solid contents and its velocity; and consequently, that a small force may remove the greatest obstacle or raise the greatest weight, if, by any contrivance or machinery, we can encrease the velocity of that force, so as to make it an overmatch for its antagonist..” (E 4.13)

28

28

Hume’s Conceivability Principle

- Even in the *Treatise*, Hume mostly relies not so much on his Dichotomy as on the *Conceivability Principle*, which yields a far more plausible criterion of demonstrability.

“To form a clear idea of any thing, is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it.” (T 1.3.6.5, cf. 1.3.3.3, 1.3.9.10, 1.3.14.13)

“whatever we *conceive* is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense: but wherever a demonstration takes place, the contrary is impossible, and implies a contradiction.” (A 11, cf. E 12.28)

29

29

Hume’s Fork

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume replaces his Dichotomy with a distinction amongst propositions which is fundamentally based on the Conceivability Principle:
 - *Relations of Ideas* can be known *a priori* – without any dependence on experience or real existence – by inspecting ideas; hence their falsehood is inconceivable and they are necessarily true.
 - e.g. Pythagoras’ Theorem. (E 4.1)
 - $3 \times 5 = \frac{1}{2} \times 30$. (E 4.1)
 - All bachelors are unmarried.
 - The modern term is *analytic* (as understood e.g. by Ayer): “true in virtue of its meaning”.

30

30

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A Plausible Threefold Identification

- *Matters of Fact* cannot be known *a priori*, and their truth / falsity are equally conceivable:
 - e.g. The sun will rise tomorrow. (E 4.2)
 - The sun will not rise tomorrow. (E 4.2)
 - This pen will fall when released in air.
- Hume presumes that the *analytic/synthetic*, *a priori/a posteriori*, and *necessary/contingent* distinctions all coincide.
- Hume's Fork, and this identification, became orthodoxy through most of the 20th century, and still retains significant plausibility today.

31

31

3. Hume's Regress Argument for "Scepticism with Regard to Reason"

- The argument of *Treatise* 1.4.1 is radically sceptical, supposedly denying rational foundation to any belief whatever.
- It plays havoc with Hume's attempt to find a coherent position on which to base his would-be science of human nature.
- But the argument is hopeless, and it seems that Hume later recognised this.

32

32

From Knowledge to Probability

- *Treatise* 1.4.1 contains a famous – and highly corrosive – sceptical argument.
- Its first stage argues that, even if we assume that in "demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible" (T 1.4.1.1), some doubt is still appropriate because our faculties are imperfect and we sometimes make mistakes.
- "All knowledge degenerates into probability" (T 1.4.1.1) when we take into account our *experienced probability* of such mistakes:

33

33

"A history of all the instances"

"We must, therefore, ... enlarge our view to comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv'd us, compar'd with those, wherein its testimony was just and true. Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. By this means all knowledge degenerates into probability; and this probability is greater or less, according to our experience of the veracity or deceitfulness of our understanding, and according to the simplicity or intricacy of the question."

34

34

An Obligation to Embark on "Reflex Judgment"

- Hence when we consider what confidence to place in a mathematical calculation that we have carried out (for instance), we need to make, and take account of, a judgment about the reliability of our reason or understanding:
 - "we ought always to correct the first judgment, derived from the nature of the object [e.g. the mathematical judgment], by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding." (T 1.4.1.5)

35

35

A Further Obligation of Reason

- The same sort of correction is appropriate for probable judgments, including our judgments about our own reliability. (T 1.4.1.5)
- So how good are we in judging the reliability of our own faculties? Since that first [probable] reflex judgment is itself subject to error, we need to make a second correction:
 - "we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties." (T 1.4.1.6)

36

36

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

Iterative Weakening to Nothing

- This obligation iterates, repeatedly weakening the evidence left by the previous judgments:
“this decision, tho’ it should be favourable to our preceding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still farther our first evidence, and must itself be weaken’d by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on *in infinitum*; and even the vastest quantity ... must in this manner be reduc’d to nothing. ... all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence.” (T 1.4.1.6)

37

37

Hume’s Purpose in T 1.4.1

- Hume cannot of course suspend judgment on everything (as his argument would mandate):
“Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel” (T 1.4.1.7)
- He says his intention has been to prove that
“*belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*”,
by showing that if it were founded on reason
“it must infallibly destroy itself, and ... terminate in a total suspense of judgment.” (T 1.4.1.8)

38

38

How Does Hume Escape?

- So how does Hume’s own account of belief escape this iterative weakening and eventual reduction to complete suspension?
“I answer, that after the first and second decision; as the action of the mind becomes forc’d and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure; tho’ the principles ... be the same ...; yet their influence on the imagination [weakens] ...” (T 1.4.1.10)
- As Hume remarks, the difficulty of following and being moved by abstruse arguments is very familiar to us. (T 1.4.1.11, cf. 1.3.13.17)

39

39

The Significance of the Argument

- Hume anticipates T 1.4.1 in the previous Part:
“we shall find afterwards, [note to T 1.4.1] ... one very memorable exception [to iterative psychological weakening], *which is of vast consequence* in the present subject of the understanding.” (T 1.3.13.5)
- He also draws on it in the conclusion of Book 1:
“I have already shown, [note to T 1.4.1] that *the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.*” (T 1.4.7.7)

40

40

A Crucial Distinction

- In the first paragraph of T 1.4.4, Hume had famously drawn an important distinction:
“In order to justify myself, I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the *principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal*; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the *principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular*; ... The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but ... are observ’d only to take place in weak minds ...”

41

41

- The Respectable “General” Principles
– These are “permanent, irresistible, and universal” (e.g. custom/induction). Hume himself relies on these as the basis of factual inference and science.
- The Disreputable “Trivial” Principles
– These are “changeable, weak, and irregular” (e.g. imaginative fancies). Hume criticises ancient philosophers and others for depending on these.

42

42

This would be fine, if only we could consistently base our thinking on the General principles and renounce the Trivial principles. But the argument of Treatise 1.4.1 undermines this neat solution, generating a serious dilemma because the avoidance of total scepticism depends on the manifestly “trivial” principle of failing to follow abstruse reasoning ...

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

"if we assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy; ... they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham'd of our credulity. ... But on the other hand, if ... [we] ... reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding, that is, to the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination; even this ... wou'd be ... attended with the most fatal consequences. For I have already shown, [note to T 1.4.1] that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remove views of things" (T 1.4.7.6-7)

43

43

Epistemic Meltdown

"What party, then, shall we choose among these difficulties? If we embrace this principle, and condemn all refin'd reasoning, we run into the most manifest absurdities. If we reject it in favour of these reasonings, we subvert entirely the human understanding. We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all. For my part, I know not what ought to be done. ... The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence ... ? I am confounded with all these questions ..." (T 1.4.7.7-8)

44

44

An Unsatisfactory Resolution

- Contemporary scholars, following Garrett, tend to look for a resolution in Hume's "Title Principle":

"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)
- Given that a significant part of Hume's concern is to distinguish between science and superstition (cf. T 1.4.7.13), this answer looks lame. Superstitious reasoning is characteristically lively, and mixes with strong natural human propensities. If the *Treatise* account has to rely on this ill-considered principle as a criterion of discrimination, then it is a failure.

45

45

Doubts about *Treatise* 1.4.1

- Despite the significance Hume accords it, the T 1.4.1 argument seems extremely dubious:
 - Suppose I make a mathematical judgment.
 - Experience suggests to me that I go wrong about 5% of the time in such judgments, so I adjust my credence to 95%.
 - Then it occurs to me that my estimate of 5% might be wrong ... but why should this make me assume that my estimate is likely to be too *optimistic* rather than *pessimistic*? Maybe my credence should be *greater than 95%*?

46

46

Desperately Defending Hume

- Some defenders of Hume (e.g. Bennett, Owen) admit that reduction isn't forced, but suggest that iteration implies a "spreading" of the probability estimate, so it becomes completely non-specific.
- But this doesn't fit Hume's account of belief as a vivacious idea – belief involves a *specific level of felt vivacity*, not reflective judgment over a range.
- Moreover like other defences of Hume, it has never been spelled out beyond vague hand-waving, and no such defence has achieved sufficient rigour to yield mathematical plausibility.

47

47

Why Iterate?

- Most fundamentally (and contrary to the standard assumption of Hume's defenders), *the case for repeated iteration is hopeless*. My credence in my mathematical judgment should depend on my reliability [and hence remembered track record] in judging *mathematics*, not on my reliability in judging my reliability in judging ... (etc.).
 - Hume's argument *itself* relies on memory and records, appealing to the "history of the instances" of my past judgments. These remembered/recorded statistics remain what they are, *irrespective of how good or bad I might be at iterative reflexive judgments*.

48

48

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Where is the Obligation of Reason?

- Even if there were some good reason *in principle* to iterate up the reflexive levels, doing so is *in practice* impossible for us (as Hume emphasises), and it apparently doesn't make us better judges (since it pulls us away from the true statistics). So how can it possibly be an *obligation of reason*?
- On Hume's own conception of reason, reflexive checking can only make sense if it is warranted by *experience*. There is no *a priori* requirement to do it, and hence the lack of any *a posteriori* benefit entirely undermines the supposed obligation.

49

49

Scepticism in the First *Enquiry* (1)

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume denies that reflexive faculty-checking is required for rational reliance on them:

"There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others ... It recommends an universal doubt ... of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious ... But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others ... Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject." (E 12.3)

50

50

Scepticism in the First *Enquiry* (2)

- What Hume calls *consequent* scepticism (E 12.5) instead puts the onus on *the sceptic* to identify problems with our faculties.
- At E 12.22-3, we see this strategy deployed very effectively to answer Hume's famous "sceptical doubts" about induction (presented in Section 4).
- Here we see a striking convergence in Hume's approach to sceptical topics that he had treated quite differently in the *Treatise*. He now finds a satisfactory resolution of scepticism, and a plausible criterion of discrimination, in *mitigated scepticism* (E 12.24-5) and his Fork (E 12.26-34).

51

51

4. The Fundamental Egoism of the *Treatise*

- a) The *Treatise* shows clear signs of having inherited Locke's egoist hedonism, though most scholars deny that it is egoist.
- b) Sympathy is often considered contrary to egoism, though in fact it supports it. Genuine benevolence to those we love is contrary, but highlighted by Hume as theoretically awkward.
- c) Several of Hume's works show a very clear historical progression away from egoism.

52

52

Locke's Hedonism and Egoism

- "happiness and that alone ... moves *desire*";
- "Happiness ... in its full extent is "the utmost Pleasure we are capable of";
- "what has an aptness to produce Pleasure in us, is that we call *Good*, and what is apt to produce Pain in us, we call *Evil*, for no other reason, but for its aptness to produce Pleasure and Pain in us, wherein consists our *Happiness* and *Misery*" (Essay II xxi 41-2)

53

53

Hedonism in Hume's Direct Passions

- "By direct passions I understand such as arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure." (T 2.1.1.4, cf. 2.3.1.1, 2.3.9.1-8)
- "'Tis *obvious*, that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity" (T 2.3.3.3, my emphasis – clearly means *our* pain/pleasure)
- "'Tis *easy to observe*, that the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure ... Upon the removal of pain and pleasure there immediately follows a removal of ... desire and aversion ..." (T 2.3.9.1 – likewise)

54

54

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

But “Hume is No Egoist” !!

- “Certainly, Hume is no egoist, ... Hume also believes that humans possess ‘natural’ virtues, many of which are inherently sociable” (Gill 2000, p. 90)
- “Hume is no egoist: the operation of sympathy guarantees that human beings are concerned for the pleasures and pains of others as well as their own, and he recognises other basic instinctual desires and aversions.” (Garrett, 2014, p. 114)

55

55

- “Hume is no egoist. He allows that human beings care for family and friends as well as for themselves. Indeed he maintains that they have a greater affection for those close to them, taken together, than for themselves. [T 3.2.2.5]” (Owens 2011, p. 72)
- “However, not all our behaviour is driven by the prospect of personal pleasure and pain, and Hume is no psychological egoist. Various direct passions ‘... [arise naturally] ... The desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites’ [T 2.3.9.8]” (Millican 2012, p. 128)

56

56

Four Aspects of Hume’s Alleged “Non-Egoism”

- Natural virtues that are inherently sociable;
- Sympathy or fellow-feeling;
- Benevolence (“desire of happiness”) to family and friends; anger (“desire of punishment”) to our enemies;
- Other basic instinctual desires and aversions: “hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites”.

57

57

Natural, Sociable Virtues

“That many of the natural virtues have this tendency to the good of society, no one can doubt of. Meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, equity, ... are commonly denominated the *social* virtues, to mark their tendency to the good of society. ... moral distinctions arise, in a great measure, from the tendency of qualities and characters to the interest of society, and ... ’tis our concern for that interest, which makes us approve or disapprove of them. Now we have no such extensive concern for society but from sympathy; and consequently ’tis that principle, which takes us so far out of ourselves, as to give us the same pleasure or uneasiness in the characters of others which are useful or pernicious to society as if they had a tendency to our own advantage or loss.” (T 3.3.1.11)

58

58

The Function of Humean Sympathy

- Humean sympathy is a *mechanism* that replicates other people’s perceived emotions in our own, e.g. causing pity:
“We have a lively idea of every thing related to us. All human creatures are related to us by resemblance. Their persons, therefore, their interests, their passions, their pains and pleasures must strike upon us in a lively manner, and produce an emotion similar to the original one; since a lively idea is easily converted into an impression.” (T 2.2.7.2)

59

59

Sympathy’s Theoretical Role

- Sympathy thus enables our concern for others’ wellbeing to be accommodated within an egoist framework, saving it from evident refutation.
- Accordingly, once I become aware that others’ pain and pleasure impacts on my own (through sympathy), I will start to care about these:
“’Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object: And these emotions extend themselves to the causes and effects of that object, as they are pointed out to us by reason and experience.” (T 2.3.3.3)

60

60

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

Admitting Unselfish Benevolence and Anger

- “Love is always follow’d by a desire of the happiness of the person belov’d, and an aversion to his misery: As hatred produces a desire of the misery and an aversion to the happiness of the person hated.” (T 2.2.6.3)
- resentment against someone who injures me “often ... makes me desire his evil and punishment, independent of all considerations of pleasure and advantage to myself” (T 2.3.3.9, emphasis added)

61

61

A Contingent Blending

- At T 2.2.6.3-6, Hume is analysing how the passion of love characteristically blends with benevolence (and hatred with anger). He concludes that the two passions are, in fact, quite distinct, “and only conjoin’d ... by the original constitution of the mind” (T 2.2.6.6).
- So we *happen to be* constituted in such a way that we naturally feel unselfish benevolence (or anger) towards those we love (or hate).
 - Isn’t this proof that the *Treatise* considers us *not to be* pure egoists? Yes it is, but the immediately preceding paragraph is highly significant ...

62

62

Belated Recognition, and a Theoretical Cost

“... I begin to be sensible ... of a misfortune, that has attended every system of philosophy, with which the world has been yet acquainted. ’Tis commonly found, that in accounting for the operations of nature by any particular hypothesis; ... there is always some phaenomenon, which is more stubborn, and will not so easily bend to our purpose. ... the difficulty, which I have at present in my eye, is no-wise contrary to my system; but only departs a little from that simplicity, which has been hitherto its principal force and beauty.” (T 2.2.6.2)

63

63

- It is striking that Hume’s only other topic-specific mentions of theoretical simplicity (cf. T 1.3.16.3 and E 4.12) occur in connection with egoism:

“The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis, is, that, ... it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions ... All attempts [to reduce benevolence etc. to selfish motives] have hitherto proved fruitless, and seem to have proceeded entirely, from that love of simplicity, which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy” (M App 2.6)

“the hypothesis, which allows of a disinterested benevolence, distinct from self-love, has really more simplicity in it, and is more conformable to the analogy of nature, than that which pretends to resolve all friendship and humanity into this latter principle” (M App 2.12)

64

64

Confused Acceptance

- Having belatedly recognised this phenomenon of unselfish benevolence etc., Hume seems to have attempted to adjust his theory so as to preserve the connection with pleasure and pain:

“Beside good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure, the direct passions frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable. Of this kind is the desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites. These passions, properly speaking, produce good and evil, and proceed not from them, like the other affections.” (T 2.3.9.8, cf. 2.1.1.4 above)

65

65

Has Hume Noticed Butler’s “Cart Before the Horse” Point?

- Suppose I insure my life so that my wife and children will prosper after my death – something I will never see. The Egoist says that I do this to remove my own feelings of unease about their future suffering etc.
- But why should I feel such unease unless I *already care about them*? As Butler famously pointed out, caring is the *cause* of the unease, not its *result*.
- Likewise, I may be pleased at helping someone cross the road *because I want them to be safe*; the wanting comes first, and causes whatever pleasure I feel after seeing them safely across.

66

66

Why Hume Disowned His *Treatise of Human Nature*

Proof of Butler's Later Influence

- A significant footnote occurs in the first two editions of the first *Enquiry* (1748 & 1750):
“ * ... It has been prov'd, beyond all Controversy, that even the Passions, commonly esteem'd selfish, carry the Mind beyond Self, directly to the Object; that tho' the Satisfaction of these Passions gives us Enjoyment, yet the Prospect of this Enjoyment is not the Cause of the Passion, but on the contrary the Passion is antecedent to the Enjoyment, and without the former, the latter could never possibly exist; ...” (1748, 1.14 n.)
* See Butler's sermons

67

67

A Speculation about the Influence of Bishop Joseph Butler

- In 1737-8, Henry Home gave Hume – just back from France – an introductory letter to Butler, who by then was famous as author of *The Analogy of Religion* (1736). Unfortunately Butler was away when Hume called in March 1738.
- This interest in Butler might well have led Hume to Butler's *Fifteen Sermons* (1726, 3rd edition 1736). Sermon XI “Upon the Love of our Neighbour” is the classic source for his celebrated attack on psychological egoism. Merivale (2014) speculates that this informed T 2.3.9.8 as well as later works.

68

68

“Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature” (1741)

“In my opinion, there are two things which have led astray those philosophers, that have insisted so much on the selfishness of man. In the *first* place, they found, that every act of virtue or friendship was attended with a secret pleasure; whence they concluded, that friendship and virtue could not be disinterested. But the fallacy of this is obvious. The virtuous sentiment or passion produces the pleasure, and does not arise from it. I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure.” (DM 10)

69

69

The Zeal of a Convert

- In the first edition of the second *Enquiry* (1751), Hume devoted the first half of Section II, “Of Benevolence” (p. 11-22), to a systematic attack on the selfish hypothesis, distancing himself completely from it. (We now know this as the second Appendix to the moral *Enquiry*.)
“An Epicurean or a Hobbist ... may attempt, by a philosophical Chymistry, to resolve the Elements of this Passion [friendship] ... into those of another, and explain every Affection to be Self-love, twisted and moulded into a Variety of Shapes and Appearances. (M 1751, 2.4)

70

70

Fully Appreciating Butler's Point

- In the second *Enquiry*, Hume clearly recognises the “cart before the horse” point, and not only in respect of benevolence etc. Desire is often the *cause* of pleasure, rather than its *effect*:
“Nature must, by the internal Frame and Constitution of the Mind, give an original Propensity to Fame, 'ere we can reap any Pleasure from it, or pursue it from Motives of Self-love, and a Desire of Happiness. If I have no Vanity, I take no Delight in Praise: If I be void of Ambition, Power gives no Enjoyment: If I be not angry, the Punishment of an Adversary is totally indifferent to me.” (M 1751, 2.12)

71

71

Conclusion: Disowning the *Treatise*

- We have seen three MAJOR problems in the *Treatise of Human Nature*:
 - A hopeless logical theory based on relations;
 - A sceptical argument that cannot plausibly be spelled out, and falls apart under examination;
 - A fundamentally egoist moral theory.
- The first two Hume later relinquishes; the last he explicitly refutes. These gave him ample reason to have disowned the *Treatise*, quite apart from its other flaws.

72

72