



## Hume Alfred William Benn

[An important] step in the evolution of English thought was to consist in a return to Locke's method, involving a complete breach with seventeenth-century Platonism, and with the Continental metaphysics that it had inspired. This decisive movement was effected by one in whom German criticism has recognised the greatest of all British philosophers. David Hume (1711-1776) was born and bred at Edinburgh, which also seems to have been through life his favourite residence. But his great work, the *Treatise on Human Nature*, was written during a stay in France, between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-six. Thus his precocity was even greater than Berkeley's. Indeed, such maturity of thought so early reached is without a parallel in history. But Hume's style had not then acquired the perfection—the inimitable charm, Kant calls it—of his later writings; and, whether for this or for other reasons, the book, in his own words, “fell dead-born from the press.” In middle life the office of librarian of the Advocates' Library at Edinburgh gave him access to the materials for his *History of England*, which proved a source of fame and profit. A profound historical scholar, J. S. Brewer, tells us that Hume “possessed in a pre-eminent degree some of the highest excellences of a historian.” Other historians have treated their subjects philosophically; he furnishes the sole instance of a great speculative genius who has also produced a historical masterpiece of the first order. But morally it is a blot on his fame. It is sad that a philosopher should have deliberately perverted the truth, that one who has performed priceless services to freedom of thought should have made himself the apologist of clericalising absolutism, and, still more, that a master of English played this part to some extent through hatred of the great English people engendered by disappointed literary ambition. It may be mentioned, however, as a possible extenuation that towards the middle of the eighteenth century the highest English ability had thrown itself, with few exceptions, on the Tory side. It must be mentioned also that in private life Hume's character was entirely admirable—cheerful, generous, and gentle, without a frailty and without a stain. His opinions were unpopular; but his life offered no handle for obloquy, although his studious retirement was more than once exchanged for the responsibilities of political office, and the freedom from pedantry so conspicuous in his writings bears witness to habits of well-bred social intercourse.

Hume's philosophy is best understood when we consider it as, in the first place, a criticism of Berkeley, just as Berkeley's had been a criticism of Locke. It will be remembered that the founder of subjective idealism discarded the notion of material substance as an “abstract idea,” an unintelligible figment devoid of any sensuous or imaginative content. The only true substances are the subjects of what we call experience communicating through sensation with God, the infinite spirit whose eternal consciousness is reality itself. Hume applied the same tests to spiritual substance, and found that it equally disappeared under his introspective analysis. He begins by dividing the contents of consciousness into two classes, impressions and ideas—the second being copies of the first, and distinguished from them by their relative faintness. Now, from these perceptions (which he called thoughts) Descartes had passed by an immediate inference to the ego or self, which he affirms as the primary fact of consciousness, using it as a basis for sundry other conclusions. But Hume stops him at once, and will not grant the

existence of the metaphysical self--that is, a simple and continued substance, as distinguished from particular states of consciousness. We are, he declares, "nothing but a bundle of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement." "There is properly no simplicity in it [the self] at one time, nor identity in different [times]; whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity." So much being assumed, Berkeley's whole argument for a new theology founded on subjective idealism is bound to collapse, as also is the argument for natural immortality derived from the supposed simplicity and identity of the thinking substance.

Modern critics have rightly insisted, as against Hume, that isolated perceptions without a self are abstractions not less unintelligible than a self without perceptions. But the metaphysical argument for human immortality has not benefited by this more concrete interpretation of epistemology; and probably Hume was really more interested in destroying this than in maintaining the sceptical paradox which does not recur in his later writings.

A word must be added about Hume's division of perceptions into impressions and ideas. The point left out of sight in this analysis is that impressions of sense habitually find their reflexes not in revived sensations, but in expressions, in motor reactions which, with human beings, mostly take the form of words uttered or thought. These, no doubt, are associated to some small extent with revived sensations; but they are more commonly grouped with other words, with movements of the limbs, and with actions on the material or human environment of the percipient. Such expressions are incomparably easier to revive in memory, imagination, or expectation than the impressions that originally excited them; and, indeed, it is in connection with them that such revivals of sensation as we actually experience take place. And it is probable that to this active side of our consciousness that we may trace those associative processes which Hume studies next in his analysis of human knowledge.

Putting aside principles of doubtful or secondary value, the relations between states of consciousness that first offer themselves to view are, according to Hume, Co-existence and Succession (united under the name of Contiguity), Resemblance, and Causation. It is with the account he gives of this last category that his name is inseparably associated, for from it all subsequent speculation has taken rise. Yet primarily he seems to have had no other object in view than to simplify the laws of knowledge by resolving one of them into a particular case of another, and thus reducing his three categories to two. The relation of cause and effect, he tells us, is no more than a certain relation between antecedent and consequent in time where the sequence is so habitual as to establish in our minds a custom of expecting the one whenever the other occurs. The sequence is not necessary, for one can think, without any self-contradiction, of a change which has not been preceded by another change; nor is it, like the truths of geometry, something that can be known *a priori*. Without experience no one could tell that bread will nourish a man and not nourish a lion, nor even predict how a billiard-ball will behave when another ball strikes it. Should it be objected that the *a priori* knowledge of a general principle need not involve an equal knowledge of nature's operations in particular cases, Hume would doubtless reply by saying that there is no abstract idea of causation apart from its concrete exemplifications.

It is possible to accept Hume's theory in principle without pledging oneself to all his incidental contentions. Causation, as a general law, may be known only by experience, whether we can or cannot think of it as a pure abstraction. And we may interpret it in terms of unconditional antecedence and consequence, while discarding his apparent assumption of an inscrutable connection between the two; a mysterious necessity for the production of the one by the other, for which it is felt that a reason exists, but for which our reason cannot account. It

is inconceivable that our knowledge of any given sequence could be increased, except by the disclosure of intermediate sequences, making their continuity, in space and time, more absolute than we had before perceived, until the whole process has been resolved into a transference of momentum from one molecule to another—a change for which, according to Hume, no reason can be given. Nor, on his principles, would it help us to explain such transferences by bringing them under the law of the Conservation of Energy. For, although this would be a great triumph for science, his philosophy demands a reason why the quantity of energy should remain unalterable for ever.

It is a mistake, shared by Hume with his opponents, to suppose that the common sense of mankind ever saw more than invariable sequence in the relation of cause and effect, or ever interpolated a mysterious power between them. In the famous verse, “Let there be light, and there was light,” it is the instantaneity of succession, not the interpolation of any exerted effort, that so impresses the imagination. And when Shakespeare wants to illustrate logical compulsion in conduct, his reference is to an instance of invariable succession:

This above all,—to thine own self be true;  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Indeed, I think it will be found on examination that when we associate the idea of power, or of necessity, with causal sequences, it is not in connection with a case of causation here and now, but rather in reference to similar effects that may be expected from the same cause elsewhere or at another time. And that “custom,” by which Hume seeks to explain our belief in the “power” of the cause to produce its effect as well as the “necessity” of the connection between them, rather acts negatively by eliminating all other antecedents as possible causes than positively by setting up a habit of thinking about a particular antecedent and consequent at the same time. And that is why a burnt child needs no repetition of the experiment to be convinced that contact with fire was the cause of its pain. The very novelty of the experiment was enough to eliminate any explanation other than that of contact with the flame.

The child, as it grows older, may learn to speak of the fire as having a power to burn. But that merely means, “if I touch it, it will burn me—or light paper if I hold the paper to it.” Power, in fact, is incomplete causation, the presence of every condition but that one which, in Aristotelian phrase, turns potency into act. And it is in contradistinction to that idea of possibility that the idea of necessary connection comes in. When all the elements of the causal antecedent are combined the effect necessarily supervenes. Furthermore, the causal antecedent is thought of as necessary in contrast with the contingency of other antecedents whose connection with the effect is merely accidental. Finally, the idea of production has been quoted as vitally distinguishing true causation from invariable sequence. But various myths, of which the story of Oedipus is the best known, show that primitive folk regard day and night as alternately producing one another, just as Polonius quotes their sequence as a type of logical necessity.

Hume professed himself a Deist, but probably with no more seriousness than when he, or when Gibbon, called Christianity “our religion.” At any rate, his philosophy destroys every argument for the existence of a Creator advanced in his own or in the preceding century. Nor need his particular theory of causation be invoked for the purpose. The most telling attack is on the argument from design. The apparent adaptation of means to ends in living organisms is quoted as evidence of their having been planned by a conscious intelligence. But, answers Hume, such an intelligence would itself exhibit marks of design, and so on for ever. Why not, then, stop at the animal organism as an ultimate fact? It was Shelley’s unlucky demand for a

solution of this difficulty that led to his expulsion from Oxford.

It has been shown how the new analysis of mind cut the ground from under Berkeley's theism, and from under the metaphysical argument for human immortality. By denying the substantiality of the ego it also confirmed the necessitarianism of Spinoza. Hume seemed to think he could abate the unpopularity of this doctrine by interpreting the constant motivation of human actions as a mere relation of antecedence and consequence. But the decisive point was that he assimilated sequences in conscious behaviour to the unconscious sequences in physical events. Thus, for the vulgar and the theologians, he remained what would now be called a materialist.

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Alfred William Benn. *History of Modern Philosophy*. London: Watts and Co, 1912.

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