

DAVID HUME (1711–1776)

❑ Scottish philosopher, historian, economist, and essayist known especially for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism.

❑ Beginning with *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), Hume strove to create a naturalistic science of man that examined the psychological basis of human nature. Hume argued against the existence of innate ideas, positing that all human knowledge derives solely from experience. This places him with [Francis Bacon](#), [Thomas Hobbes](#), [John Locke](#), and [George Berkeley](#) as a British Empiricist.

***A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1739–40)**

❑ Hume argues that the **passions**, rather than reason, cause human behavior. He introduces the famous problem of induction, arguing that inductive reasoning and our beliefs regarding cause and effect cannot be justified by reason; instead, our faith in induction and causation is caused by mental habit and custom. Hume defends a sentimentalist account of morality, arguing that ethics is based on sentiment and the passions rather than reason, and famously declaring that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave to the passions".

Epistemological Issues

❑ Much of Hume's [epistemology](#) is driven by a consideration of philosophically important issues, such as space and time, cause-effect, external objects, personal identity, and free will. In his analysis of these issues in the *Treatise*, he repeatedly does three things. First, he skeptically argues that we are unable to gain complete knowledge of some important philosophical notion under consideration. Second, he shows how the understanding gives us a very limited idea of that notion. Third, he explains how some erroneous views of that notion are grounded in the fancy, and he accordingly recommends that we reject those erroneous ideas.

❑ Hume was heavily influenced by Locke as well as Newton. From Locke he firmly believed that the aim of science is not to get certainties but only probabilities. From Newton he believed that the aim of science is not necessarily to aim for ultimate understanding of things but rather systemization of things. E.g. The laws of gravitation does not actually reveal about how gravity works but rather concentrate of the effects of it.

❑ In his *Treatise*, he primarily postulates how our understanding of a certain phenomena is based on previous experiences. E.g.: the case of the billiards ball and that of Adam.

❑ To explain the Origin and Association of Ideas, Hume categorizes Perceptions into:

PERCEPTIONS

Ideas

**Sensations
(Impressions & Feelings)**

From Memory

From Imagination

**Of Sensation
(External)**

**Of Reflection
(Internal)**

From Fancy

From Understanding

Involving Relations of Ideas

Involving Matters of Fact

Ideas

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graph TD; Ideas --> FromMemory[From Memory]; Ideas --> FromImagination[From Imagination];
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From Memory

{as memory is a faculty that conjures up ideas based on experiences as they happened.}

From Imagination

{a faculty that breaks apart and combines ideas thus forming new ones.} e.g. Golden Mountain

As our imagination takes our most basic ideas and leads us to form new ones, it is directed by three principles of association, namely:

1. Resemblance
2. Contiguity [e.g. idea of an apartment leads one to think of the apartment contiguous(or next) to the first one.]
3. Cause & Effect [e.g. the thought of a scar leads me to think of a broken piece of glass that caused the scar.]

Imagination

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graph TD; Imagination --> Fancy; Imagination --> Understanding;
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Fancy

(E.g. Gold Mountain)

Fanciful ideas are derived from the faculty Of the fancy, and are the sources of fantasies, Superstitions and bad philosophies.

Understanding

(represents solid reasoning; such as the trajectory of a thrown ball)

sound ideas are derived from the faculty of the understanding-or reason and are of two types:

1. involving relations of (between) ideas: a mathematical relation that is “discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe.
E.g. the mathematical statement “the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides” (*Enquiry*, 4).
2. Involving relations of fact: an object/circumstance which has physical existence, such as “the sun will rise tomorrow.”

□ This split between relations of ideas and matters of fact is commonly called “Hume’s Fork”, and Hume himself uses it as a radical tool for distinguishing between well-founded ideas of the understanding, and unfounded ideas of the fancy. He dramatically makes this point at the conclusion of his *Enquiry*:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion (*Enquiry*, 12).

□ For Hume, when we imaginatively exercise our understanding regarding relations of ideas and matters of fact, our minds are guided by seven philosophical or “reasoning” relations, which are as follows:

Principles of reasoning concerning relations of ideas (involving demonstration): (1) resemblance; (2) contrariety; (3) degrees in quality; and (4) proportions in quantity or number

Principles of reasoning concerning matters of fact (involving judgments of probability): (5) identity; (6) relations in time and place; and (7) causation

Human understanding and reasoning at its best, then, involves ideas that are grounded in the above seven principles.

Hume’s Copy Thesis: All Ideas are ultimately copied from impressions. That is, for any idea we select, we can trace the component parts of that idea to some external sensations or feelings.

This puts Hume in the Empiricist group and he regularly uses this principle as a test for determining the content of an idea under consideration.

As proof of the copy thesis, Hume challenges anyone who denies it “to shew a simple impression, that has not a correspondent idea, or a simple idea, that has not a correspondent impression” (*Treatise*, 1.1.1).

Liveliness Thesis: Argues that ideas and impressions differ only in liveliness. Most modern philosophers held that ideas reside in our spiritual minds, whereas impressions originate in our physical bodies. So, when Hume blurs the distinction between ideas and impressions, he is ultimately denying the spiritual nature of ideas and instead grounding them in our physical nature. In short, all of our mental operations—including our most rational ideas—are physical in nature.

❑ ***An Abstract of a Book lately Published***, full title *An Abstract of a Book lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the Chief Argument of that Book is farther Illustrated and Explained* is a summary of the main doctrines of David Hume's work [*A Treatise of Human Nature*](#), published anonymously in 1740. There has been speculation about the authorship of the work. Some scholars believe it was written by Hume's friend, the economist [Adam Smith](#). Most believe it was written by Hume himself, in an attempt to popularize the *Treatise*.

❑ ***Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects (1758) or Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary***
A collection of pieces written and published over many years, though most were collected together in 1753–4. Many of the essays are on politics and economics; other topics include aesthetic judgement, love, marriage and polygamy, and the demographics of ancient Greece and Rome. The Essays show some influence from Addison's *Tatler* and *The Spectator*, which Hume read avidly in his youth.
(also includes his short autobiography *My Own Life*.)

❑ ***The History of England*** (1754–61) is David Hume's great work on the history of England (also covering Wales, Scotland and [Ireland](#)), which he wrote in installments while he was librarian to the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh. It was published in six volumes in 1754, 1756, 1759, and 1761. The first publication of his *History* was greeted with outrage by all political factions, but it became a best-seller, finally giving him the financial independence he had long sought. Hume's *History* spanned "from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688" and went through over 100 editions. Many considered it the standard history of England in its day.

***An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.* (1748)**

Contains reworking of the main points of the *Treatise*, Book 1, with the addition of material on free will (adapted from Book 2), miracles, the Design Argument, and mitigated scepticism. [Of Miracles](#), section X of the *Enquiry*, was often published separately.

***An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).**

A reworking of material on morality from Book 3 of the *Treatise*, but with a significantly different emphasis. It “was thought by Hume to be the best of his writings.”

RELATION BETWEEN THE *TREATISE* AND THE *ENQUIRIES*

Hume complains that his critics focused “all their batteries” on the *Treatise*, “that juvenile work”, which he published anonymously and never acknowledged. He urges his readers to regard the *Enquiries* “as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles”, assuring his publisher that they provide “a complete answer” to his critics.

His aim in the *Enquiries* was to “cast the whole anew ... where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are ... corrected”.

He says of the first *Enquiry* that the “philosophical Principles are the same in both” and that “By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete” (HL 73.2). He also comments in “My Own Life” that the *Treatise*’s lack of success “proceeded more from the manner than the matter”—more from its *structure* than its content (MOL 8).