

Hume's Relevant Epistemology. In Defence of "The Old Hume"

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Abstract: Hume's philosophy of knowledge is contained in Book I "Of the Understanding" of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (The Old Hume) and in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (The New Hume). The dispute about philosophical relevance of these two works has become topical again recently, and there is a growing number of Humean commentators who rather prefer the *Enquiry* which is certainly better in style. It is undoubtedly also easier for readers, free of some formal imperfections of the *Treatise*, and although – as a whole – it is a good deal shorter than Book I of the *Treatise*, one third of its contents is new, so that it is a substantially different book. But unlike the *Treatise*, it neglects such philosophical questions as those of space and time, the distinction between mind and the external world, substance (both material and spiritual), and even the idea of personal identity. The "theory of ideas" and operations with them as well as the popular discussion of causation and probability is shortened and simplified in the *Enquiry*. The logical structure and systematic method of the *Treatise* is lost in the later work, and the ambition to confront and possibly solve deep problems of human knowledge is abandoned here. The *Treatise*, in comparison with the *Enquiry*, must be, therefore, regarded as a book of first-rate philosophical importance and relevant for the assessment of Hume's epistemology. But there is still an interpretational problem about the two works.

Key Words: Hume, Epistemology, Treatise, Enquiry, comparison, philosophical importance

Introduction

Hume's chief philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (The Old Hume) was written in France during the years 1734–1737. It was divided into three books bearing the titles, Of the Understanding, Of the Passions, Of Morals. The first two volumes were published in 1739, the third in 1740. As no one noticed the book, Hume devoted himself to the writing of essays (*Essays, Moral and Political*, 1741). Later Hume shortened the *Treatise* and in 1748 his *Philosophical Essays*, later called *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (The New Hume), appeared, and the same process continued in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), and finally the *Dissertations on the Passions* was published in 1757 (all the three works approximately correspond to the three books of the *Treatise*).

Hume's philosophy, as a whole, falls into two parts: the conception of the universe (reduced to the theory of human knowledge - theoretical philosophy) and the conception of life (his ethics including also the theory of passions - practical philosophy). Though Hume himself regarded the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* as the best of all his works, it seems that his theory of human understanding is much more important. This philosophy attacked the most deeply rooted principles of human reasoning, such as the relation of cause and effect, the conception of space and time, the distinction between mind and the external world, and even the idea of personal identity, the Self. Hume discovered that all these notions are only our suppositions based on belief and having no rational or logical justification.

It was Hume's criticism of the notion of causation which awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumbers and made him think about the abilities of human reason (e.g. how synthetic judgements a priori are possible). The result was Kant's most important work, *The Critique of Pure Reason* and his theory of the forms of intuition (Anschauung) and the categories of understanding (Verstand) - causality is one of these

categories, it is synthetic but a priori. At this point I would like to introduce Bertrand Russell's opinion concerning the relation between Hume and other philosophers: "German philosophers, from Kant to Hegel, had not assimilated Hume's arguments. I say this deliberately, in spite of the belief which many philosophers share with Kant, that his *Critique of Pure Reason* answered Hume. In fact, these philosophers – at least Kant and Hegel – represent a pre-Humian type of rationalism, and can be refuted by Humian arguments." (Russell, 1967, p. 646). This view presents a difficult problem in which we should not neglect the immense importance of the transcendental conception and the element of practice and activity in German philosophy that started from Kant.

1 Questioning

Hume's theory of human understanding is contained in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (Book I) and in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and I want to call attention to the problem of the relation between these two works and their evaluation. The *Treatise* is Hume's first philosophical attempt (written between the ages of 23 and 26). Book I of the *Treatise*, entitled *Of the Understanding*, is a good deal longer than the *Enquiry* published in 1748. (Hereafter I will write "*Treatise*" instead of Book I of the *Treatise*.) Some parts of the "*Treatise*" have been shortened or completely omitted in the *Enquiry*, and on the other hand, two sections of the *Enquiry* are new. At this point several questions may arise: Why did Hume write another work on the same subject and what circumstances led him to it? What is the essence of the differences, what is the relation between the two works, and which of them is more important? And finally, what are the reasons for the differences? The first commentator dealing with this problem was F. Vindig Kruse who in 1939 published the book *Hume's Philosophy in his Principal Work, A Treatise of Human Nature, and in his Essays*. Kruse says that any definite connection between the successive works of a philosopher may take one of the three different forms: First, the sequence of works corresponds to the stages of the inner development (e.g. Kant - here we do not mean the relation between his *Critique* and *Prolegomena*),

secondly, the chronology of works loses significance (e.g. Kierkegaard), thirdly, the later works of an author are only reiterations of what was written earlier, sometimes in a different form. And here, in this last case, we may meet the problem of whether the differences are purely formal or not. In the latter alternative a real change of view, a true development, may take place. To resolve such problems is connected with great difficulties, especially when there is a confusion of formal and real differences. Then Kruse makes an important point, saying that “we shall often be unable to solve the problem merely by a comparison..., we must resort to other sources outside the contents of the works” (Kruse, 1939, p. 2).

2 Relation between Treatise and Enquiry

It is generally agreed that the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is merely a repetition of Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Book I of the *Treatise* is divided into four parts, each of them containing several sections. The first part represents certain initial principles it is a general exposition of Hume’s psychology. The other three parts are, therefore, specific – presenting the results of the concrete applications of the general psychological principles to the particular problems, to certain important conceptions. In Part I Hume examines the ideas of space and time, in Part II we meet with detailed discussions and a profound criticism of the relation of cause and effect, and Part IV contains Hume’s scepticism with regard to the external or objective world and material substance (matter) as well as the internal or subjective world and spiritual substance (mind), and even personal identity represented by the idea of Self. Owing to its logical structure and systematic method the “*Treatise*” is a work typical of a scientific-minded thinker. But this does not apply to the *Enquiry*. The essay form does not require too systematic arrangement. An essay must be short and easily understood. A considerable abbreviation of the “*Treatise*” was achieved by the entire omission of Part I, by a great shortening of Part II (reduced to less than a half), and finally by omitting the most important and essential passages of Part IV (more than 80 % of the pages). Nor did the rest

remain intact – it had to be abridged and popularized. On the other hand, too theological sections, Of Miracles and Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State, were introduced in the *Enquiry* to make it readable and more attractive. Questions of religion were likely to arouse interest in the English public of the 18th century. Trying to answer the question what the reason for the omissions is, we must take into account all events that might have influenced Hume. First we should know and stress the fact that Hume was a complex and rather ambitious character, not a solitary thinker whose only desire was the realization of truth. In his autobiography Hume himself confessed his “love of literary fame” as his “ruling passion” (Hume, 1903, 615). No wonder he was greatly disappointed by the complete fiasco of the *Treatise*. In the Advertisement to Book I and II he says quite clearly. “The approbation of the public I consider, as the greatest reward of my labours, but am determin’d to regard its judgement, whatever it be, as my best instruction” (Hume, 1903, XII). He desired first of all the admiration of his contemporaries, not an eternal fame, and the failure of the *Treatise* was clear instruction from the public. The strictly scientific philosophy of his *Treatise* could not win the desired fame. It was as a logical consequence of the failure of the *Treatise* that Hume began to write popular essays. He is even regarded as a pioneer of more practical sciences, such as political economy and history. Even his philosophy was becoming quite different, more popular and easier to understand. To win the favour of the ordinary reader Hume had to abandon the systematic structure of the three books of the *Treatise*, especially of the first book (Of the Understanding) which represented the most hard and stubborn part of his work. It was changed, in this way, into a collection of short essays, only later compiled into one work, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. The loss of the systematic, logical structure is therefore typical of the *Enquiry*. Besides this, some new essays were added to make the collection more entertaining. As for the “*Treatise*”, it contained some parts which were so much contrary to the thoughts and feelings of the public that they could not be popularized, so that the only solution was to omit them and not to risk publishing them again. Hume, however, did not quite give up the philosophy of the “*Treatise*”. It is very probable

that the essays were to establish his reputation and at the same time to prepare the way for his youthful philosophy. This view is supported by the fact that Hume in one of his letters written in 1742 expresses his hope that the success of the essays will enable him to win reputation with philosophy of a more durable nature. This hope was a manifestation of Hume's cold, sober reason. On the other hand, it is true that he recommended his friends to read the *Enquiry* instead of the "*Treatise*", and he even said that it was the *Enquiry* which was philosophically relevant. But declarations of this kind were addressed to his readers. The true importance of them becomes apparent when we realize that Hume simply had a grudge against his unsuccessful work. Once he even said that he was not able to make himself reread this book. His complaints, however, were directed against the style rather than the contents, which circumstance may be seen in his autobiography. Now let's try to answer the question concerning the relation between the two above mentioned works and to say which of them really represents Hume's philosophy of knowledge. This question becomes more interesting if we take into account Hume's own declaration in the Advertisement (Collected Essays) that first appeared in 1777 in one posthumous edition. Here the author desires "that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles" (Kruse, 1939, p. 2).

Much stress was laid on this fact by some writers who took it too seriously and who, for that reason, ignored the "*Treatise*". On the other hand, as Selby-Bigge says, by Mr. Grose the Advertisement is regarded as the posthumous utterance of a splenetic invalid.

2.1 *Treatise*

To begin with the "*Treatise*", this work presents itself as a consistent system in all fundamental inquiries. Here, after an outline of his psychology, the author examines stage by stage the spheres of our reasoning. Remarkable is the fact that Hume solves all the problems on the basis of profound, highly detailed and special psychological analyses. He does not stop and remain at the general doctrine of impressions and ideas against which some serious objections may be raised. Besides, Hume inherited this doctrine from Locke and Berkeley. But there

is a lot of newly created theories especially in Part III, giving a deliberate account of the operations of psychical mechanism. The logical structure of the “*Treatise*” gives evidence of Hume’s genius. Taking this work as a whole we may observe a certain gradation both in the subject-matter and in the conclusions made. Everyone is struck by Hume’s discovery that not only metaphysicians go beyond experience in their speculations, but even our ordinary everyday reasoning (the causal inference) commits this offence. This is an instance of contradiction between common sense and science. But going further, Hume himself was certainly surprised to find out another opposition, viz. between the causal reasoning and our senses. Here, in Part IV, the consistent logic of the “*Treatise*” leads the author to pronounce his doubts concerning our belief in the external world and to reject (like Berkeley) the notion of material substance. He cannot, however, stop here. The inexorable logic impels him to banish (unlike Berkeley) also spiritual substance. Then Hume turns his attention to the only thing which remains, i.e. to the “Self”, and even this conception he destroys. There is nothing left, then, and Hume has to finish his inquiries. The closing chapter of the “*Treatise*” shows Hume’s melancholy evoked by the sceptical discoveries about our knowledge.

2.2 Enquiry

Hume knows very well that all the extreme sceptical results can have no great influence on our everyday life. But though he offers a practical cure “carelessness and inattention”, he is unable to find any theoretical way out of his dilemma which is, after all, found also in the *Enquiry*: “Nature is always too strong for principle” (Hume, 1963, p. 160).

The intellectual standard of the “*Treatise*” is no doubt very high. Therefore we must now face the question what actually gave rise to another of Hume’s work on the same subject, what made him recast Book I of the *Treatise*, so considerably changed as it is seen in the *Enquiry*. Hume’s own words may help us a little: “Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise* of Human Nature. It fell dead-born from the press without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots” (Hume 1903, 608). Since Hume’s

love of literary fame was his ruling passion, no wonder he continued his attempts to win a reputation, especially after his “*Essays*” were “favourably received” (1742). But how to explain all the omissions and insertions? Selby-Bigge rightly claims that they “cannot well be due to philosophical discontent” or “to a general desire to fill up a gap in the system” (Hume, 1963, XII). These changes must be ascribed to Hume’s ambition to be popular. And for that reason he had to make the *Enquiry* readable. Let us look more closely at the omissions. We have already observed that practically all the discussions of the “*Treatise*” were abridged and simplified in the *Enquiry*. “In the *Enquiry*, Hume’s discussion of the idea of necessary connexion (in Section VII) is less overtly central owing to his rearrangement of this material into the second half of the work” (Passmore, 1980, p. 2). Some difficult passages or psychological details have been omitted. Such simplification may be seen in Part III, the subject of which (causation) has been treated also in the *Enquiry* (it represents Hume’s most original inquiry). Similar situation is with the two aspect of “Hume’s account of power or necessary connexion, one of which explains the objective ground of the idea’s occurrence – namely observed constant conjunction – while the other identifies the subjective impression that arises in those circumstances and from which the idea is copied. In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, these two aspects are encapsulated in the famous two “definitions of cause” (T 170, E 76-7), which together sum up everything we can understand or mean by power or necessary connexion” (Millican, 2007, p. 216).

There are, however, more striking and more important omissions in the *Enquiry*, viz. Part II and nearly the whole Part IV of the “*Treatise*”. The treatment of space and time is perhaps the most difficult and for the ordinary reader the least interesting part of the “*Treatise*”. It contains a lot of abstract reflections, and some passages are almost unintelligible owing to verbal vagueness and ambiguities. Moreover, it is not difficult to see that for example the discussion about the exactness of geometry could hardly appeal to a large public. The account of space and time was therefore omitted for the reason of popularization. But can we say the same about Part IV, where the author denounces the notions of mind and matter as mere fictions? These two conceptions are too deeply

rooted and firmly established not only among ordinary people but also among philosophers. Perhaps Hume had foreseen the dangerous consequences (atheism) to which anyone who rejects spiritual substance must be led. He only ventured a brief allusion concerning matter in para. 123 but certainly for the above-mentioned reasons he had not said the same about the soul. To tell the truth, there are two paragraphs, 14 and 57, in the *Enquiry* where Hume gives rather bold explanations of the origin of our idea of God, but these psychological statements do not mean any denial of the objective existence of God. As for the insertions in the *Enquiry*, section X, Of Miracles, was withdrawn from the “*Treatise*” before publication. The only reason for this withdrawal was certainly the fact that the section Of Miracles was quite superfluous for Hume’s system. But in spite of this, Hume found it good for the *Enquiry* and added to it another lively theological section, viz. Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State. According to Selby-Bigge, they “could hardly fail to find readers, attract attention and excite that murmur among the zealots by which the author desired to be distinguished” (Hume, 1963, XII). In fact the views in these sections were quite innocent (though provoking the zealots) and could be easily excused. This applies analogically to some passages in paras, 77–81 of the *Enquiry*.

Conclusions – Results

To conclude my comparison I shall point out several facts. While the “*Treatise*” gives a complete account of all Hume’s views on the scope of our knowledge, the *Enquiry* gives us only a fragment. In the latter work Hume only left out the most sceptical conclusions which he supposed to offend commonly received conceptions or to impose an accusation of atheism on him. It is merely a compromise between Hume’s philosophy and the taste of the public, though it must be admitted that the “*Treatise*” is not quite free of imperfections, obscurities of expression, and some verbal inconsistencies. We can also mention occasional notes of arrogance (e.g. p. 105) or haughtiness (p. 138). The language of the *Enquiry* is easy, familiar (though not always precise) and no trace of egoism of the former work is perceptible here. Some examples are

better, too. The premises, however, are identical in the “*Treatise*” and *Enquiry*, the roots or sources of his sceptical conclusions have not been changed. The identical principles of the two works, therefore, are sufficient to prove that the *Enquiry* shows no development or progress beyond the philosophy of the “*Treatise*”. According to Kruse “this starting-point is like a hydra, some of whose heads look worse than others. It will not help Hume that in the *Enquiry* he cut off some of the most hideous heads. They will grow again when we know their origin” (Kruse 1939, 47). I do not consider this statement an exaggeration since it only points out that Hume’s philosophy of knowledge must be judged solely by Book I of his *Treatise of Human Nature* about which Selby-Bigge says that it is, as compared with the *Enquiry*, “beyond doubt a work of first-rate philosophic importance, and in some ways the most important work of philosophy in the English language” (Hume, 1963, X).

In order to be just to the opponents to our view, it is proper to introduce some of them. J. Passmore, for instance, thinks that it is only a “familiar legend” to explain Hume’s publishing essays on various topics as a result of his desire for literary fame. According to Passmore it was the return to Hume’s original interest in the science of man in the broadest sense and his “ambition to be the Newton of the moral sciences” (Passmore, 1980, p. 43). A. Flew recommends studying the *Enquiry* as an independent work. In comparison with the “*Treatise*” one third of its contents is quite new so that it is “a substantially different book” (Flew, 1961, p. 7).

J. Noxon, the author of the book entitled *Hume’s Philosophical Development* (1973), comes to essentially the same conclusions as our study. He admits considerable differences between the “*Treatise*” and the *Enquiry* but maintains that the principles of the two works are identical and that the latter “would be a baffling work if read as a revision of Hume’s original effort” (Noxon, 1973, p. 20).

I think we can conclude our account by a quotation of another commentator, M. A. Box, who devoted a whole book to Hume’s development. In his opinion it reached a kind of culmination in Hume’s *Enquiries* but certainly Hume himself “did not see this culmination as philosophical” (Box, 1990, p. 163). Therefore, the “*Treatise*” must be

regarded as Hume's principal work, rising far above the *Enquiry*, not only quantitatively but also from a qualitative point of view. Nevertheless, the public renouncement of the "*Treatise*" which Hume made in the Advertisement to the "*Essays*" may be regarded as an interesting contribution to the study of Hume's own psychology. The failure of the *Treatise* and Hume's aversion to it had only facilitated his definite surrender to the judgement of the public, though he had not changed his theoretical views.

The interpretational problem about Hume, however, is still vivid and topical. Traditional sceptical reading ("The Old Hume") is confronted with natural or realistic reading ("The New Hume"). The first alternative prefers Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (Book I), as the principal work, the second considers his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* as the mature and more important work.

Hume's philosophy of knowledge is contained in Book I "Of the Understanding" of his *Treatise of Human Nature* and in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. The dispute about philosophical relevance of these two works has become topical again recently, and there is a growing number of Humean commentators who rather prefer the *Enquiry* which is certainly better in style. It is undoubtedly also easier for readers, free of some formal imperfections of the *Treatise*, and although – as a whole – it is a good deal shorter than Book I of the *Treatise*, one third of its contents is new, so that it is a substantially different book. But unlike the *Treatise*, it neglects such philosophical questions as those of space and time, the distinction between mind and the external world, substance (both material and spiritual), and even the idea of personal identity. The "theory of ideas" and operations with them as well as the popular discussion of causation and probability is shortened and simplified in the *Enquiry*. The logical structure and systematic method of the *Treatise* is lost in the later work, and the ambition to confront and possibly solve deep problems of human knowledge is abandoned here. The *Treatise*, in comparison with the *Enquiry*, must be, therefore, regarded as a book of first-rate philosophical importance and relevant for the assessment of Hume's epistemology. But there is still an interpretational problem about the two works.

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