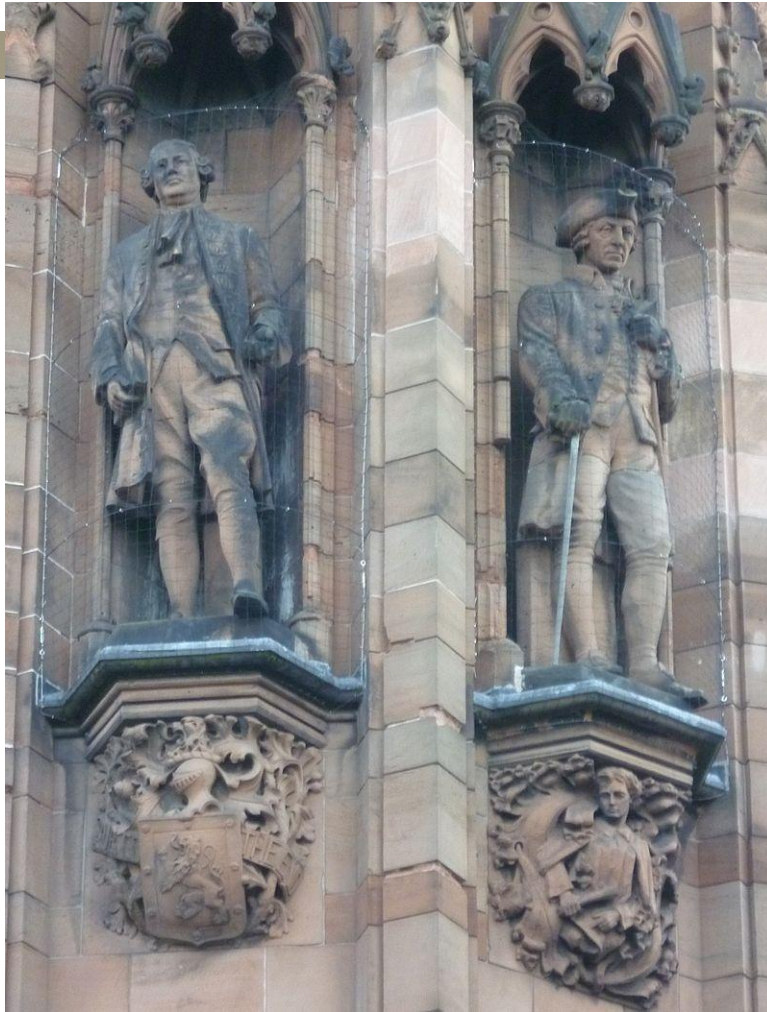


DAVID HUME

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10/31/2019

Monterey Peninsula College
GENT 10/410: The Age of Reason (1690-1775)

David Hume (1711-1776)



Statues of David Hume and Adam Smith by David Watson Stevenson on the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh

- Born and died in Edinburgh → an important figure in the Scottish Enlightenment
 - ▣ The Scottish Enlightenment was a period (18th/early 19th centuries) of prolific production of intellectual and scientific work
 - ▣ Includes thinkers such as David Hume, Adam Smith, James Hutton, Robert Burns, and others.
- Known as a philosopher, economist, historian
 - ▣ Especially for philosophical skepticism and empiricism



What is Hume known for?

- Known for approaching philosophy as the inductive and experimental science of studying human nature.
- Used Isaac Newton's scientific method as model → built on the philosophy of British Empiricist John Locke
 - ▣ Hume attempted to describe the working of the mind: How does the mind acquire knowledge?
- Since there is no knowledge beyond experience, there can be no theory of reality



David Hume by Allan Ramsay, 1766

Causality and Mental Habit

The Problem of Induction

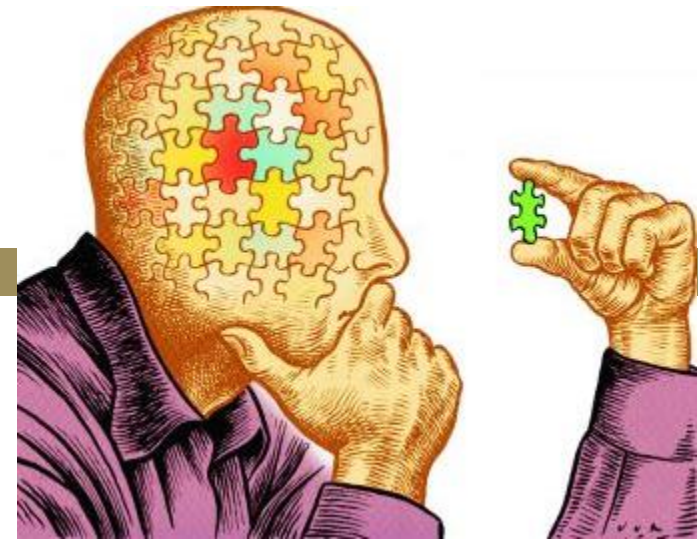
- **Inductive reasoning:** reasoning which takes specific information and makes broader generalizations from that more narrow information
 - ▣ For example: All cats you've met purr. Therefore, all cats must purr.
 - ▣ Or: You always cough when you eat peanuts. Therefore, you're allergic to peanuts.
- Hume: Inductive reasoning and causality can't be justified rationally.
 - ▣ Our reliance on causality and induction result from 'mental habit'
 - ▣ We never truly perceive that one event causes another, but only experience them together as conjoined.
- If we are to make predictions based on causal inferences from past experiences, we assume that the future will certainly resemble the past. This itself cannot be grounded in prior experience.

Hume as Sentimentalist

- **Sentimentalism:** a.k.a. moral sense theory, meta-ethical theory about moral knowledge
 - Emotion and passion tells us more than reason about moral and immoral behavior
- Hume believed ethics based on emotion rather than on any abstract moral principle: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions".
- Attempted to synthesize modern moral sentimentalism with the classical systems of virtue ethics (concerned more with character traits rather than actions)
- Committed to natural explanations of moral phenomena
- Formulated the **is-ought problem**, that philosophers make statements about what should be (prescriptive statement) based only on what is (descriptive statement) → it's not clear to Hume how one can move coherently from descriptive statement to prescriptive statement.

Bundle Theory

Hume on the Self



- People don't have actual conception of self
 - Humans only experience the self via a bundle of sensations → self is nothing more than this perceived bundle: **bundle of perceptions** that are causally-connected
- "the mind itself, far from being an independent power, is simply 'a bundle of perceptions' without unity or cohesive quality"
- What we call our "self" is nothing more than this bundle of experiences (being linked by the relations of resemblance and causation)

On Religion

FOUR
DISSERTATIONS.

I. THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION.
II. OF THE PASSIONS.
III. OF TRAGEDY.
IV. OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE.

BY

DAVID HUME, Esq.



L O N D O N,

Printed for A. MILLAR, in the Strand.

MDCCLVII.

- *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Hume “wrote forcefully and incisively on almost every central question in the philosophy of religion”.
 - His “various writings concerning problems of religion are among the most important and influential contributions on the topic.”
- He looked at religion through various lenses, such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology and history.
- He uses these various lenses in his essay “The Natural History of Religion” (1757) – published as part of his *Four Essays*
- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (the Abrahamic religions) all developed out of earlier polytheistic traditions.
- To follow religious belief to it’s end is to be met with fear and uncertainty: all faith “traces, in the end, to dread of the unknown.”

On religion

Hume's personal views

- Wrote a copiously about religion, but his personal religious beliefs are not clear → a lot of controversy about his religious position
- Some 20th/21st century scholars might call Hume agnostic → or others (like Shirley Mullen), have called him a Pyrrhonian skeptic (referencing the ancient Greek skeptic Pyrrho of Elis).
- Hume's contemporaries accused him of atheism (or at least being un-Christian) → Church of Scotland debated whether to bring charges of infidelity against him
- Most of the evidence against Hume comes from his writings on miracle where he works to separate narrative accounts of miracles from historical method.
- Belief in his atheism may have come from a story he liked to tell (retold here through historian of philosophy, Ben-Ami Scharfstein):

The best theologian he ever met, he used to say, was the old Edinburgh fishwife who, having recognized him as Hume the atheist, refused to pull him out of the bog into which he had fallen until he declared he was a Christian and repeated the Lord's prayer.

On Religion

Evidence of Hume's faith

- *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm* → seems to provide support to the traditional religious views that were standard of his community
- Could be critical of the Catholic Church (thought to be superstitious) → using Protestant arguments against idolatry and superstition
- On the other side, he attacked Protestant sects that he thought took things too far → called them the “enthusiasts” who are corrupting religion
- On the other hand, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume says: "Generally speaking, the errors in religions are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous."



“Of National Characters”

David Hume and categorizing people

THE vulgar are apt to carry all national characters to extremes; and having once established it as a principle, that any people are knavish, or cowardly, or ignorant, they will admit of no exception, but comprehend every individual under the same censure. Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgments: Though at the same time, they allow, that each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and that some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbours. The common people in SWITZERLAND have probably more honesty than those of the same rank in IRELAND; and every prudent man will, from that circumstance alone, make a difference in the trust which he reposes in each. We have reason to expect greater wit and gaiety in a FRENCHMAN than in a SPANIARD; though CERVANTES was born in SPAIN. An ENGLISHMAN will naturally be supposed to have more knowledge than a DANE; though TYCHO BRAHE was a native of DENMARK.

“Of National Characters”

David Hume and anti-blackness

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturer amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the Whites, such as the ancient German, the present Tartars, still have something eminent about them, in their valor, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will [229] start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.