

Hume's First Enquiry: Paper- and Discussion Topics

Boas
Hume ①
1st Enquiry.

1 In Section I of the **Enquiry concerning Human Understanding**, Hume remarks that the "**abstruse philosophers**"

. . . push on their enquiries to principles more general, and rest not satisfied till they arrive at those original principles, by which, in every science, all human curiosity must be bounded (p. 6).

Yet his **own** program, discribed on p. 12 ff., is

to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, form an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such abstruse subjects.

He even compares this undertaking (pp. 14-15) to that of

a philosopher, who at last, arose, who seems, from the happiest reasoning, to have. . . determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed.

when the argument has essentially run its course (p. 90), he finally claims that

when we consider now aptly **natural** and **moral** [which here means 'social' and "psychological" as well as "moral"] evidence link together, and form only one chain of argument, we shall make no scruple to allow that they are of the same nature, and derived from the same principles.

Is there any strain between these assertions? Does the implicit comparison with Newton, for example, withstand scrutiny (if not as self-characterisation, then as some kind of limiting ideal)?

Or might the ambition Hume expresses -- to formulate a social psychology (in effect) as precise and verifiable as Newton's celestial mechanics, and -- be **inherently** overstated?

(Might there be, for example, no such thing as "the nature of human understanding"? Whether there 'is' or not, do you think this is a question we should realistically expect any branch of "science" to adjudicate?)

2 Is Hume perhaps an ineluctably "**abstruse** philosopher", who **wants** to be an "**easy**" one?

Consider, for example, his well-known resolution of 'all' thought into (vaguely defined assemblages of) "**relations**" and "**ideas**" -- his "**new microscope**" or **species of optics**" (p. 62).

Could one seriously **hope** to bring **this resolution itself** -- much less the elaborate programmatic claims for it sketched in the second quotation of question 1, or other arguments of Hume's own metaphysics -- into clear **focus**, under this "microscope"?

If **not**, should we simply accept whatever blur may result (as part of "human nature", perhaps)?

If the "blur" is inevitable, should we nevertheless try to **work** with Hume's dichotomy, and perhaps some other dogmatic assertions of his system as well?

Might we regard them conceptual counterparts, for example, of the **Hubble telescope** (which **has** yielded significant results, despite its much-publicised flaws)?

Do we have a choice?

3 Consider again Hume's well-known assertion of the '**fork**', that

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, **Relations of Ideas**, and **Matters of Fact**.

Might this celebrated dichotomy be more problematical that Hume seems to think, in dialectical or self-referential way(s)?

Suppose we ask, for example, whether **the dichotomy itself** is a 'relation of ideas', or a 'matter of fact'?

Are there any passages of the first **Enquiry** in which **Hume himself** seems to express any misgivings about one or another form of this dichotomy between "reason and experience"? Or at least call it (implicitly, if not explicitly) into question?

Suppose further (for hypothesis' sake) that Hume's famous dichotomy is ambiguous in some way. Or subtly begged. Or both.

perception/conception that is ambiguous (between "perception" and "conception", say)? Or simply much too strong? If the latter, in what ways do you think Berkeley might be making excessive or unrealistic demands on our abilities to "frame" ideas?

4 Consider the following **example of an "(abstract?) general idea**", of the sort Berkeley analyses critically, even rather scathingly, in the "Introduction" to the **Principles of Human Knowledge** (pp. 65-76 in our text): '**my signature**'.

This phrase refers both to particular concrete 'executions' of it in assorted situations, and to the more 'abstract' notion of it as a **legal instrument** ("My signature is my bond"), and **mark of personal style** (even metaphorically: "I want this bit of craftwork to bear my own personal signature"; "That line of argument has her signature written all over it".)

How might Berkeley want to treat the more 'abstract' (?) usages of this notion? You might keep in mind that 'my signature' has (in fact) physically **evolved** quite a bit over the years (The "W"'s have changed, for example, and I now write a different sort of small script-"s"), as is the case with most people.

Might this bear on a hypothetical 'Berkeleyan' construal of 'my signature' as the sign, not of an abstract general idea, but of several particular ideas, any one of which it **indifferently** suggests to mind (**Principles**, "Introduction", paragraph 11; the emphasis is mine)

One of the more subtle programming tasks of the current generation, moreover, has been to '**teach**' **machines** to **recognise** 'signatures', and such 'recognition' will probably be commonplace in a few years. How do you think Berkeley might have regarded such development(s)?