

# History of Philosophy

## 46 David Hume

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#### Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes provides an academic overview of **David Hume**, the third great **British empiricist**, highlighting his shift from Enlightenment optimism to **philosophical skepticism**. Unlike his predecessors, Hume focuses on **human nature** and **descriptive psychology** rather than rational proofs, suggesting that **belief** and **morality** stem from feeling rather than logic. He replaces the search for "clear and distinct ideas" with a theory of **impressions**, prioritizing the **force and vivacity** of sensory experience over abstract reasoning. By applying a strict **empiricist criterion of meaning**, Hume challenges the validity of concepts like **causation**, **substance**, and **personal identity**, arguing they lack empirical origins. Ultimately, Holmes illustrates how Hume reduces the **self** to a mere "theatre" of fleeting perceptions, laying the groundwork for modern **phenomenalism** and logical empiricism.

#### Briefing Document:

David Hume: Skepticism, Human Nature, and the Limits of Understanding

Executive Summary

David Hume, the third of the great British empiricists, represents a pivotal shift in Enlightenment thought. Writing approximately 50 years after John Locke, Hume moved philosophy away from "rationalistic optimism" toward a profound skepticism regarding the reach of human knowledge. His central thesis posits that philosophy must be grounded in a "descriptive psychology" of human nature rather than the "rule of reason."

Key findings in the source context include:

- **The Primacy of Impressions:** Hume replaces the "clear and distinct ideas" of his predecessors with "impressions"—forceful, vivacious, and affective experiences that serve as the original input for all human consciousness.
- **The Psychology of Belief:** Belief and moral action are not products of logical proof but are driven by psychological habits and feelings.
- **The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning:** Hume establishes that for a term to have factual meaning, it must be traceable to an original impression. This criterion effectively dismantles traditional metaphysical concepts of substance, the soul, and necessary causal connections.
- **Phenomenalism of the Self:** Hume rejects the notion of the "soul" as a substance, defining the self instead as a "theater" or a fleeting "stream of ideas" linked only by memory.

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### The Transition from Optimism to Skepticism

The philosophical trajectory from John Locke (1690) to David Hume (1748) marks a transition from the belief in the absolute possibilities of empirical knowledge to a skeptical inquiry into its limitations.

### Major Works and Objectives

- **A Treatise of Human Nature (1739):** Written in Hume's 20s, this longer, more comprehensive work attempted to settle philosophical disputes through the "experimental method"—defined here as an appeal to experience rather than laboratory testing.
- **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748):** A shorter, more accessible version of the *Treatise* designed to gain "literary fame." It focuses heavily on epistemology and the scope of scientific knowledge.

Hume's primary concern was not "knowledge" in the rationalist sense, but rather an empirical account of **human belief** and **human action**. He argued that human nature, rather than artificial demands of reason, should characterize philosophy.

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### The Theory of Perceptions: Impressions and Ideas

Hume's epistemology rests on a fundamental distinction between how the mind receives and processes information. He uses the term "perceptions" to refer to all states of consciousness.

### Impressions vs. Ideas

Unlike Locke, who viewed "simple ideas" as the primary input, Hume identifies **impressions** as the original stimuli.

Feature	Impressions	Ideas
<b>Origin</b>	Original input/stimuli (sensations)	Copies of impressions
<b>Nature</b>	Emotive, affective, forceful	Cognitive, conceptual
<b>Characteristics</b>	"Force and vivacity"; irresistible	Faint reflections of impressions
<b>Sequence</b>	Arises and arouses consciousness	Follows as the impression declines

Hume emphasizes the **primacy of the affective**. Experience begins with a physical or emotional impact (e.g., the "blinding force" of a flash of light or a reflex action) rather than a clear conceptual thought.

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### The Association of Ideas

Hume explores the psychological processes by which the mind combines simple ideas into complex ones (such as substances or relations). He identifies three principles of association:

1. **Resemblance:** The mind associates similar impressions and ideas, leading to the formation of ideas like "substance" or ongoing identity (e.g., recognizing a marker through repeated similar appearances).
2. **Contiguity:** The mind associates things that are adjacent in space or time, allowing for the concept of specific locations and chronological sequences.

3. **Cause and Effect:** While a primary principle of association, this is the most problematic. Hume argues that we only observe "constant conjunctions" (uniform associations) but never the actual "causal power" or "force" itself.
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### The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning

Hume's most incisive tool is his criterion for meaningful language. He posits that for any philosophical term to have factual meaning, it must refer to a specific **original impression**.

#### Applications of the Criterion

- **Necessary Connection:** Because there is no impression of "causal force," the idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect has no empirical meaning.
  - **Miracles:** These are deemed impossible to ascertain as they are unrelated to original impressions.
  - **Abstract Ideas:** Hume adopts **nominalism**, agreeing with Berkeley that there are no "universal essences." Words become general names only through customary usage between similar particulars.
  - **Substance and Soul:** Since there is no impression of a "mind-substance" or "soul-substance," these terms lack empirical reference points.
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### Personal Identity and the Phenomenal Self

Applying his criterion of meaning to the concept of the self, Hume rejects the Cartesian "I" as a thinking substance.

- **The Self as Theater:** Hume describes the self as a "theater in which ideas appear and pass... fleeting as they come and go."
- **The Stream of Ideas:** He clarifies that the "I" is the stream of ideas itself, not the "stage" or the "building" where they occur.

- **The Role of Memory:** Personal identity is not an ontological reality but a construct of memory, tracing complex streams of past impressions and ideas.
- **Phenomenalism:** Hume is a phenomenalist regarding the self; we can only discuss how the self *appears*, not what it *is*.

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### Logical Framework: Relations of Ideas vs. Matters of Fact

Hume categorizes all human inquiry into two distinct types of propositions, a distinction that became foundational for later empiricism.

#### Comparison of Proposition Types

Category	Description	Examples	Characteristics
<b>Relations of Ideas (Analytic)</b>	Logical relationships between terms; definitions.	Mathematics (3+5=8); "A bachelor is an unmarried male."	Logical truths; certain but provide no info on the external world.
<b>Matters of Fact (Synthetic)</b>	Statements regarding the external world/experience.	"Bachelors are miserable"; "The sun will rise."	Factual truths; contrary is logically possible; falsifiable.

Hume argues that "abstruse philosophy" (the rationalist approach of Descartes and Locke) is useful only for the "Relations of Ideas" (mathematics), but is "impotent" in grounding morality, natural theology, or scientific knowledge of the external world. These latter fields belong to the "Practical Philosophy" of human nature and belief.

## Study Guide:

David Hume: Epistemology and the Philosophy of Human Nature

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical shifts initiated by David Hume, moving from the rationalist optimism of the Enlightenment toward a rigorous empirical skepticism. Based on the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes, this document explores Hume's theories on human understanding, the nature of belief, and the limits of reason.

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## Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

- 1. How does David Hume distinguish between "impressions" and "ideas"?** Hume posits that impressions are the original, forceful, and vivacious stimuli that serve as the primary input to human consciousness. Ideas, by contrast, are weaker cognitive states that follow impressions; they are essentially copies of original impressions that lack the same intensity and "force."
- 2. What is meant by the "experimental method" in Hume's *Treatise concerning Human Nature*?** In the context of the Enlightenment, the experimental method refers to a consistent appeal to experience rather than the use of hypotheses and confirmation. Hume uses this method to provide an empirical account of human nature as it relates to two specific areas: human belief and human action.
- 3. What are the three principles of the "association of ideas" identified by Hume?** Hume identifies resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect as the three principles by which the mind combines simple ideas into complex ones. These principles explain how we develop mental habits, such as identifying a substance through repeated similar impressions or associating objects that are spatially or chronologically adjacent.
- 4. Describe Hume's "empiricist criterion of meaning."** This criterion asserts that for any philosophical term or idea to have factual meaning, it must be traceable back to an original empirical impression. If no original sensation or reflection can be assigned to an idea, Hume argues that the term is employed without meaning and should be viewed with suspicion.
- 5. How does Hume's view of "perception" differ from that of John Locke?** While Locke views simple ideas as the original input to consciousness, Hume replaces this with "impressions," which are affective and emotive rather than purely cognitive.

Hume uses the term "perception" to describe the entire state of consciousness that encompasses both these forceful impressions and the ideas that copy them.

**6. Why does Hume characterize the self as a "theatre" rather than a permanent substance?** Hume argues that the self is merely a stream of fleeting ideas and impressions that pass one after another, much like actors on a stage. Crucially, he clarifies that there is no underlying "stage" or "building" (substance) that supports these appearances; the "I" is the stream of perceptions itself, known only through memory.

**7. What is the distinction between "abstruse" and "practical" philosophy?** Abstruse philosophy is theoretical and motivated by intellectual curiosity, finding value primarily in the logical precision of mathematics but failing to ground morality or scientific knowledge. Practical philosophy focuses on what guides human action and belief, emphasizing human nature over the "artificial demands of reason."

**8. How does Hume define "analytic" versus "synthetic" propositions?** Analytic propositions (relations of ideas) concern logical truths and definitions where the terms are logically equivalent, such as in mathematics. Synthetic propositions (matters of fact) deal with factual truths where the contrary is logically possible and falsifiable, representing the primary focus of Hume's skeptical inquiry.

**9. Why is the principle of "cause and effect" considered problematic in Humean empiricism?** Empirically, one can only observe "constant conjunctions" or uniform associations between two events, but never the actual "causal power" or "necessary connection" itself. Because there is no impression of causal force, Hume argues that our belief in necessary connections is a psychological habit rather than a logically proven or empirically observed fact.

**10. What is the role of "force and vivacity" in Hume's theory of knowledge?** Instead of the Cartesian criteria of "clarity and distinctness," Hume uses "force and vivacity" as affective criteria to describe impressions. These qualities make impressions irresistible and lively, capturing the consciousness in a way that purely cognitive ideas cannot.

### Question Core Answer Points

- 1 Impressions are original/forceful; ideas are subsequent copies/faint.
- 2 It is the appeal to experience to describe human belief and action.
- 3 Resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.
- 4 Meaning depends on tracing an idea back to an original impression.
- 5 Hume prioritizes affective "impressions" over Locke's cognitive "simple ideas."
- 6 The self is a stream of perceptions (phenomenalism) without a substantial "stage."
- 7 Abstruse is logical/mathematical; Practical is human nature/action-oriented.
- 8 Analytic deals with relations of ideas; Synthetic deals with matters of fact.
- 9 We observe constant conjunction but lack an impression of "necessary connection."
- 10 These are affective/emotive criteria that make impressions irresistible to the mind.

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### Part III: Essay Questions

1. **From Optimism to Skepticism:** Analyze the transition from John Locke's "rationalistic optimism" to David Hume's skepticism, focusing on how their differing views on the "rule of reason" impacted their respective epistemologies.
2. **The Psychology of Belief:** Discuss Hume's assertion that belief is a "psychological account" rather than a matter of "evidentialist criteria." How does this shift redefine the purpose of philosophy according to the *Treatise*?
3. **The Limits of Substance:** Evaluate Hume's critique of the concept of "substance" (in both material and mental forms). How does his "empiricist

criterion of meaning" necessitate a move toward phenomenism regarding the "I"?

4. **The Associationist Framework:** Explain how Hume uses the principles of resemblance and contiguity to account for our ideas of space, time, and particular substances. Why does he exclude "necessary connection" from being empirically justified?
5. **A Philosophy for "Man":** Reflect on Hume's advice to "be a philosopher, but be still a man." How does this reflect his rejection of the Enlightenment's "Age of Reason" in favor of a philosophy grounded in human nature and feelings?

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#### Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Abstruse Philosophy:** Theoretical reasoning motivated by intellectual curiosity; useful in mathematics but impotent in grounding morality or knowledge of the external world.
- **Analytic Proposition:** A statement concerning the "relation of ideas" where the truth is determined by the logical equivalence of terms (e.g., definitions or mathematical truths).
- **Associationism:** The psychological theory that the mind naturally links ideas based on specific principles (resemblance, contiguity, and cause/effect).
- **Constant Conjunction:** The observable, uniform association of two events occurring together, which the mind mistakes for a necessary causal connection.
- **Contiguity:** A principle of association where things adjacent in space or time are linked together in the mind.
- **Empiricist Criterion of Meaning:** The requirement that any meaningful term must refer to a specific, original empirical impression.
- **Force and Vivacity:** The affective/emotive qualities that distinguish original impressions from the faint "ideas" that copy them.
- **Idea:** A cognitive state that serves as a faint copy of an original impression.

- **Impression:** The original, forceful stimuli of sensation or reflection; the primary input of human experience.
- **Matters of Fact:** Synthetic propositions where the contrary is logically possible; these are falsifiable and based on empirical experience.
- **Nominalism:** The view (shared by Hume and Berkeley) that there are no abstract universal ideas, only names used to refer to collections of similar particulars.
- **Phenomenalism:** The philosophical position that we can only know how things appear to consciousness (phenomena) rather than what they are in themselves (substance).
- **Practical Philosophy:** A mode of inquiry focused on what guides human action and the psychological roots of belief.
- **Resemblance:** A principle of association where the mind combines ideas based on their similarity.
- **Synthetic Proposition:** A statement whose truth is based on "matters of fact" rather than the logical definition of its terms.