

**24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy**  
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**IV. Hume**

**Lecture 15. Hume's Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**

1. *Biographical notes.* David Hume spent most of his life (1711-1776) in Edinburgh, apart from a period at La Fleche, the Jesuit college where Descartes had studied. He worked as a diplomat and a librarian, but held no university position, having been turned down for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in 1744, on the grounds of his skeptical and heretical opinions. His work as librarian enabled him to write a monumental *History of England*, which eventually gained him financial independence. He was a great friend of the economist and philosopher Adam Smith, who wrote about his death:

Thus died our most excellent, and never to be forgotten friend; concerning whose philosophical opinions men will, no doubt, judge variously. . . but concerning whose character and conduct there can scarce be a difference of opinion. . . . The extreme gentleness of his nature never weakened either the firmness of his mind, or the steadiness of his resolutions. His constant pleasantry was the genuine effusion of good nature and good-humour, tempered with delicacy and modesty, and without even the slightest tincture of malignity, so frequently the disagreeable source of what is called wit in other men. . . And that gaiety of temper, so agreeable in society, but which is so often accompanied with frivolous and superficial qualities, was in him certainly attended with the most severe application, the most extensive learning, the greatest depth of thought. . . Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit. (Adam Smith, Letter to William Strahan, 1776)

2. *Hume's empiricism.* In Section II, 'Of the Origin of Ideas', Hume draws a contrast between 'ideas' and 'impressions', which he distinguishes on the basis of their vividness. He argues that ideas are 'copies' of impressions, either directly (in the case of simple ideas) or indirectly (in the case of complex ideas). Even the idea of God arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and 'augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom'. The only exception he considers to this rule is the possibility of someone having an idea of a shade of blue that he has never seen. The final paragraph of this Section reveals his view as the antithesis to that of Descartes:

All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure: The mind has but a slender hold of them: they are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas; and when we have often employed any term, though without a distinct meaning, we are apt to imagine it has a determinate idea, annexed to it. On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: The limits between them are more exactly determined: Nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them.

3. *Hume's philosophical method.* This principle about the origin of ideas can be used to show how some putatively significant philosophical claims turn out to be empty or meaningless:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.

4. *Hume's distinction between 'Relations of Ideas' and 'Matters of Fact'.* In Section IV, Hume contrasts our belief 'that three times five is equal to the half of thirty' and our belief 'that the sun will rise tomorrow'. The former expresses a *relation of ideas*: it is intuitively or demonstrably certain; it is discoverable by the mere operations of thought; its denial is impossible; its denial is self-contradictory. The latter expresses a *matter of fact*: it is not discoverable by the mere operations of thought, but—*if at all*—on the basis of experience; its denial is possible; its denial is not self-contradictory.

5. *A closer look at Hume's distinction.* Hume's contrast between relations of ideas and matters of fact has been tremendously important to philosophy; and most philosophers agree that there are actually *three* different aspects to the contrast Hume has in mind: how propositions are *knowable*, what their *modal* status is, and how they get their *meaning*. Here are the three aspects, with the labels that have become attached to them since Kant's time:

(i) *A priori/ a posteriori.* This is about how we could *know* something. Some things we seem to know just by thinking about them; e.g. '5+7=12'. Other things we don't know just by thinking about them: e.g. 'It rained in Cambridge during the first week of April 2006'. Relations of ideas are, according to Hume, 'discoverable by the mere operation of thought': i.e. they are knowable *a priori*, while matters of fact are knowable *a posteriori*, not through mere operation of thought—we know them, instead, through *experience*, but what exactly that involves is going to be an important question for Hume.

(ii) *Necessary/ contingent.* This is about whether something *has* to be so or not, it concerns the *modal* status of something. If a proposition is *necessarily* true, then it must be true, it could not have been false; it is true, as we say these days, 'in every possible world'. Hume says, 'the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible'. A proposition expressing a relation of ideas is necessary: its contrary is not possible.

(iii) *Analytic/ synthetic.* This is about what makes something *true*; roughly, whether it is true in virtue of its meaning, or true in virtue of the way the world is. Hume says that the truth of propositions expressing relations of ideas depends only on the relation of those ideas, 'without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe'. Denying such a truth results in a contradiction. By contrast, the contrary of a matter of fact 'can never imply a contradiction'; the truth of a matter of fact depends how the world is—on what is somewhere 'existent in the universe'.