

Intercollegiate Lectures - **Hume** Lecture Two - 'The Newton of the Mind'

2000-01 J.L. Thomas

Hume is a mental atomist:

His impressions and ideas, are (like Locke's ideas) conceived on an analogy with atoms of matter. Each is independent of all the others --

"...**all simple ideas** may be separated by the imagination..." (S-B p.10; NN I.1.iv para1)

"I do not think there are **any two distinct impressions** which are inseparably joined" (S-B p.66; NN I.2.vi para 3).

And just as Newton made systematic sense of the movement of the planets, Hume wants to make such systematic sense of the activities of the mind. He is attempting an account of human nature (= the nature of the human mind/epistemic position) in terms of impressions and ideas -- in **conscious analogy with Newton's physics...**

He announces his hopes and intentions in the first *Enquiry*. He wants to discover the "springs and principles by which the human mind is actuated" (S-B p.14) and he thinks there is "no reason to despair" of success as great as that enjoyed by the astronomers (esp. Newton) in discovering "the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed".

So ideas, impressions are all discrete, independent

- yet they are not just connected by chance ("at hazards") in our experience

- in present complexes (simple ideas "fall regularly into complex ones")

- in idea-histories (ideas follow one another in the mind according to some principles)

But what principles? and how do they work?

The "uniting principle" among ideas is "association"

For Hume the chief business of the mind is repetition, copying of impressions -

In MEMORY this is vivid repetition, "somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea" (S-B

p.8; NN I.1.iii para 1) and tied down as to order and arrangement like the impressions copied.

In IMAGINATION "faint" ideas are produced which have no quality of being an impression.

Since Hume's psychology is repetitive rather than originatively creative, the how? when? and why? of repetition will be very important.

S-B p.10; NN I.1.iv para 1 - " 'tis impossible the same simple ideas should

fall regularly into complex ones (as they commonly do) without some bond

of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another."

If we ask 'What is the question or problem to which Hume's association principle is the answer?' the reply will be 'Given that you are having the idea you are having now, why do you go on to have whatever idea you have next?' The answer to *this* question is 'The association principle provides the required unifying bond or connection among our ideas'.

And this bond of union among ideas works by 3 qualities:

i) resemblance

ii) contiguity in space and time

iii) cause and effect

But what are these qualities of?

- ideas? or alternatively - objects the ideas are of?

Ideas?

Particularly if you concentrate on resemblance you will probably think these are qualities of ideas. Hume says "our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that resembles it" (S-B p.11: NN I.1.4 para 2)

The objects these ideas are of?

But if you think of ii) and iii)...it is hard to know what sense we could attach to the notion of ideas themselves being contiguous, being 'neighbours' in any spatial sense

and we tend to think of objects or events -- again not ideas -- being related to each other by cause and effect.

The association principle is Hume's mental gravity/magnetism. And we need to ask 'What does it operate on?'

- the imagination? (replacing a first idea with a second in my mental history?)
- the mental atoms themselves? (one idea somehow bringing now this/ now that idea in its wake?)

Hume is quick to admit that its operation (unlike gravity) is not invariable - rather, association is "**...a gentle force which commonly prevails**" (S-B p.10; NN I.1.iv para 1) (i.e. The analogy with gravity is not total.)

Which of the three qualities wins out when any one of them might operate and why? When you have idea A in your mind you might, presumably, next have

- idea B which resembles A or
- idea C which is the idea of something neighbouring A (or what A is an idea of) or
- idea D - the idea of something caused by A or whatever A is the idea of.

Hume doesn't give us any help with answering this question. So we are left wondering 'How exactly is the association principle meant to work? (This is Hume's mental mechanics - he owes us (but hasn't really given) an explanation.)

What about "force of habit"? Isn't that another force Hume talks a lot about? Yes - but for Hume force of habit just is the build-up of strong associations created and reinforced by experience, custom, repetition among our perceptions.

At (S-B 178-9; NN I.3.xvi para 9) Hume calls association an "instinct" shared with the non-human animals (it takes the place of reasoning in them and indeed, Hume thinks, in us as well!)

Association tells me why my ideas come together as they do - in patterns [at a time (clusters) and over time (series)].

But why are some of my ideas **BELIEFS**?

Not all the ideas my mind throws up or which I form are beliefs - they couldn't be otherwise there could be no differences of opinion. (If just having idea A were all there were to believing A everyone who

thought of it would believe A.)

So what makes some of my ideas beliefs? What promotes a merely-entertained idea into a belief?

Not - being accompanied by an extra belief-idea (e.g. an idea of existence or reality) because

1) there is no separate idea of existence or reality

2) anyway, if belief required an extra idea you could just hook that belief-idea to any other idea at will and believe anything you like. Experience tells us belief isn't whimsical or within the believer's complete control like that.

So the only other possibility is that the ideas which are beliefs are ones conceived in the right manner (with the right 'feel'). These are the ideas which have extra force and vivacity transferred to them from an accompanying impression.

Hume's Fork

"All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds."

Enquiry IV (S-B p.25 - first two paragraphs)

(i) The minority of these are **relations of ideas** - e.g. truths of geometry, algebra, arithmetic. These are 'not possibly not true'.

(ii) The majority, are **matters of fact** - e.g. 'The sun will rise tomorrow'. "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible".

Where demonstration, deduction (apriori reasonings) impel you to the idea

- that feeling of being impelled makes the idea a belief (gives it the right feel).

Matters of fact can't be demonstrated

- so, with these, you feel impelled by force of habit; habitual expectation: when you see an A, you expect a B - the impression (your seeing A) lends a bit of its force to your idea of B (your idea that B is coming).

Beliefs just feel different from merely-entertained ideas. They have superior force, vivacity, solidity, firmness, steadiness (*Treatise* S-B p.629; NN I.3.vii para 7).

S-B p.102; NN I.3.viii para 10 "...all the belief which follows upon any present impression is derived solely from [custom]".

S-B p.96; NN I.3.vii para 5 "...a belief..." = dfn "...a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression".

S-B p.103; NN I.3.viii para 12 "Thus all probable reasoning [reasoning about matters of fact] is nothing but a species of sensation".

S-B p.183; NN I.4.i para 8 Belief is "an act of our sensitive part...not our cogitative part".

Hume's discussion of what has come to be called 'the problem of induction'

Habitual belief formation as we have now seen (Hume thinks) should not be regarded as reasoning at all. It is not a kind of deduction...

...from - a major premise: "instances of which we have no experience must necessarily resemble those of which we have"

(S-B p.104; NN I.3.viii para 13)

(i.e. future instances will resemble past instances - 'The future will resemble the past')

and - a minor premise: 'The sun has always risen'

to - the conclusion: 'The sun will rise tomorrow'

There are two reasons why this is not a good deduction and cannot be a correct account of how we form our habitual beliefs:

(i) It wouldn't stand up because there is no support for the major premise -

- you can't reason to it

'the course of nature may change' implies no contradiction (*Enquiry* IV, pt II)

- you can't confirm it by experience (which can only tell you what has happened)

(And that exhausts the possibilities.)

(ii) Many who learn from experience (form beliefs like 'fire is dangerous', 'the sun

will rise tomorrow') are incapable of such sophisticated, syllogistic reasoning

(e.g. the ignorant, peasants, infants, animals).

Hume makes the point that if we try to base our contention that future instances will resemble past ones on the evidence of past resemblances we will be "evidently going round in a **circle**, and taking that for granted which is the very point in question"

(*E* p.36)

Criticisms of Hume's account

There are several standard criticisms of Hume's contention that our beliefs about matters of fact are not rationally justified:

(i)(a) First there are the reservations already expressed about Hume's theory of belief - how does an impression (such as my impression/sight of some bread) convey its force and vivacity to the idea I form that the bread will be nourishing for me and make that idea into a belief?

(b) Also - if beliefs, as Hume says, are generated by the imagination, how is Hume going to distinguish them from the fictions also generated by that faculty? (Yet he clearly thinks that established scientific beliefs about matters of fact do have a superior status (almost amounting to proof) to superstitions or even mere probabilities - let alone fictions. (*E* pp.110-111).)

(ii) Hume seems to contradict himself - First he suggests that beliefs are formed almost mechanically and irresistably by a kind of instinct (certainly reasonlessly). Then he says "a wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence" suggesting that we have some control over which contingent propositions we believe and criteria for which of them are more reasonable. Also, there seems a sort of contradiction in maintaining that the predictive arguments of science should be looked on as authoritative while continuing to regard them as lacking rational justification.

(iii) This last point leads naturally into the criticism made by, among others, P.F.Strawson, that Hume is simply construing reason far too narrowly as if deductive validity exhausted the meaning of rationality. Doesn't 'rationality' have a broader meaning on which prediction on the basis of past regularities is reasonable alongside other equally reasonable procedures like deduction?

Is Hume's suspicion of induction justified?

Pt (iii) immediately above demands the following reply -

Hume does not say either

- you can't argue from repeated past instances to future probabilities

or - a priori truths are the only ones worth having (quite the contrary)

And he is clearly of the opinion that inductively supported beliefs are better than mere guess work. But he would continue to maintain that whereas deductive conclusions are as certain as their premises inductive conclusions are not.

Hume thought we ought not to complain about not being able to demonstrate that induction produces true conclusions because

- it does not always do so!

- sometimes (maybe, often) it produces falsehoods we prefer to ignore, forget

On the other hand Hume seems not to have realised that induction *simpliciter* is not a very good, scientific, method - we need meta-enquiries to discover in which subjects, areas of life, induction works best

- astronomy? biology? maybe 'yes'

- weather prediction? 'no'

Hume would just say 'experience gives us good habits' but, notoriously, Hume is too sanguine that

- the more repetitions, the firmer the belief

- general principles like "like objects placed in like circumstances will always produce like effects" will mop up all residual problems

Three crucial beliefs Hume says we come by courtesy of the kind of mental momentum he has been describing are

- causality

- the external world

- identity, personal identity and the self

Have these no more justification and support than feeling and instinct?