

# David Hume's Theory of Mind, Chapter 8: The *Enquiries*

---

*Daniel E. Flage*

Originally published by: Routledge, London and New York, 1990.  
Electronic edition: Leeds Electronic Text Centre (University of Leeds)

Hume's attempt to develop a theory of mind in the *Treatise* failed on grounds of explanatory completeness. Although the Appendix suggests that he agonized over the inadequacies of his theory (*T* 633-6; cf. *Letters* 1:38-9), and even though late in his life he still seemed to prefer something like the theory of the *Treatise* to a substance theory of mind (cf. *D* 159-60), there is no evidence that he was able to refurbish his bundle theory or to provide an alternative theory that would meet his meta-theoretical requirements. In this chapter I briefly examine the 'account of mind' Hume developed in the first *Enquiry*. I show that that account reflects a shift away from the theoretical reduction of the *Treatise* to merely a lawful description of the operations of the mind. This shift is manifest in four ways. (1) The Hume of the *Enquiries* makes no positive statement regarding the nature of the mind: his account is consistent with either a substance or a bundle theory of mind. (2) The evidence for the copy theory of ideas is independent of the principles of the association of ideas. (3) Explanations and predictions are made strictly at the level of phenomena. (4) Finally, there is an increased emphasis on natural laws. I conclude the chapter by arguing that this shift in his account of mind provides a nonstylistic ground for Hume's disavowal of the *Treatise* (cf. GG 3:v; *EHU* 2).

## The Science of Human Nature

As a proponent of the accurate and abstruse method for doing moral philosophy, Hume's task in the *Enquiries* was to 'find those principles, which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action, or behaviour' (*EHU* 6). Hume appears to be concerned solely with the discovery of the laws [Page 158] governing thought, rather than to discover the 'essence of the mind' (cf. *T* xvii). Further, given his reduction of the notion of 'force' to lawful regularity (*EHU* 69-70), Hume's extolment of Newton's success in 'determin[ing] the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed' and his hope for similar success with respect to the mind (*EHU* 14) suggest he was searching for the laws governing thought. Hume's statement of his objectives in the first section of the second *Enquiry* also supports my contention that he was searching for nothing more than a lawful description of the activities of the mind. In stating his

objectives, he contrasts his own method with an alternative scientific method. He wrote:

The only object of reasoning [in morals] is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation are ultimately derived. As this is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances. The other scientific method, where a general abstract principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions, may be more perfect in itself, but suits less the imperfection of human nature, and is a common source of illusion and mistake. (*EPM* 174)

The objective of the second *Enquiry* is to discover those principles that describe the situations in which one actually approves or disapproves of an action or motive. It is nothing more than an attempt to construct inductive generalizations that describe experience, and in the body of the second *Enquiry* one finds little more than an extensive case study showing that, as a matter of fact, human beings approve of those actions and motives that are useful to themselves or others.<sup>1</sup> Hume contrasts this ‘experimental method’ with one in which ‘a general principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions’ (*EPM* 174). As we have seen, the second method is the method Hume himself employed in the *Treatise*, a method of establishing general principles (the principles of the association of ideas) and then explaining other phenomena (beliefs in the external world and substance) in an attempt to confirm the theory. Hume’s distinction between the ‘experimental method’ in the *Enquiries* and the ‘other scientific method’, the method he himself had employed in the *Treatise*, suggests that he had consciously changed his [Page 159] philosophical objectives from giving an account of the nature of the mind to merely giving a lawful description of the operations of the mind.

If this is correct, then one should find that the several laws of thought proposed in the *Enquiries*, including the copy theory of ideas, are supported solely on the basis of inductive generalizations from experience. This is what one finds. Recall that in the *Treatise* Hume claimed a ‘full examination’ of the adequacy of the copy theory of simple ideas ‘is the subject of the present treatise’ (*T* 4). No such claim is made in the first *Enquiry*. If the copy theory were a part of a more general theory, then, although one might provide inductive evidence for the truth of the copy theory, the copy theory of ideas would be deemed adequate if and only if the

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worthy of notice that Hume apparently considered the inductive program in the second *Enquiry* very successful, since he considered it, ‘of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best’ (*GG* 3:4, *Letters* 1:4; cf. *Letters* 1:227).

theory of which it is a part were adequate. The inadequacy of the theory of mind in the *Treatise* raises doubts regarding the copy theory of ideas. As in the *Treatise*, the Hume of the first *Enquiry* provides inductive evidence for the truth of the copy theory (EHU 19-20), but in the *Enquiry* this is the only evidence he provides for the truth of the copy theory. The fact that he claimed no theoretical connection between the copy theory of ideas and any other aspect of his account of mind suggests that there is a shift away from an account of the nature of the mind to a lawful description of thought.

One finds a similar shift with respect to the laws of the association of ideas. In the 1777 edition of the first *Enquiry*, Hume's evidence for the principles of the association of ideas is two-fold. First, he contends that 'It is evident that there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity' (EHU 23). His evidence for this is drawn from observations of various kinds of thinking and discourse. Second, he contends that 'there appear to be only three principles of connexion among ideas, namely, Resemblance, Contiguity in time and place, and Cause or Effect' (EHU 24). The evidence for this claim is given in a single paragraph. Hume wrote:

That these principles serve to connect ideas will not, I believe, be much doubted. A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original [resemblance]: the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an enquiry or discourse concerning the others [contiguity]: and if we think of a wound, we can scarce forbear reflecting on the pain which follows [cause and effect]. But that this enumeration is complete, and that there are no other principles of association, except these, may be difficult to prove to the satisfaction of the reader, or even to a man's own satisfaction. **[Page 160]** All we can do, in such cases, is to run over several instances, and examine carefully the principle which binds the different thoughts to each other, never stopping till we render the principle as general as possible. The more instances we examine, and the more care we employ, the more assurance we shall acquire, that the enumeration, which we form from the whole, is complete and entire. (EHU 24)

Hume's evidence for the principles of association is limited to a few instances plus a promissory note that further instances will bear out his hypothesis. Further, all the instances Hume provides are all drawn from one's immediate observations. While in the pre-1777 editions of the first *Enquiry* Hume provided a more detailed examination of cases by examining the role of the association of ideas in narrative compositions, those cases also are based strictly upon observation: the evidence

for the acceptance of the rules of association consists of nothing more than inductions from observable phenomena (cf. GG 4:19n-23n).<sup>2</sup>

It is one thing to discover general rules. It is another thing to apply them and to ask what inferences can be drawn on the basis of a lawful description of a phenomenon. The issues we should consider are: Does the Hume of the *Enquiries* use the principles of the association of ideas to explain phenomena? If he does, are all the phenomena explained purely observable phenomena? And does he use these explanations to draw any inferences regarding the nature of the mind?

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume's sole use of the principles of the association of ideas is to explain the 'transfer of force and vivacity' from impressions to ideas in belief contexts. Much of his evidence for this is drawn verbatim from the *Treatise* (*EHU* 51-3; cf. *T* 99-101), and even those portions that differ in detail remain the same in spirit: there is an observable increase in the force and vivacity of an idea that follows an impression in a belief context. On the other hand, the use of the principles of association to explain empirically problematic beliefs is markedly absent in the *Enquiries*.

Is this absence of an attempt to explain problematic beliefs symptomatic of a more general change in the *Enquiries*, or does it merely mark an attempt on Hume's part to popularize his writings? I believe they reasonably can be taken to mark a change in his philosophical objectives. It was on the basis of the putative success of the explanations of these problematic beliefs that Hume could claim that his theory of mind provides the best explanation of mental phenomena and could infer that the mind is a bundle of perceptions. In the first *Enquiry*, no inference is made from the propriety of the principles of association to the nature of the mind. Allusions to the bundle [Page 161] theory of mind, which were so prominent in the *Treatise* (cf. *T* 207, 251, 264, 277), are strikingly absent in both the *Enquiries* and the *Dissertation on the Passions*. Further, Hume's invectives against the doctrine of substance, his metaphysical considerations regarding the nature of perceptions, and the discussion of mind-body interaction (*T* 232-50) have few counterparts in the *Enquiries*. Although he claimed that the doctrine of material substance as 'only a certain unknown, inexplicable something as the cause of our perceptions; [is] a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to

---

<sup>2</sup> It should be acknowledged that the language of the pre-1777 *Enquiry* is somewhat ambiguous, and it is possible that it was only late in his life, that Hume concluded that a lawful description of the mind was the most for which one could reasonably hope. Note that the section begins as follows: 'Instead of entering into detail of this kind, which would lead into many subtleties, we shall consider some of the effects of this connexion upon the passions and imagination; where we may open a field of speculation more entertaining, and perhaps more instructive, than the other' (GG, 4:19n; cf. GG, 23n). This might suggest that the kind of explanatory program in which he had engaged in the *Treatise* was viable in principle. His removal of the section from the final edition of the work suggests that he had concluded that it is improbable that an adequate theory of the nature of the mind could be discovered.

contend against it' (*EHU* 155), in 'Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion' he referred to both mind and body as substances (*EHU* 65, 68-9). Hume's noncritical use of the term 'substance' in that context is, by itself, unimportant. But together with the absence of any positive account of the nature of the mind, it suggests that Hume considered his account of mind in the *Enquiries* to be nothing more than a lawful description of observable mental phenomena. Such an account leaves open the question of the nature of the mind. If this is correct, then it is plausible to suggest that Hume changed his philosophical objectives between the time he completed the first book of the *Treatise* and the time he wrote the *Enquiries*.<sup>3</sup>

## The Disavowal of the *Treatise*

So far we have seen that there seems to be a shift in Hume's philosophical objectives in going from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiries*. While the Hume of the *Treatise* attempted to infer the nature of the mind from observational and explanatory claims, the Hume of the *Enquiries* attempted to provide nothing more than a lawful description of the mind. In what remains I argue that in this shift from a theory of mind to merely a lawful description one finds a plausible nonstylistic reason for Hume's disavowal of the *Treatise*.

The *Treatise* was an anonymous work. Although his authorship was fairly well known in intellectual circles, Hume acknowledged it only in his posthumous works, first in 'My Own Life' and later in an Advertisement added to the 1777 edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. In the latter, he acknowledged his authorship only to disavow the work. The Advertisement reads:

Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature: A work which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But [Page 162]* not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers, who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against the juvenile work, which the Author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all the rules of

---

<sup>3</sup> Nelson recently has argued that Hume's philosophical position underwent a more significant change, viz., the Hume of the *Enquiries* rejected metaphysics (Nelson 1972). This seems too strong. If metaphysical inquiries concern the nature of objects, then the later Hume should make no claims regarding the nature or probable nature of objects. But in the *Natural History of Religion* Hume referred to the corpuscular hypothesis as 'the most probable, at least the most intelligible philosophy' (*NHR* 29), and, as Cummins has shown, there are few differences in the metaphysical positions of the first *Enquiry vis-à-vis* the *Treatise* (Cummins 1973a). My interpretation provides an account of a change in Hume's philosophy that allows for the continued acceptance of much of the metaphysics of the *Treatise* while explaining the absence of an account of the nature of the mind.

candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigotted zeal thinks itself authorized to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles. (GG 3:5; *EHU* 2)

If Hume disavowed the *Treatise*, at least in part, on philosophical grounds, there is a subtle shift in one of the central issues of concern in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries*. Providing an account of mind was a fundamental objective in both works. If Hume recognized that his bundle theory of mind lacked explanatory completeness and, as a consequence, he rejected it in favor of a mere lawful description of the operations of the mind, this constitutes such a subtle shift. But if this was Hume's reason for disavowing the *Treatise*, we should find some evidence in his several accounts of the failings of that work. It is to these that we shall now turn.

Even before the third book was published, Hume considered the *Treatise* a failure. In a letter to Hutcheson on 16 March 1740, where he expressed 'some Impatience for a second Edition [of the *Treatise*] principally on Account of Alterations I intend to make in my Performance' (*Letters* 1:38), Hume wrote:

I wish I cou'd discover more fully the particulars wherein I have fail'd. I admire so much the Candour I have observ'd in Mr Locke, Yourself, & very few more, that I woud be extremely ambitious of imitating it, by confessing my Errors: If I do not imitate it, it must proceed neither from my being free of Errors, nor from want of Inclination; but from my real unaffected Ignorance. (*Letters* 1:39)

The 'Errors' to which Hume refers can only be understood as substantive errors, and his concern with the 'particulars wherein I have fail'd' reminds one of the worries ultimately found in the Appendix on personal identity. In so far as Hume recognized and desired to correct certain errors in the *Treatise* as early as 1740, one would expect him to correct them in any subsequent writings on the same subject. Since [Page 163] there was no second edition of the *Treatise*, if the errors struck at the heart of his theory of mind, it should not be surprising that he would disavow the earlier work.

Hume's more famous comments on the *Enquiries vis-à-vis* the *Treatise* are more ambiguous. His comment in 'My Own Life' that 'I had always entertained a notion, that my want of success in publishing the *Treatise of Human Nature*, had proceeded more from the manner than the matter' (GG 3:3) is often taken to be a comment on the stylistic shortcomings of the *Treatise*. As Nelson has suggested, however, the 'manner' involved might be philosophic, rather than literary, manner (Nelson 1972: 335). If my argument that Hume changed his philosophical objectives is sound, this would constitute a change in philosophic 'manner'.

A similar ambiguity is found in his letter to Gilbert Elliot of March or April 1751. There Hume wrote:

I believe the philosophical Essays contain every thing of Consequence relating to the Understanding, which you would meet with in the *Treatise*; & I give you my advice against reading the latter. By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete. *Addo dum minuo*. The philosophical principles are the same in both: But I was carry'd away by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately. So vast an Undertaking, plan'd before I was one and twenty, & compos'd before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. I have repented my Haste a hundred, & a hundred times. (*Letters* 1:158)

The ambiguous term here is 'philosophical Principle'. If by this term Hume means the content is the same in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries*, the claim is false. Although many of the issues Hume considered, and many of his positions regarding those issues, are the same in both works, we have seen that there is a significant difference regarding his account of mind. Further, there are a number of issues discussed in the *Treatise* that are passed over without comment in the *Enquiries*, for example, Hume's discussions of space and time (*T* 27-65) as well as personal identity. If 'philosophical Principle' refers to nothing more than his empiricist presuppositions, and not to his methodological presuppositions, they remain approximately the same, although, given the methodological shift, Hume's empiricism might be deemed even stronger in the *Enquiries* than it was in the *Treatise*. But the term 'philosophical Principle' also might denote his principles of the association of ideas—or those principles together with his general principles regarding those properties, objects, or actions one deems good—which are exactly the same in both the *Treatise* and the [Page 164] *Enquiries*. It is worthy of notice that Hume often refers to general rules as principles, and even in the Introduction to the *Treatise* he indicated that he was attempting to 'explain the *principles* of human nature' (*T* xvi, emphasis added). If my account of Hume's shift in objectives is correct, one can understand why he would claim that 'By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete', namely, the lawful description in the *Enquiries* provides as adequate an account of the mind as he believed to be available to human understanding (cf. *EPM* 174). Therefore, the evidence from these two well-known passages is consistent with my contention that Hume's disavowal of the *Treatise* rests upon a change in his account of mind.

But Hume's disavowal was also intended to constitute an answer to those critics 'who . . . have taken care to direct all their batteries against the juvenile work, . . . and have affected to triumph in their advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it' (GG 3:v, *EHU* 2). Hume identified those 'several writers' in a letter to William Strahan, suggesting that the Advertisement 'is a complete Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie' (*Letters* 2:301). This seems to imply that by disavowing the *Treatise*, Hume undercut the basis for all of Reid's and Beattie's criticisms. Such a claim seems incredible for two reasons.

First, some aspects of Hume's philosophy that were criticized in both Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* and Beattie's *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*—the only critical works they had published by 1776—are doctrines common to both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. For example, Reid was critical of Hume's account of belief and his inductive scepticism (Reid 1970: 244-6), views that seem not to have changed appreciably in the transition from the *Treatise* to the first *Enquiry*. Second, while most of Reid's criticisms were directed against the 'author of the *Treatise of Human Nature*', Beattie took issue with 'Mr HUME'S Essay on a particular providence and a future state' (Beattie 1770: 115, cf. 487n-488n), 'Of National Characters' (Beattie 1770: 479-82), 'Of Liberty and Necessity' (Beattie 1770: 308-26), the views of the second *Enquiry* (Beattie 1770: 422-35) as well as virtually everything Hume said in the first book of the *Treatise*. Beattie, at least, did not 'direct all [his] batteries against the juvenile work.'

Does this imply that either Hume was confused or simply attempting to save face in disavowing the *Treatise*? Perhaps. But there is a more sympathetic interpretation of Hume's disavowal. If one takes seriously Hume's contention that the disavowal of the *Treatise* is an answer to Reid and Beattie, that 'answer' was limited to views that are peculiar to the *Treatise*.<sup>4</sup> Further, it seems reasonable to limit considerations to [Page 165] those issues in the *Treatise* that were discussed both in Reid's *Inquiry* and in Beattie's *Essay*. The one issue that fits both of these conditions is the bundle theory of mind. It is particularly with respect to this issue that both of those philosophers might be charged with 'bigotted zeal' (GG 3:v, *EHU* 2).

In his *Inquiry*, Reid's criticisms of Hume's theory of mind are directed solely at the bundle theory. Although Reid sets the tone of his criticisms in the 'Introduction' (Reid 1970: 14-15), the bulk of criticisms are found in Section VI of Chapter 2. There Reid focuses on the theory of ideas in general and Hume's contention that perceptions are independent existents in particular. Beginning with the plea that 'no offence may be taken in charging [Hume's bundle theory] or any other metaphysical notions with absurdity, or being contrary to the common sense of mankind' (Reid 1970: 31-2), he proceeds to argue that 'Ideas seem to have something in their nature unfriendly to other existences' (Reid 1970: 33). Tracing the history of the 'way of ideas', he indicates initially that ideas were taken to be mental images of nonmental objects, but as reasoning regarding the nature of ideas became more acute, ideas played larger and larger roles in philosophical systems. Reid wrote, 'But the triumph of ideas was completed by the *Treatise of Human Nature*, which discards spirits also, and leaves ideas and impressions as the sole existences in the universe' (Reid 1970: 33; cf. Reid 1970: 34 and Beattie

---

<sup>4</sup> This requires that one not assume the disavowal is a 'complete' answer to Reid and Beattie, in the sense that it is an answer to all their criticisms, but only that it is a sufficient answer.

1770: 266-7). Even if this were an accurate statement of Hume's position in the *Treatise*, we have seen that the denial of material or immaterial substance plays little or no role in the account of mind Hume offers in the first *Enquiry*. Given the shift in Hume's account of mind in the *Enquiries vis-à-vis* the *Treatise* and the centrality of that account to those works, Reid's contentions that Hume's theory of mind is inconsistent with common sense (Reid 1970: 34-5) and capable of being believed only while in one's philosophical closet (Reid 1970: 35 and 36), and Beattie's contention that Hume's theory of mind is nonsense, impious, and based upon a misrepresentation of common facts and a misuse of common words (Beattie 1770: 263-7) might well have provoked Hume to repudiate the *Treatise*.

## Conclusions

In this chapter we have seen that Hume's recognition that his bundle theory of mind failed on explanatory grounds led to a shift in his philosophical objectives in the *Enquiries*. While the *Treatise* provides [Page 166] a theory of the nature of the mind, the *Enquiries* provides merely a lawful description of the operations of the mind. Even though there is little question that Hume considered a bundle theory of mind more plausible than a doctrine of substance throughout his philosophical career (cf. *D* 159), the explanatory failure of his own account resulted in a shift away from theoretical reduction to mere description. Given Reid's and Beattie's criticisms of the bundle theory of mind, I argued that this shift in his account of mind provides nonstylistic grounds for Hume's disavowal of the *Treatise*.