

Hume's "Compleat Answer to Dr Reid"



Peter Millican
Hertford College, Oxford

Hume's 'Advertisement'

'... several writers, who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work [the *Treatise*]. ... Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces [EHU, DOP, EPM, NHR] may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles.'

Enquiry, 'Advertisement', 1775

Hume's Covering Letter

'There is a short Advertisement, which I wish I had prefix'd to the second Volume of the *Essays and Treatises* in the last Edition. I send you a Copy of it. Please ... give out no more Copies without prefixing it to the second volume. It is a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie.'

Letter to Strahan, 26th Oct 1775

The Puzzle

- Hume's *Enquiry* does not answer, or even address, most of the criticisms of the *Treatise* made in Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764).
- So how can Hume possibly describe the Advertisement as even an *answer* to Reid, let alone 'A compleat Answer'?

Somerville's Solution (1)

- Hume himself says the philosophy of the *Enquiry* is the same as that of the *Treatise*:
 - 'The philosophical Principles are the same in both' (letter to Elliott, 1751)
 - '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 ... I, therefore, cast the first part of that work anew in the *Enquiry* concerning Human Understanding. ('Life')

Somerville's Solution (2)

- Hume's 'compleat Answer' to Reid can be simply 'nothing other than his philosophy and his determination to continue to stand by that philosophy' (p. 181).
- The explanation of Hume's comment to Strahan is that 'Hume came to view his philosophy as opposed to the type of philosophical position which the names of Reid and Beattie had come to represent to him through reading Priestley's *Examination* – that is, a position of a bare and dogmatic appeal to common sense.' (p. 364).

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (1)

- January 1739: *Treatise* published
- June 1st 1739, letter to Kames:

‘My fondness for what I imagined new discoveries, made me overlook all common rules of prudence’
- October/November 1739: *Abstract* written
 - Completed by March 1740, the *Abstract* suggests a major rethink and restructuring, anticipating the *Enquiry* in many ways.

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (2)

- March 16th 1740, letter to Hutcheson:

‘I wait with some Impatience for a second Edition principally on Account of Alterations I intend to make in my Performance. ...
I am apt, in a cool hour, to suspect, in general, that most of my Reasonings will be more useful by furnishing Hints & exciting People’s Curiosity than as containing any Principles that will augment the Stock of Knowledge that must pass to future Ages.’

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (3)

- November 1740: *Book III* is published ...

... together with *Appendix*, confessing errors.
- May 21st 1745, *Letter from a Gentleman*:

‘I am indeed of Opinion, that the Author had better delayed the publishing of that Book; not on account of any dangerous Principles contained in it, but because on more mature Consideration he might have rendered it much less imperfect by further Corrections and Revisals. (L 33)’

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (4)

- Spring 1751, letter to Gilbert Elliot:

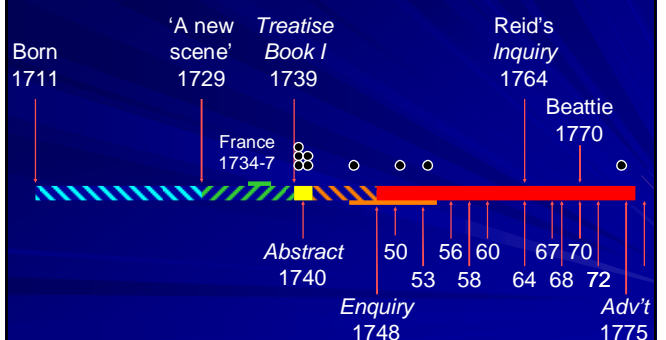
‘I give you my Advice against reading [the *Treatise*]. ... I was carry’d away by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately. So vast an Undertaking, plan’d before I was one and twenty, & compos’d before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. I have repented my Haste a hundred, & a hundred times.’

Disillusion with the *Treatise* (5)

- February 1754, letter to John Stewart:

I shall acknowledge ... a very great Mistake ... viz my publishing at all the *Treatise* of human Nature, a Book, which pretended to innovate in all the sublimest Parts of Philosophy, & which I compos’d before I was five & twenty. Above all, the positive Air, which prevails in that Book, & which may be imputed to the Ardor of Youth, so much displeases me, that I have not Patience to review it.

A Timeline of Hume’s Life



'The Philosophical Principles are the Same in Both' (1)

- (a) 'Where the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* cover the same topics, they say the same about those topics.'
- Plainly false: e.g. the theory of belief, the two definitions of cause, liberty and necessity, infinite divisibility, arguably scepticism.
- Would not endorse *Treatise* 'doctrines' that aren't in the *Enquiry* also.
- Would not give the *Treatise* priority, because Hume repeatedly says it is badly expressed.

'The Philosophical Principles are the Same in Both' (2)

- (b) 'The *central* or *fundamental* principles of the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* are the same.'
- More plausible than (a).
- Stands more chance of justifying giving priority to the *Treatise*, on the grounds of its deeper and/or more detailed investigation into these fundamental principles.
- But raises a question: *which* of Hume's 'principles' are central or fundamental? The answer can depend on one's perspective!

A Dubious 'Syllogism'

- 1 The fundamental principles are the same in both (the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*).
 - 2 X is a fundamental principle of the *Treatise*.
- ∴ X is a fundamental principle of the *Enquiry*.

- The 'syllogism' is dubious because what is seen as fundamental after 1748 might not appear fundamental in a work written before 1740.

Central Principles of the *Treatise*?

- According to Don Garrett (1997):
 - Faculty psychology
 - Copy Principle
 - Separability Principle
- According to Harold Noonan (1999):
 - Copy Principle
 - Separability Principle
 - Conceivability Principle
 - 3 Principles of Association of Ideas

Assessing the Candidates

- Copy Principle:
 - used only once in the *Enquiry*, though on a central topic (necessity and hence free-will);
 - agreed by Hume and Reid to be a standard principle, common to most philosophers.
- Conceivability Principle:
 - important role in *Enquiry* IV and XII;
 - 'an establish'd maxim in metaphysics'.
- Separability Principle:
 - never used or even mentioned in the *Enquiry*.

Association in the *Enquiry*

- 3 Principles of Association
 - Play little role, and only in *Enquiry* III & V ii.
 - Superficial phenomena: '*mental geography*'.
 - Never used to provide deeper account of '*secret springs and principles*'; at most provide an 'analogy' to operation of custom.
- Custom
 - Plays a major role from *Enquiry* V onwards.
 - Identified as a fundamental principle analogous to association, but also importantly different.

Hume's 'Philosophical Principles'

- Must be identified *from the perspective of the Enquiry*
 - because that's the perspective Hume was viewing from when he made the comments.
- More likely to mean *conclusions* and *distinctive doctrines* rather than *premises* (such as Copy & Conceivability principles)
 - because he took those premises to be standardly accepted.

What is the Perspective of the *Enquiry*?

- A manifesto for inductive moral science and how to pursue it, distinguishing:
 - 'mental geography, or delineation of the distinct parts and powers of the mind' (1.13);
 - discovery of 'the secret springs and principles, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations' (1.15).
- Examine the limits of possible enquiry, to:
 - undermine bogus metaphysics and the superstition that it supports (1.11-12).

- Sections IV and VII:
 - Causes are discoverable by experience alone rather than by rational understanding.
 - Factual inference is founded on assumption of uniformity, irresistible due to custom.
 - The only appropriate scientific ambition is to resolve observable phenomena into simple, quantifiable laws that describe them, rather than aspiring to intelligibility or rational insight.
- Section V Part ii:
 - A sketch of an example of such resolution of phenomena: the operation of custom on the mind is somewhat analogous to association.

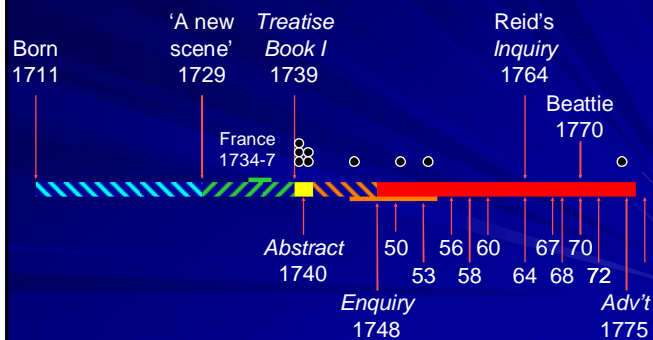
- Section VI:
 - Probabilistic inference is a natural development of induction, based on custom.
- Section VIII:
 - Inductive reasoning is equally applicable to the moral sciences as to the physical.
 - It is to be pursued in the same way, through a probing search for uniform hidden causes.
- Section IX:
 - Analogical inference is another development of induction, where similarity is imperfect.
 - Man is part of nature, alongside the animals.

- Section X:
 - We should 'proportion our belief' to the evidence, and carefully scrutinising testimony with an inductively-informed critical eye.
- Section XI:
 - Inductive inference is subject to a constraint of proportionality, and arguably a prohibition on speculation about unique phenomena.
- Section XII:
 - Metaphysical insight into matter is a dead end.
 - Restrict areas of enquiry, with induction based on 'methodizing and correcting'.

The Principles are the Same!?

- The 'Principles' of the *Enquiry* are indeed in the *Treatise*, at least embryonically.
- However there is much else besides:
 - metaphysics of space and time;
 - refined associationist explanation;
 - (arguably) extreme sceptical paradoxes (etc.).
- If the fundamental principles are indeed the same, then these can't count even as fundamental principles of the *Treatise*!

A Timeline of Hume's Life



Clarifications in Response to Wright

■ Associationism:

- Hume continued to find associationism plausible, but no longer saw his own associationist explanations as so convincing, nor anything like so central to his project.

■ The Copy Principle

- Hume continued to believe the Copy Principle, and argued for it in his letter to Blair about Reid.
- However there is no doubt that it is *relatively* insignificant in the *Enquiry*.

■ Scepticism:

- John and I agree, I think, that the *Enquiry* gives a much clearer presentation of Hume's intended scepticism attitude to scepticism.
- John takes Hume to be a mitigated sceptic in the *Treatise* also; I am agnostic on this.
- I like John's point about Hume's talk of correction 'by common-sense and reflection'.

■ The *Treatise*:

- Of course the *Treatise* continues to be well worth studying. But we should remember that its author considered it very far from polished!