

# Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought.—The ‘volume’ referred to at the outset contained the present work, the *Dissertation on the Passions* and the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which were all published together.]

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~~thought to be more rash, precipitate, and dogmatic than even the boldest and most affirmative philosophy that has ever attempted to impose its crude dictates and principles on mankind.~~

~~If these reasonings concerning human nature seem abstract and hard to understand, what of it? This isn't evidence of their falsehood. On the contrary, it seems impossible that what has hitherto escaped so many wise and profound philosophers can be very obvious and easy to discover. And whatever efforts these researches may cost us, we can think ourselves sufficiently rewarded not only in profit but also in pleasure, if by that means we can add at all to our stock of knowledge in subjects of such enormous importance.~~

~~Still, the abstract nature of these speculations is a draw~~

~~back rather than an advantage; but perhaps this difficulty can be overcome by care and skill and the avoidance of all unnecessary detail; so in the following enquiry I shall try to throw some light on subjects from which wise people have been deterred by uncertainty, and ignorant people have been deterred by obscurity. How good it would be to be able to unite the boundaries of the different kinds of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty! And still better if by reasoning in this easy manner I can undermine the foundations of an abstruse philosophy that seems always to have served only as a shelter to superstition and a cover to absurdity and error!~~

## Section 2: The origin of ideas

Everyone will freely admit that the perceptions of the mind when a man feels the pain of excessive heat or the pleasure of moderate warmth are considerably unlike what he feels when he later remembers this sensation or earlier looks forward to it in his imagination. Memory and imagination may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses, but they can't create a perception that has as much force and liveliness as the one they are copying. Even when they operate with greatest vigour, the most we will say is that they represent their object so vividly that we could *almost* say we feel or see it. Except when the mind is out of order because of disease or madness, memory and imagination can never be so lively as to create perceptions that are indistinguishable from the ones we have in seeing or feeling. The most lively thought is still dimmer than the dullest sensation.

A similar distinction runs through all the other perceptions of the mind. A real fit of anger is very different from merely thinking of that emotion. If you tell me that someone is in love, I understand your meaning and form a correct conception of the state he is in; but I would never mistake that conception for the turmoil of actually being in love! When we think back on our past sensations and feelings, our thought is a faithful mirror that copies its objects truly; but it does so in colours that are fainter and more washed-out than those in which our original perceptions were clothed. To tell one from the other you don't need careful thought or philosophical ability.

So we can divide the mind's perceptions into two classes, on the basis of their different degrees of force and liveliness. The less forcible and lively are commonly called 'thoughts'

or 'ideas'. The others have no name in our language or in most others, presumably because we don't need a general label for them except when we are doing philosophy. Let us, then, take the liberty of calling them 'impressions', using that word in a slightly unusual sense. By the term 'impression', then, I mean *all our more lively perceptions when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will*. These are to be distinguished from ideas, which are *the fainter perceptions of which we are conscious when we reflect on* [= 'look inwards at'] *our impressions*.

It may seem at first sight that human thought is utterly unbounded: it not only escapes all human power and authority—as when a poor man thinks of becoming wealthy overnight, or when an ordinary citizen thinks of being a king, but isn't even confined within the limits of nature and reality. It is as easy for the imagination to form monsters and to join incongruous shapes and appearances as it is to conceive the most natural and familiar objects. And while •the body must creep laboriously over the surface of one planet, •thought can instantly transport us to the most distant regions of the universe—and even further. What never was seen or heard of may still be *conceived*; nothing is beyond the power of thought except what implies an absolute contradiction.

But although our thought seems to be so free, when we look more carefully we'll find that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts merely to the ability to combine, transpose, enlarge, or shrink the materials that the senses and experience provide us with. When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas—*gold* and *mountain*—with which we were already familiar. We can conceive a virtuous horse because our own feelings enable us to conceive virtue, and we can join this with the shape of a horse, which is an animal we know. In short, all the materials of thinking are

derived either from our outward senses or from our inward feelings: all that the mind and will do is to mix and combine these materials. Put in philosophical terminology: *all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones*.

Here are two arguments that I hope will suffice to prove this. **(1)** When we analyse our thoughts or ideas—however complex or elevated they are—we always find them to be made up of simple ideas that were copied from earlier feelings or sensations. Even ideas that at first glance seem to be the furthest removed from that origin are found on closer examination to be derived from it. The idea of God—meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being—comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds. However far we push this enquiry, we shall find that every idea that we examine is copied from a similar impression. Those who maintain that this isn't universally true and that there are exceptions to it have only one way of refuting it—but it should be easy for them, if they are right. They need merely to produce an idea that they think *isn't* derived from this source. It will then be up to me, if I am to maintain my doctrine, to point to the impression or lively perception that corresponds to the idea they have produced.

**(2)** If a man can't have some kind of sensation because there is something wrong with his eyes, ears etc., he will never be found to have corresponding ideas. A blind man can't form a notion of colours, or a deaf man a notion of sounds. If either is cured of his deafness or blindness, so that the sensations can get through to him, the ideas can then get through as well; and then he will find it easy to conceive these objects. The same is true for someone who has never experienced an object that will give a certain kind of sensation: a Laplander or Negro has no notion of the

taste of wine ·because he has never had the sensation of tasting wine·. Similarly with inward feelings. It seldom if ever happens that a person has *never* felt or is *wholly* incapable of some human feeling or emotion, but the phenomenon I am describing does occur with feelings as well, though in lesser degree. A gentle person can't form any idea of determined revenge or cruelty; nor can a selfish one easily conceive the heights of friendship and generosity. Everyone agrees that non-human beings may have many senses of which we can have no conception, because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only way in which an idea can get into the mind, namely through actual feeling and sensation.

(There is, however, one counter-example that may prove that it isn't absolutely impossible for an idea to occur without a corresponding impression. I think it will be granted that the various distinct ideas of colour that enter the mind through the eye (or those of sound, which come in through the ear) really are different from each other, though they resemble one another in certain respects. If that holds for different colours, it must hold equally for the different shades of a single colour; so each shade produces a distinct idea, independent of the rest. (We can create a continuous gradation of shades, running from red at one end to green at the other, with each member of the series shading imperceptibly into its neighbour. If the immediate neighbours in the sequence are not different from one another, then red is not different from green, which is absurd.) Now, suppose that a sighted person has become perfectly familiar with colours of all kinds, except for one particular shade of blue (for instance), which he happens never to have met with. Let all the other shades of blue be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest: it is obvious that he will notice a blank in the place where the missing shade should go. That

is, he will be aware that there is a greater quality-distance between that pair of neighbouring shades than between any other neighbour-pair in the series. Can he fill the blank from his own imagination, calling up in his mind the idea of that particular shade, even though it has never been conveyed to him by his senses? Most people, I think, will agree that he can. This seems to show that simple ideas are not always, in every instance, derived from corresponding impressions. Still, the example is so singular [Hume's word] that it's hardly worth noticing, and on its own it isn't a good enough reason for us to alter our general maxim.)

So here is a proposition that not only seems to be simple and intelligible in itself, but could if properly used make every dispute equally intelligible by banishing all that nonsensical jargon that has so long dominated metaphysical reasonings. ·Those reasonings are beset by three troubles·. **(1)** All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure, so that the mind has only a weak hold on them. **(2)** Ideas are apt to be mixed up with other ideas that resemble them. **(3)** We tend to assume that a given word is associated with a determinate idea just because we have used it so often, even if in using it we haven't had any distinct meaning for it. In contrast with this, **(1)** all our impressions—i.e. all our outward or inward sensations—are strong and vivid. **(2)** The boundaries between them are more exactly placed, and **(3)** it is harder to make mistakes about them. So when we come to suspect that a philosophical term is being used without any meaning or idea (as happens all too often), we need only to ask: From what impression is that supposed idea derived? If none can be pointed out, that will confirm our suspicion ·that the term is meaningless, i.e. has no associated idea·. By bringing ideas into this clear light we may reasonably hope to settle any disputes that arise about whether they exist and what they are like.

~~START OF A BIG FOOTNOTE~~

~~Philosophers who have denied that there are any innate ideas probably meant only that all ideas were copies of our impressions; though I have to admit that the terms in which they expressed this were not chosen with enough care, or defined with enough precision, to prevent all mistakes about their doctrine. For what is meant by 'innate'? If 'innate' is equivalent to natural', then all the perceptions and ideas of the mind must be granted to be innate or natural, in whatever sense we take the latter word, whether in opposition to what is uncommon, what is artificial, or what is miraculous. If innate means 'contemporary with our birth', the dispute seems to be frivolous — there is no point in enquiring *when* thinking begins, whether before, at, or after our birth. Again, the word 'idea' seems commonly to be taken in a very loose sense by Locke and others, who use it to stand for any of our perceptions, sensations and~~

~~passions, as well as thoughts. I would like to know what it can mean to assert that self love, or resentment of injuries, or the passion between the sexes, is not innate!~~

~~But admitting the words 'impressions' and 'ideas' in the sense explained above, and understanding by 'innate' what is *original or not copied from any previous perception*, then we can assert that all our impressions are innate and none of our ideas are innate.~~

~~Frankly, I think that Locke was tricked into this question by the schoolmen [= mediaeval Aristotelians], who have used undefined terms to drag out their disputes to a tedious length without ever touching the point at issue. A similar ambiguity and circumlocution seem to run through all that philosopher's reasonings on this as well as on most other subjects.~~

~~END OF THE BIG FOOTNOTE~~

### **Section 3: The association of ideas**

~~The mind's thoughts or ideas are obviously inter connected in some systematic way: there is some order and regularity in how, in memory and imagination, one idea leads on to another. This is so clearly true of our more serious thinking or talking what when a particular thought breaks in on the regular sequence of ideas it is immediately noticed and rejected as irrelevant. Even in our wildest daydreams and night dreams we shall find, if we think about it, that the imagination doesn't entirely run wild, and that even in imagination the different ideas follow one another in a somewhat~~

~~regular fashion. If the loosest and freest conversation were written down, you would be able to see something holding it together through all its twists and turns. Or, if not, the person who broke the thread might tell you that he had been gradually led away from the subject of conversation by some orderly train of thought that had been quietly going on in his mind. We also find that the compound ideas that are the meanings of words in one language are usually also the meanings of words in others, even when there can be no question of the languages' having influenced one another.~~