Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, sections 2-4.

This week we will be moving into modern philosophy and David Hume, this is jump of some 2,000 years in time. We have roughly covered 400 years of philosophy so far in the class and thus there are some things to fill in and you may need to read the following more than once. What follows is intended as a very general over-view of the subject matter as that is all that is possible in this setting. Those of using wishing to fill in the gaps with more detail might take a look at a book called Sophie's World by Jostein Gaarder as it is readily available and quite good. It starts a little slow but it is recent and very readable.

Plato's work, a good deal of which is present in the Republic, is extremely influential on subsequent thinkers in philosophy and thus if we discuss some of its' themes we will have a background for jumping to modern philosophy. We will start with Plato's definition of justice and then move into his system of nature. In the Republic Plato defines justice as a specific balance between three parts of the mind; reason, the emotions/spirits and the appetites.

Reason is the ability to identify and solve problems, the ability to understand how things function and propose solutions. Emotions are things like will-power, love, hate or drives relating to others and the appetites are things like the desire for sex, food, drink or drives relating to the self. For Plato people's minds are a combination of these three things (reason, emotion, appetite) and there are better and worse ways to mix these things together. The person that uses their reason exclusively to serve their appetites will behave much differently than one who uses their reason to balance the demand of their appetites and their emotions. The first is a clever glutton with reason slaved to the role of providing greater and greater delights, the second uses reason correctly in its role of guiding life and making it for the better.

Plato also thinks that each of these parts of the mind has an associated proper or correct function termed excellence or virtue. An excellent person is thus one who has developed excellence(s) or virtues in relation to the three parts of the mind; reason, emotion and the appetites. The excellence of the reason for Plato is wisdom, the excellence or virtue of the emotions is courage and the excellence of the appetites is temperance. The just person is thus one who is WISE, (I will define this below) one who has COURAGE and one who has balanced his mind such that reason and spirit unite to rule

and guide the appetites (TEMPERANCE). The just person knows what is right, has the courage to do what is right and does not get drunk the night before and miss the chance to do what is needed.

Knowing what is right is the hard part of this equation but before getting too deep into this keep in mind that things like being decent, kind and nice are not hard concepts to understand, they are just hard concepts to put into consistently into practice. One of the reason they are hard to put into practice is things like our emotions and appetites (I don't like that person, I want his girl-friend as mine) jump into the mind and cloud our moral judgement. (I should be helpful, but...)

Plato also contends that justice or proper behavior is mental health and that injustice is a form of mental disease. The unjust person thus is not only a bad person (defined in terms of what it is to be an excellent human) but is also involved in an internal struggle that generates unhappiness that if denied or repressed results in a human malfunction or unhappiness. Thus for Plato morality/justice creates an internal and healthy balance between the parts of our minds and immorality puts ourselves into conflict with ourselves and others; it is a state from which happiness will not arise.

The above has hopefully served to bring some completion what we have been reading about Plato. The above, however, will also help serve to get us started in our discussions of the 2,000 years between Plato and Hume. With this in mind let's return to Plato's definition of wisdom as unpacking this will cover lots of historical ground as it pulls us into Plato's deepest thoughts about reality.

For Plato (as in Christian thought) there are two worlds, a visible world of matter and sense and an invisible world of ideas. This world of ideas serves as blue-prints or non-physical ‘cookie-cutters’ that imprint these ideas on the world of sense and matter. One way of thinking about these things is to think of the law of gravity and its mathematical expression M1*M2/D*D (Mass1 x Mass2 divided by the Distance between the two masses Squared.) This formula of gravity is an abstract expression and yet it will get you to the moon and back if you have enough rocket fuel and a rocket-ship. The invisible ideas of Plato are similar to the concept of gravity, these invisible ideas determine/explain the appearance and behavior of the material objects. If we want to know how objects will behave in regards to gravity we need only consult the formula as it seems to govern the behavior of objects in

gravitational fields. If we want to know how bees behave we should study the idea of bees, the form of the bees, the essence of bees. What it is that makes a bee a bee and not a wasp or a bird.

Another way to think about these matters is consider the U.S. constitution. In one reality it is marks on paper and thus fairly unimportant, in another reality, the realm of ideas, these marks have an impact that reaches far beyond the physical boundaries of the document and indeed guide and form a good deal of American life. The world of ideas is thus like gravity or the constitution, concepts that have enormous influence on how things are and how the act.

Plato considered Wisdom to be knowledge of this world of ideas, the world of the forms. For Plato the ideas represented an unchanging and eternal reality that once understood would provide humanity with knowledge of reality and hence what it needs to live happily and successfully. It was this knowledge which a philosopher sought and it was this that the philosopher taught.

We can see the beginnings of this system of nature in Socrates' search for definitions, the search for understanding of the governing idea behind a term (the definition of courage, of justice, etc.) Now at the top of this world of ideas is the master idea, the idea of the good. From this master idea all other ideas flow and from these other ideas (when mixed with matter) flows the physical world. The master idea, the form of the good, is not human, it is not conscious, it has no will or desire, but it is the source of all else and it thus enters into everything to some degree or another. Plato often compares the idea of the good to the sun and its role in human life. From the sun flows light, food, warmth, etc. It makes all other things visible and makes life possible.

There is a hierarchy to the realm of ideas where more general ideas (mammal, insect, mineral) govern a group of more specific ideas (dolphins, wasps and gold). The idea of mammal governs the lesser ideas of dolphins, humans, dogs, etc., the idea of mineral governs gold, silver, iron, etc. These ideas can get mixed together as well in that the idea of red can be mixed with the idea of leaf to create a red leaf. Finally when these more specific ideas mix with matter and we get individual objects of this a boat, that goat or the blue car making a stop at the red stop lights. You, me, Bill Clinton, Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey are created from mixing matter with the

idea of humanity. The idea of humanity derives from the idea of mammal and mammal derives from the idea of living things which derives from....until we reach the idea of the good. Plato is unclear on how this happens outside of mentioning a cosmic craftsman with a mixing bowl, not some of his better stuff but still a powerful model of nature.

Plato's Order of Realty

Form of the Good
Realm of Ideas (in a hierarchy)
World of Matter and Sense

Plato's system of reality becomes very important to later thinkers, most of who will use aspects of Plato's thought. When Greek philosophy is mixed with the Jewish and Christian scriptures we get a great deal of philosophical output that covers most Western thought until we get to the beginning of the modern era (the Renaissance, Enlightenment, roughly the 16-18th century). Medieval philosophy is a large part variations on attempts to explain how the bible and Greek philosophy work together to make a full system of thought and belief. One of the main differences, however, between Greek and Christian philosophy is one of attitude, for the Greeks the motto was more "Man can" and for the Christians the model was more "Man cannot without God." Thus, for Plato, it was possible for humanity to come to know, by reason, the whole of reality, no recourse to revealed writings of a God or Gods was necessary. For the Christian thinkers the dictates of reason had to be squared with the teachings of the bible and if the two appeared to be in conflict preference was given to the word of God until the conflict was resolved.

The enlightenment of Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries brought the beginning of a return to the Greek model of "Man can" and new attempts at philosophy were being made. There was a difference between these two ages, however, observation and experimentation, in a manner unknown before, was added to the modern mix. Plato had been more committed to the program of reason than to one of observation; after all the world of ideas is invisible and thus open more to the mind than to the senses. Reason, however, would seemingly be able to only get one so far if you do not put in a heavy dose of observation and experimentation. (In fairness the Ancient Greeks they did do some work with experimentation and thus the difference

here is one of degrees of experimentation with the modern world doing lots and lots experiments and the Ancient world doing some.)

During the enlightenment attempts were made to build philosophy almost exclusively on observation and experimentation. An emphasis on reason had been given a chance to explain and fashion things and now there was a desire to work out a program of philosophy that used observation and experimentation as the basis for generating our beliefs about the world. (Much of this project is still with us today in the form of science.)

Our next author we will be reading, Hume, will be looking at and critiquing this project of using observation as a basis for a system of philosophy. It is useful to keep in mind that Hume writes in a time when the use of observation and experimentation to fashion a philosophy had been pushed to the outer limits of the theory. It was being asserted by some that all of our beliefs about the world were formed by our senses. The mind at birth was a blank slate, a blank piece of paper which experience would then write upon. It is useful to note that a school of psychology that had great acceptance in the 1960's and beyond in America, Behaviorism, maintained something very close to this point of view. Hume will explore this perspective in detail in the readings for this week and the next.

The reading assignment for the week is broken into three sections in Hume's book, sections II, III and IV with section IV having two parts. The following questions are assigned in terms of the sections mentioned above as the sections should be common to all copies of the text and page numbers are not.

Section II, Of the Origin of Ideas

1) For Hume the most lively thought is…

Still less lively than the dullest sensation.
Not connected with this discussion.
Thought of religion and God.
None of the other three.

2) Hume divides perception into two categories…

Impression and fainter impressions.
Ideas and mathematics.
Ideas and impressions.
All of the other three.

3) Ideas live in the memory while impressions…

Are contained in ideas.
Are contained in relations among ideas.
Live in the past.
Live in the now.

4) For Hume all of our ideas…

Are innate a birth.
Were first in the senses, our impressions.
Come from our parents.
Come from God.

5) According to Hume our ideas of God come from…

The bible.
Augmenting the operations of the human mind and positing these as the qualities of God.
Ideas placed by God in our heads.
Relations among ideas.

6) For Hume a man blind from birth cannot…

Have any notion of colors.
Have a full conception of God.
Reason concerning relations among ideas.
All of the other three.

7) To Hume the ability to imagine a missing shade of blue is…

Something very few people can do.
A matter of mathematical probability given a larger enough population.
Not significant enough to alter his general theory.
Not related to his discussion.

8) According to Hume his system of thought can assist in the…

Greater understanding of religion.
Construction of a wealthier society.
Banishing of terms that are poorly conceived as they have no corresponding impression.
Both A and B.

Commentary on questions one through eight. In this section Hume is setting the table on the source and nature of our thoughts or ideas. For Hume all of our ideas, every single one of them can be traced to impressions. What is in the mind was first in the senses. This is approach to thinking knowledge of the world comes from our senses is common in a school of thought known as empiricism and indeed Hume is commonly classified among the British Empiricists. Empiricism can be contrasted with Rationalism, the view that we can construct philosophy from concepts and need not rely on the senses too much. Descartes, who will read a little about later in the term, is a good example of this Rationalist school of thought as is Plato. In the last two readings will we study a blend of these two schools of thought championed by the British philosopher Susan Haack.

The last paragraph of Hume section II deals with words that don't seem to have any determinate meaning or correspondence to experience. After many centuries of Medieval philosophy conceptual abuses had become common. A quick example would be something like the term medieval term 'impetus' or spirit in regard to its use in the description of gun powder. For a time it was thought, by many, that the reason a cannon ball flew when fired was that the explosion imparted an impetus into the ball and this spirit caused the movement.

William of Ockham pointed out that this postulated entities beyond necessity in that it is quite possible to simply say the explosion caused the cannon ball to move, the impetus was an extra entity in the description that did no work. Hume might do something similar with this term (though he seems to be thinking more about theological and metaphysical jargon) in that we have an impression of the explosion and an impression of the cannon ball moving but no impression of the impetus. The impetus, in the case of the cannonball is thus just metaphysical nonsense that needs to be abandoned in our thinking.

Section 3, Of the Association of Ideas

9) For Hume the three principles of association of thoughts are…

Resemblance, Color and Sound.
Resemblance, Contiguity and Cause and Effect.
Impossible to determine.
An issue best left to psychology.

Commentary on question nine. Hume is here discussing what is more a psychological issue these days but one that was also dealt with by philosophers at this time. The three operations mentioned for Hume describe how our mind moves in thinking about matters. Psychology is a good example of a philosophical study that attempted to break away and become its' own science, how successful or recommendable such a break with philosophy was warranted remains to be seen.

Section 4, Part I, Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding.

10) For Hume there are two divisions in reason and enquiry and these are…

Matters of fact and relations among ideas.
Matters of fact and matters of experience.
Matters of experience and religious study.
Matters of experience and revelation.

11) According to Hume geometry, mathematics, formal logic are all…

Certain in their answers if correctly applied.
Very hard to study.
Matters of experience.
Matters of Fact.

12) For Hume matters of fact are…

Something for science to determine.
Not something for science to determine.

Derived from relations among ideas.
Possible but not certain.

13) For Hume all reasoning concerning matters of fact is founded upon…

Intuition.
Cause and effect.
Innate ideas.
All of the other three.

14) Reason, without experience, for Hume can never discover…

Causes and effects.
God.
Religious truths.
Relations among ideas.

Commentary on questions ten through fourteen. Here Hume is proposing a common division in philosophical thought, a division between experience or the material physical world and that of the world of concepts and their relations. The argument that 'All heroes are mortal, Achilles is a hero and thus he is mortal' is an example of concepts and relations. If the first two statements are true 'All heroes are mortal and Achilles is a hero' the last statement must be true. Mathematical arguments are similar, 12 divided by 2 is 6, it is a matter of definition and thus must be true. The rest of the section is a development of the proof that all of our beliefs about matters of fact come from cause and effect, a point Hume will use to great effect in next section.

Section 4, Part II, Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding

15) For Hume all of our reasonings about matter of fact are founded on…

Experience.
Mathematical proofs of probability.
Innate ideas.
Innate ideas and mathematical proofs of probability.

16) For Hume our experience of cause and effect is not…

Something that can be intelligently discussed.
Something to be discussed privately, only publicly.
Founded on any reasoning process or operation of the understanding.
All of the other three.

17) For Hume nature has kept us a great distance from her...

Plans and wishes.
Innate ideas.
Truly religious ideals.
Secrets.

18) For Hume to think one piece of bread will be like another piece of bread is…

A natural thought process but not a process of reasoning or proof.
Something that cannot be doubted.
A question best left to science.
A question best left to psychology.

19) For Hume for causes which appear similar we expect…

Similar effects.
Similar causes.
Dissimilar effects.
Dissimilar causes.

20) For Hume the past provides no evidence for…

Astrology.
The course of future events.
Relations among ideas.
The course of future events and relations among ideas.

Commentary on questions fifteen to twenty. Hume is here laying out a challenge to other philosophers, find some alternate demonstration of how we justify our beliefs about matters of fact or agree with me, David Hume, on this matter. For Hume our beliefs about matters of fact come from experience but experience, having seen something that appears similar to

something we have seen in the past, is not a guide to the future. If all knowledge comes from experience then we can have no knowledge of future for by definition we have no experience of the future.

Hume agrees that we tend to think this way and that beasts and infants do it automatically but this is not a process of reasoning or philosophically justified belief, it is custom, a matter Hume will discuss in the readings for next week. In sum Hume thinks we have two primary methods of coming to understand things, relations among ideas (things true by definition) and impressions (sensations and perceptions) which furnish us with ideas. Neither of these methods of understanding is sufficient to provide us with reasons for thinking our impressions and ideas about one thing will provide any guidance in regards to something that appears similar. In the last two readings of the term we will discuss a possible solution to Hume's puzzle.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Answer one of the following three questions.

1) Explain in detail the problem that the 'missing shade of blue' presents for Hume's theory.

2) Explain in detail what Hume intends by the terms 'matters of fact' and 'relations among ideas".

3) Explain in detail why Hume thinks the past cannot be informative in regards to the future.

1 A
2 C
3 D
4 B
5 B
6 A
7 C
8 C
9 B
10 A
11 A
12 D

13 B
14 A
15 A
16 C
17 D
18 A
19 A
20 D