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DAVID HUME ON TWO DIFFERENT SPECIES OF PHILOSOPHY: INTERSECTING EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Davidas Hume'as apie dvi skirtingas filosofijos rūšis: epistemologijos ir psichologijos metodų sankirtoje

SUMMARY

The article ventures a detailed and critical exposition of the first three sections of David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which represents, in a revised fashion, most of Book I of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. Through a careful examination of such core concepts of Hume's epistemology as 'perception,' 'impression,' and 'idea,' the article arrives at the conclusion that the Humean theory of human understanding is best construed as a kind of methodological dualism: on the one hand, Hume proceeds as a philosopher making statements about the nature of human understanding with the force of a priori evidence, on the other, he acts as a natural scientist gathering empirical data, examining it, and drawing an inductive generalization therefrom. Hume is thus both a theoretical epistemologist and an empirical psychologist with a semi-disguised propensity to reduce the duties of the former to those of the latter.

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje išsamiai ir kritiškai išskleidžiami pirmieji trys Davido Hume'o *Žmogaus proto tyrinėjimo*, pataisyta forma sudarančio beveik visą pirmąją *Traktato apie žmogaus prigimtį* knygą, skyriai. Įdėmiai susipažinus su pagrindinėmis Hume'o epistemologijos sąvokomis *suvokimas, įspūdis ir idėja*, daroma išvada, kad hūmiškoji žmogaus proto teorija tiksliausiai bus suprasta kaip tam tikras metodologinis dualizmas: viena vertus, Hume'as elgiasi kaip filosofas, teiginius apie žmogaus proto prigimtį grįsdamas *a priori* argumentais; kita vertus – kaip gamtotyrininkas, rinkdamas, tirdamas ir apibendrinamas empirinius duomenis indukciniu būdu. Vadinasi, Hume'as – ir epistemologas teoretikas, ir psichologas empirikas, pusiau slapčiom linkęs pirmojo užduotis perduoti antrajam.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: David Hume, epistemologija, suvokimas, įspūdis, idėja.

KEY WORDS: David Hume, epistemology, perception, impression, idea.

The task of the present article is to venture a detailed and critical exposition of the second and third sections of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which represents, in a revised fashion, most of Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

Before we embark on Section II, let us pay particular attention to the manner in which Hume poses his problem. His inquiry amounts to no less than an investigation of the “nature of the human understanding.” In its wording, at least, it has all the attributes of a philosophical question. Yet, the manner in which Hume wishes to pursue the question is by an “analysis of its powers and capacity” or “delineation of the distinct parts and powers of the mind.” Jessop is right in observing that Hume “confessedly set out to make an empirical study of mind; and an empirical study of mind is psychology” (Jessop 1966: 41). In fact, Jessop even views it as a common misunderstanding on the part of many philosophers to read “much of [Hume’s] psychology [...] as if it were epistemology” (ibid: 42). This, however, must be debated.

We may ask what sort of science studies the “nature of the human understanding?” We are immediately presented with the ambivalence of the sense of “nature.” Are we concerned with the question of what it means for man¹ to understand or what is the faculty with which man performs the act of understanding? For Hume, I suppose, it is all the same. It is only under the supposition that there actually exists a distinction between epistemology and psychology that one is able to insert it in the interpretation of Hume’s inquiry. Yet,

Hume’s point is precisely that the subject-matter of epistemology is reducible to the subject-matter of psychology, i.e., to study the nature of the human understanding is to study the powers, capacities, and distinct parts of the mind. For Hume, thus, epistemology is psychology, and psychology is epistemology.

Thus Hume seems to notice no difference between the two disciplines, the autonomy of their questions and methods, may perhaps be accounted by the fact that in his times all pursuit of systematic knowledge was thought of as philosophy, which was subdivided in its natural and moral departments (Ayer 1992: 206). As a result, any intellectual quest, inasmuch as it possessed a definite object and a method of its examination, by definition was a philosophical quest. It is also apparent that Hume was particularly fond of Newton’s experimental (inductive) method, he saw the success of its application in the natural sciences and wished for its application to the nature of man (Copleston 1964: 66). Thus the dualism of the Humian enterprise: one the one hand, he is a philosopher making statements with the force of *a priori*² evidence about the nature of the human understanding and, on the other, he is an earnest scientist gathering empirical data, submitting it to examination and making a generalization therefrom.

In the second section of the *Enquiry* Hume discusses the origin of ideas. The mind’s natural activity is to perceive. Moreover, there are two distinct species of perceptions of the mind, those consisting in ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain,’ and those consisting in ‘memory’ and ‘imagination’

(Hume 1958: 316). The former Hume calls “impressions,” the latter – “thoughts and ideas” (ibid: 216–70). Impressions are subdivided into outward impressions or sensations and inward impressions or passions, feelings, and sentiments.

Ideas are generated by the mind’s reflection on actual impressions. It is through them and them alone that we come to possess ideas. To wit, according to Hume, the “actual feeling and sensation” are the “only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind” (ibid: 318).³ He speaks of the relationship between an impression and its corresponding idea as that between a thing and its copy. It is no surprise, then, that ideas and impressions are distinguished “by their different degrees of force and vivacity” (ibid: 216–7). Impressions are lively and vivid, ideas faint and obscure. Thus, we may rehearse Hume’s famous dictum: “The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation” (ibid: 316). Or to quote another passage, “All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure [...] On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them” (ibid: 319). The last clause is of importance as it provides us with a second mark distinguishing impressions and ideas. That is, the strength with which impressions impose themselves on us permits little occasion for misguided judgments, whereas ideas, due to their feeble presentation, are much vulnerable to erroneous interpretations.

It is not clear from the text whether the qualities of ‘force’ and ‘vivacity’ are

treated by Hume as mere criteria helping us to discriminate between impressions and ideas, or as inherent traits of impressions, which are in each event absent from ideas, so that the reason why something is an impression and not an idea is that it is vivid and not obscure. Both Bennett⁴ and Alfred Jules Ayer make valid correction to Hume’s formulation of the difference among ideas and impressions. Ayer notes that

The salient feature of impressions is not their force or vividness but their immediacy; this may in general have the effect of making them more lively than the images of memory or the creatures of fancy [...] but the empirical evidence does not favor the assumption that this is always so. (Ayer 1992: 28–9).

A metaphor can sometimes be employed, but it is nothing short of its abuse when a metaphor is turned into a philosophical term which is to play a crucial role in one’s epistemological doctrine. I have in mind here Hume’s generous use of the word ‘copy’ to explain the nature of ideas. For besides its poetic value, it is rather a destitute notion. Does Hume really believe that the mind bends itself to impressions and stamps copies thereof for its own ends and after its own fashion? The word ‘copy,’ it seems, provides us with a “strong and vivid” specimen of an idea that is “faint and obscure.”

Another source of concern is Hume’s apparent reduction of the whole of mental activity to memory and imagination. As a consequence, all meaning and thought must be construed in terms of images, and this is dubious, if not outright wrong. Ayer’s remark is timely and to the point. Hume’s “assumption that

the use of a concept consists in the framing of an image is false. [...] The use of a general term need not be accompanied either by an image or by the thought of any particular individual" (ibid: 28–9).

Next, Hume poses the question, whether the fact that "what never was seen, or heard of, may yet be conceived" by the mind, given that nothing is "beyond the power of thought, except what implies an absolute contradiction" (Hume 1958: 317), – whether this fact does not run counter to his previous claim that all ideas are derived from impressions? A closer inspection, according to Hume, demonstrates to us that it does not. For "all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the sense and experience" (ibid: 317). Impression, therefore, ever remains the single source for the origin of our ideas, which, once they have been copied from correspondent sensations, may then be mixed, combined, and manipulated at will by the mind.

In order to prove that each and every idea must be preceded and caused by some impression, Hume advances two arguments. First he thinks that "when we analyze out thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment" (ibid: 318). Thus, in the famous illustration of a golden mountain we simply unite two distinct ideas each of which separately leads us to simple impressions of gold and a mountain. Secondly, continues the philosopher, "if it happen, from a defect

of the organ, that a man is not susceptible of any species of sensation, we always find that he is as little susceptible of the correspondent ideas" (ibid). A blind man has no idea of color, a deaf man of sound, and so on. These and other handicapped men cannot dispose of simple ideas because on account of their natural infirmities they are unable to undergo certain sensations which are the necessary requisites for the origin of those ideas.

In such simple examples like that of a golden mountain, Hume's first proof appears to make sense. However, as soon as we extend the range of possible ideas and ask whether all of them, in whole or in component, can be traced to some individual sensation, we are, or better, Hume, is faced with many a difficult case. If I am allowed to have the idea of something as beautiful or good, can I really hope to find some impression that is to exhaust those ideas? In addition, there exist a multitude of ideas termed syncategorematic meanings which cannot be *expanded*, let alone *reduced*, to any simple impression. The search for corresponding impressions or sensations of such ideas as 'but' or 'therefore' is likely to cause anguish and an immense waste of time. Frederick Copleston is correct in pointing out that, "Hume assumes that 'experience' can be broken into atomic constituents, namely, impressions or sense-data" (Copleston 1964: 72).

This leads us to consider his second proof from the defect of an organ. What it definitely proves is that the realization of certain ideas demands the realization of certain sensations, but it does not indicate the precise manner in which that

dependence occurs. And yet that is what Hume wishes to reap from his argument, because his thesis asserts not only that all ideas are dependent on impression, but also that ideas are mere copies of impressions and as such they cannot have any sense which was not already contained in sensation. As the argument stands now, it is still compatible that ideas, though they are informed by impressions, may nevertheless transcend them in conditioning, reshaping, and even augmenting their contents. The mind, no matter how much it profits from various impressions, may in addition have ways and designs, peculiar but to itself, of perceiving the world.⁵

If, therefore, all ideas draw their sense from corresponding sensations, – and this is Hume’s conviction, – then any idea which corresponds to no sensation must lack sense. The following is the definition of what D. G. C. MacNabb aptly dubs as “Hume’s razor”⁶: “When we entertain [...] any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea, we need but inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion” (Hume 1958: 219–20).

It is quite probable, as Robert Wolff suggests, that Hume’s initial plan was to explain the nature of the human mind exclusively in terms of ideas, their combinations, and their relation to impressions. Yet, he came soon to realize that “knowledge and belief result from what the mind *does* with its contents rather than simply from the nature of those contents” (Wolff 1966: 103). This gives us some reason why, after having dealt

with the “distinct parts of the mind,” i.e., the ideas, in Section III of the *Enquiry*, Hume proceeds to examine the “powers of the mind,” – although such a transition is more noticeable in the *Treatise* than in the *Enquiry*.

Hume’s intention, which he extends to his reader as well, is to seek after the “principle which binds the different thoughts to each other, never stopping till we render the principle as general as possible” (Hume 1958: 322). It is implied that our efforts should be spent on finding a *single*, most universal, principle, even though Hume does not take the pains to show why there should be just one principle and not several under which the mind operates, to begin with. Let us recall that his investigations of the human understanding are based on a method that is experimental and inductive, a method, moreover, which he borrowed from Sir Isaac Newton and his manifold fortunes in explaining so numerous an event in nature by one and the same law of gravitation. It was a great source of inspiration for Hume who, in the words of Jessop, was ravished by the expectation that, parallel to the principle of attraction, the “processes of knowing [...] can [too] be explained by the principle of association” (Jessop 1966: 47). As a result, we must see whether some such general law may not be detected in the operations of the mind, as well.

As we analyze the multiple ways in which the faculty of reasoning manages its ideas we are to encounter, Hume believes, the fact that, “there is a principle of connection 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” (Hume 1958: 320). Indeed, on the next page Hume speaks of “three principles of connection,” yet his overall inclination is to speak of one principle which possesses three distinctive modes of functioning. These are, according to Hume, resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect. The thinker explicates every one of them in the respective order: “A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original [resemblance]: the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an inquiry or discourse concerning the others [contiguity]: and if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it [cause and effect]” (ibid: 321). All other mental acts, such as contract or contrariety, are, in Hume’s opinion, reducible to any one of the three connections or a combination of them.

It is at this point that we are able to best appreciate Jessop’s aforementioned contention that Hume’s analysis is strictly psychological, not epistemological, and as such it must be treated. Hume’s grave mistake does not lie in his predilections of deduction and experimentation. It might as well be that his empirical discoveries are of great significance as far as the science of psychology is concerned. His mistake, rather, is attached to the effort of thinking that the questions of epistemology may be un-

dertaken and answered by psychology thus depriving the former of any ground to exist as an autonomous and independent philosophical discipline.

The error, furthermore, needs to be traced all the way back to the beginning of the *Treatise* where in sweeping passages – and the more sweeping the more parlous they are – Hume voices a boundless enthusiasm in the upcoming results of his analyses. The following is the tenor of his philosophical endeavor: “In pretending, therefore, to explain the principle of human nature, we in effect propose a complete system of the sciences, build on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security” (ibid: xx); or, once more, the “science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences” (ibid). Thus, it is the science of man and the principles of human nature that are to preoccupy Hume’s theoretical scrutiny which for him is embodied in the application of the experimental method. He does not doubt for a moment whether that method is in effect adequate and appropriate to the study of man as man (since he refers to ‘human nature’ in the most general sense). Our objection, hence is this: from the very start Hume confounds the order of philosophical or any other scientific enterprise, namely, that it is the nature of things which determines the character and means of their study, and not *vice versa*.

CONCLUSION

We have thus provided a detailed and critical exposition of Hume’s epistemology as it is developed in the first three

sections of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. We have witness the thinker’s tendency to reduce the subject-

matter of epistemology to that of psychology, i.e., to study the nature of human understanding by studying the powers, capacities, and distinct parts of the mind. At times, epistemology for Hume is psychology, and psychology is epistemology, both forming a noetic synthesis of sorts. At other times, Hume seems to succumb to a methodological dualism: one the one hand, he proceeds as a philosopher mak-

ing statements about the nature of human understanding with the force of *a priori* evidence, on the other, he acts as a natural scientist gathering empirical data, examining, and drawing an inductive generalization therefrom. Hume is thus both a theoretical epistemologist and an empirical psychologist with a semi-disguised propensity to reduce the duties of the former to those of the latter.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Throughout the article, we shall adhere to Hume's usage of the words 'man' and 'men,' including the masculine personal pronouns referring to them, to signify 'human' and 'humans,' respectively.
- ² See the arguments put forth by Jonathan Bennett in his *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Bennett 1971: 229).
- ³ In this respect, Hume is faithful to his precursors Locke and Berkeley who held that all knowledge of the world is derived from sense experience (see Ayer 1992: 198).
- ⁴ On p. 224 of his *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes*, the author states that "Hume's official position is that (a) the impression/idea is just the lively/faint line within perceptions; but he tends to slip into the assumption, neither of which square with that (b) impressions occur only in

experience of the objective realm, and that (c) ideas occur only in thinking and reasoning."

- ⁵ This is, of course, the moment when Immanuel Kant wakes up from his dogmatic slumber to devise an "accurate and abstruse" case for the *a priori* contributions of the mind to the faculty of sensibility by way of the spatio-temporal forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding (see Kant 1961).
- ⁶ In his article "David Hume," written for *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, MacNabb likens "Hume's razor" with the verification principle of the logical positivists. He says that "both attempt to formulate precisely the general principle that to understand a word or expression one must know how one would use it in relation to concrete cases one has met or might meet in experience" (MacNabb 1967: 77).