

Cognition
and
Commitment
in
Hume's
Philosophy

Don Garrett

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Don Garrett

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*For Frances,
for Bula, Matthew, and Christopher Garrett,
and in memory of Professor Barbara Lindsay,
sources of wisdom all*

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Abbreviations

- ATHN David Hume (attributed), *An Abstract of a Book lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature*, in THN.
- DCB Francis Burman, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, translated by John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
- DM George Berkeley, *De Motu*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957).
- E Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Spinoza's Collected Works*, vol. 1, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- ECHU John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- EHU David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- EPM David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
- ISM G. W. F. Leibniz, "On What Is Independent of Sense and Matter," in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2 vols., translated by L. E. Loemker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).
- LDH David Hume, *Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., edited by J. Y. T. Grieg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).
- MFP René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- NE G. W. F. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated by

- Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- PC George Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957).
- PHK George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957).
- PP René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- TDHP George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957).
- THN David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
- TIE Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, in *Spinoza's Collected Works*, vol. 1, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy

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Introduction

In the course of his remarkable life as an author, diplomat, and government official, David Hume (1711–1776) made noteworthy contributions to many fields of inquiry, including history, economics, political science, anthropology, and psychology. But while his contributions to these fields were noteworthy, his contributions to philosophy were momentous. Indeed, most contemporary philosophers would agree that he was the greatest philosopher yet produced by the English-speaking world. Beneath this agreement about Hume’s greatness, however, lies considerable disagreement and confusion concerning the meaning of his most famous philosophical doctrines, the precise nature of his philosophical greatness, and the bearing of his contributions on contemporary philosophy.

As my title indicates, it is Hume’s philosophy—rather than his life, his times, or his contributions to other fields—that constitutes the primary focus of this book.¹ Specifically, this book is devoted to resolving a series of interpretive puzzles that have long stood in the way of a complete understanding and accurate assessment of Hume’s philosophy. Through the resolution of these puzzles, I try to explain the meaning of some of his central philosophical doctrines, to defend an account of his greatness as a philosopher, and to facilitate a better understanding of the contemporary significance of his philosophy. Before endeavoring to explain Hume’s philosophy, however, I must first explain what I mean by ‘philosophy’, what Hume himself meant by ‘philosophy’, and what the enterprise that he called by that name meant to him. I will also explain my conception of the relation of philosophy to its own history—what might be called my philosophy of the history of philosophy—and the way in which the organization and contents of this book reflect that conception. In the course of doing so, I will also be explaining why I take cognition and commitment as my central themes.

Philosophy in the Writings of David Hume

‘Philosophy,’ as I am using the term, simply designates the attempt to answer questions that are especially fundamental. A question is fundamental if an array of other

important questions depends on the answer to it in some important way. Because there are several different ways in which one question can depend importantly on the answer to another, there are several different ways in which a question can be philosophical. Thus, a question may be philosophical because the discovery or justification of *answers* to an array of other important questions depends on the answer to it. The question, "How should moral character be evaluated?" is philosophical in this way, since the answers we give to many other important ethical questions will (at least partly) depend, for their discovery or justification or both, on our answer to it. Alternatively, a question may be philosophical because grasping the proper *interpretation* or appreciating the full *significance* of the answers to an array of other important questions depends on it. Thus, the question, "What is the causal relation?" is philosophical as well, since our understanding of how to construe or regard many important scientific truths depends on our answer to it. A question may even be philosophical because the *evaluation* of other important questions depends on the answer to it. The question, "Do we have a coherent notion of identity through time?" is philosophical in this way, since whether we take a large class of other important questions about the continuing identity of persons and things to be well formulated or not depends on our answer to it. A question may be especially fundamental in more than one of these ways or, perhaps, in other ways as well, but what distinguishes philosophical questions from others is the characteristic of being especially fundamental in at least some way. So understood, philosophy includes the most fundamental questions of the various special disciplines. It nevertheless differs from those special disciplines in at least one respect. For while the special disciplines divide the field of knowledge vertically, distinguishing themselves from one another by differences in their objects of study, philosophy divides the field of knowledge horizontally, concerning itself with those questions, whatever their objects may happen to be, that are especially fundamental.²

Hume uses the term 'philosophy' frequently, without ever offering a definition of it. It is reasonably clear from his usage, however, that his conception of philosophy is in one way more inclusive, and in another way more exclusive, than the one that I have just outlined. Hume does not regard philosophy as being limited only to the most fundamental questions of the special disciplines; instead, he thinks of most of those disciplines as belonging to philosophy in their entirety. He distinguishes philosophy into two main branches. The first of these is *natural philosophy*, which is concerned with the world of extended objects and includes all of what we would now call the natural sciences. The second is *moral philosophy*, which is concerned with the human mind and with human life generally, and it includes what we would now call psychology and the human or social sciences. In this respect, then, Hume's sense of the term 'philosophy' is more inclusive than mine, and that is why he can write of philosophy as "nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (EHU §130).

However, at various points in his writings, he distinguishes history, literature, revealed theology, and mathematics *from* philosophy—evidently, as enterprises so different in their conduct from both natural and moral philosophy as to deserve separate classification. Thus, even the most fundamental questions of these fields will apparently not be "philosophical" in his sense, unless they also belong either to

natural or moral philosophy, or both. In this respect, then, his sense of the term is less inclusive than mine. It is worth noting that, in dividing philosophy into only two branches, Hume is rejecting a traditional tripartite division of philosophy into natural, moral, and metaphysical philosophy. Unlike most of his predecessors—but, he thinks, like many of his contemporaries—he uses the term ‘metaphysics’ not as a term for a distinct subject matter within philosophy (concerned with the ultimate nature of being) but rather as a synonym for “any difficult or abstruse reasoning,” regardless of subject matter.

Because Hume used the term ‘philosophy’ in one sense and I use it in another, the reference to “Hume’s philosophy” in the title of this book is ambiguous. This ambiguity is intentional: the phrase may be taken in both senses at once. This is possible because, of all the many questions posed by “philosophy” in his sense, the ones that interest him most are almost always “philosophical” in my sense as well. To be sure, Hume often addresses the processes of human cognition, emotion, and moral response in considerable detail. But he does so primarily because he aims to show how an understanding of these processes bears crucially on the answers to fundamental questions. In doing so, he seeks to show, in effect, that many of these topics of relative psychological detail are themselves far more fundamental than we might have supposed. At the same time, he shows how a very wide variety of the fundamental questions that concern him most can profitably be treated within what he calls “moral philosophy.”

Although Hume’s conception of philosophy itself remained largely constant throughout his career, his conception of his intended contribution to it underwent subtle but significant changes. His first work—and in many ways, his masterpiece—was, of course, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, published in two volumes in 1738 and 1739 while its author was still in his twenties. It is an ambitious work that, according to its subtitle, constitutes “an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects.” Hume takes as his subject the whole “science of man,” and of this science he writes:

Here then is the only expedient, from which we can hope for success in our philosophical researches, to leave the tedious lingering method, which we have hitherto followed, and instead of taking now and then a castle or village on the frontier, to march up directly to the capital or center of these sciences, to human nature itself; which being once masters of, we may every where else hope for an easy victory. From this station we may extend our conquests over all those sciences, which more intimately concern human life, and may afterwards proceed at leisure to discover more fully those, which are the objects of pure curiosity. There is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz’d in the science of man; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science. In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security. (THN xvi)

Its three books are devoted, respectively, to the “understanding,” the “passions,” and “morals,” and in its pages Hume takes up a wide range of topics. The first book alone includes lengthy discussions of mental representation, space and time, causation, causal reasoning and probability, the belief in external bodies, the immaterial-

ity of the soul, personal identity, the characteristics of ancient and modern philosophy, and several species of skepticism. The second book takes up the nature and operations of pride and humility, of love and hatred, and of various related passions, in addition to the nature of the will. The third book considers the nature of vice, virtue, and the moral sense; justice, fidelity to promises, allegiance to governments, chastity, and modesty; and various natural virtues and abilities.

Hume's *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, written as a recasting of Book I of the *Treatise* and first published in 1748, has a much more exclusive, and pragmatic, principle of organization. In this first *Enquiry*, Hume presents only as much of his theory of mind and his arguments concerning causality and causal reasoning as are necessary to draw conclusions bearing on the practical struggle against "superstition"—that is, the doctrines and practices of unphilosophical and unreflective organized religion. At the very time that his content becomes more directly subversive, however, his tone becomes strikingly more conciliatory and urbane. The first *Enquiry* also provides a treatment of skepticism that differs noticeably from that of the *Treatise*. *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, written as a recasting of Book III of the *Treatise*, resembles the first *Enquiry* in having a narrower and more immediately practical principle of organization. This second *Enquiry* focuses on the questions of what we regard as elements of personal merit and why we find them meritorious. One of its primary aims is to draw practical moral conclusions that stand in opposition to the morality of superstitious "divines," even as it teaches its readers how to be more persuasive secular moralists themselves. An understanding of all three works is essential to an understanding of Hume's philosophy, for while the *Treatise* addresses more topics, and often provides more of his views on a given topic, the *Enquiries* provide his last, rather than his first, word on the topics they address. In addition to the philosophical topics Hume addresses in these three works, he takes up many other philosophical questions ("philosophical" in both his sense and mine) in his various essays and dissertations, in his *History of England*, and of course in his posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

From his earliest writings to his last, Hume showed a lively satirical sense concerning the pretensions and excesses of self-styled "philosophers." He also possessed a profound awareness of the confusion and difficulty in which the pursuit of philosophy, in his sense, would inevitably involve its human practitioners. He nevertheless endorsed the pursuit of philosophy, both for himself and for others who were capable of it. He did so partly because he found it to be an enjoyable and mostly innocent endeavor, but he had a more important reason as well. For he was concerned above all with virtue—with understanding it and with cultivating it. It is, he thought, chiefly through moral philosophy that we can come to understand the nature of virtue and thus come to understand, too, the ways in which virtue can be best cultivated. Moreover, of all the virtues, perhaps none concerned him more than the specifically cognitive virtue of wisdom, and he followed the ancient moralists, whom he greatly admired, in seeing philosophy as the way to wisdom.

This combination of satirical deflation and practical endorsement are evident in a well-known passage from *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

"Tis certain, that superstition is much more bold in its systems and hypotheses than philosophy; and while the latter contents itself with assigning new causes and principles to

the phænomena, which appear in the visible world, the former opens a world of its own, and presents us with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new. Since therefore 'tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action, we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable. And in this respect I make bold to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination. For as superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions. Philosophy on the contrary, if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are merely the objects of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities. The CYNICS are an extraordinary instance of philosophers, who from reasonings purely philosophical ran into as great extravagancies of conduct as any *Monk* or *Dervise* that ever was in the world. Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous. (THN 271–272)

Hume saw his age as a battleground between what he called “philosophy,” on the one hand, and “superstition,” on the other. In that battle, Hume unequivocally chose the side of philosophy.

Philosophy and Its History

The history of philosophy in my sense—that is, the history of investigations into especially fundamental questions—is of interest partly for purely historical reasons, for its ability to illuminate the past. But the history of philosophy also matters to philosophy itself, in at least three ways. First, in coming to understand the history of philosophy, we come to understand better the current state of the enterprise: why it pursues the particular questions it does, in the manner that it does, using the methods that it does, and offering the answers that it does. Such understanding is often of considerable value for the practice and evaluation of contemporary philosophy. In this first respect, however, the relation between philosophy and its history does not differ essentially from that between other fields and their histories. Second, the history of philosophy often provides lessons, derived from past successes or failures, that are applicable to present practice. In this respect, too, however, the relation between philosophy and its history closely resembles that between other fields and their histories. Third, the writings of historical figures in philosophy—particularly the greatest such figures—are themselves consistently important objects of study as ongoing contributions to contemporary philosophical inquiry. And in this respect, the history of philosophy is an integral part of philosophy in a way that is unmatched by the case of any other field.

There are several reasons why the writings of some philosophers of the past retain this kind of special ongoing relevance to contemporary philosophy. In part, it is because the set of living questions itself—that is, the set of open questions under discussion—often changes more slowly in philosophy than in other fields. In part, it is because philosophy can often employ only relatively few resources without begging its own questions, and hence often makes progress relatively slowly in the

answers that it gives. In part, it is because empirical data often support or refute philosophical claims relatively indirectly, if at all, so that philosophy by necessity relies more on its own previous conversation for inspiration than do other fields. In part, it is because the frequent density, ambiguity, openness, and richness of philosophical works make the assimilation and understanding of those works both a time-consuming and a constantly self-renewing process. In part, it is because philosophical inquiry benefits from exploring and utilizing as resources the widest possible variety of perspectives or frameworks of understanding—a variety of frameworks that philosophers of the past can often provide. For these reasons—and no doubt others as well—the history of philosophy is of special importance to philosophy.

Yet despite this importance, our temporal and cultural distance from philosophers of the past often poses serious problems of interpretation. Accordingly, those who pursue the history of philosophy primarily for its value to philosophy itself often face a difficult choice: to what extent should one's efforts be directed toward achieving historically accurate interpretations, and to what extent should one's efforts be directed toward achieving philosophically cogent evaluations? On the one hand, insufficient attention to historically accurate interpretation often leads to mere "point scoring," in which a philosopher's position is first misrepresented and then easily refuted from a contemporary standpoint. Equally often, it leads to the converse: anachronistic, self-congratulatory predecessor-hunting, in which great philosophers of the past are charitably interpreted—precisely because of their acknowledged greatness—to be expressing (in a somewhat antiquated style, of course) whatever opinions and arguments happen to be most valued by the contemporary commentator doing the interpreting. On the other hand, insufficient attention to philosophically cogent evaluation often leads to a kind of scholastic self-absorption, in which commentators expend the greatest interpretive efforts on issues that are of little philosophical importance while leaving the questions of the ultimate adequacy and significance of the philosopher's contributions no nearer to answers than they were before.

Those who place a greater emphasis in their practice on historical interpretation and those who place a greater emphasis in their practice on philosophical evaluation need not be antagonists, however. On the contrary, where abilities and interests differ among those pursuing a common endeavor, a division of labor is generally the best tactic. Those who emphasize historical interpretation may correct the misunderstandings and refine the targets of their more evaluatively inclined colleagues. Those who emphasize philosophical evaluation may direct the attention of their more interpretively inclined co-inquirers to the most important questions for historical and textual investigation and then assess more philosophically the results of those investigations. Ultimately—and especially in the case of the best philosophers of the past—neither historically accurate interpretation nor philosophically cogent evaluation is likely to be achieved in the complete absence of the other. In order to assess fully the accuracy of an interpretation of a philosopher, one must determine whether a philosopher of such ability could, in the given context, actually have found the position ascribed to him or her reasonable and convincing, and this already involves submitting the position ascribed to serious philosophical evaluation. Conversely, in order to assess fully an evaluation of a great philosopher, one

must determine whether the evaluation deals adequately with the support offered by, and difficulties arising from, the philosopher's own discussion of his or her position, and this already involves accuracy in the interpretation of the philosopher's writings. Furthermore, at least in the case of the best philosophers, an interpretation that is based on an accurate understanding of the philosopher's own intentions is almost certain to be of greater purely *philosophical* interest and significance than an interpretation that is based on historical misunderstandings.

Any work whose topic falls within the history of philosophy, if it is intended to be a contribution to philosophy itself, should ultimately support assessments of the bearing of the historical texts it considers on living contemporary philosophical issues. For such assessments to be well grounded, however, they must be based on accurate interpretation of those texts. In the attempt to provide accurate interpretation, three strategic goals are of particular importance: first, to isolate and grasp the philosopher's most fundamental aims, methods, and principles; second, to understand the content and structure of the reasons or arguments by which the philosopher justifies his or her conclusions; and third, to explicate the philosopher's conclusions and their interrelations.

In the attempt to achieve these three strategic goals, in turn, three tactics are often useful. First, because a philosopher's aims, principles, and methods are often deeply influenced by his or her conception of what the process of understanding that he or she aims to utilize and produce actually is, it is often helpful to begin by focusing on the philosopher's views about understanding and cognition—what we might nowadays call the philosopher's views in *cognitive science* or *cognitive psychology*.³ Second, it is often helpful, in understanding the content and structure of a philosopher's arguments, to set out the most central of them as explicitly and formally as possible, primarily in the philosopher's own words; for in making and referring to such a formulation of the arguments, we are forced to remain more attentive to the philosopher's own intentions. And third, in explicating a philosopher's conclusions, it is often helpful to focus on interpretive puzzles—apparent contradictions, paradoxes, or other surprising features of the texts—that give rise to disagreement or consternation among readers. For it is in resolving these puzzles, where possible, that we see most deeply and specifically into the use a philosopher intends for his or her own claims, and hence we can see into their real meaning and interrelations.

In particular, the philosophy of David Hume—whose writings are so often explicitly addressed to the nature of the “understanding”; whose arguments are so carefully and elaborately thought out; and whose conclusions, though presented in masterful prose, have nevertheless given rise to so many interpretive puzzles—benefits from this kind of tactical treatment. The organization of this book reflects this belief. The book begins with a chapter setting out, in the context of the philosophy and cognitive science of his era, Hume's own account of the process of understanding, emphasizing his account of the main human representational faculty, which he calls the “imagination.” This chapter is followed by two chapters devoted to the primary methodological principles—which I call the “Copy Principle” and the “Separability Principle”—that Hume derives from his account of representation. The remaining seven chapters are devoted to particular philosophical topics from his *Treatise* and his two *Enquiries*, questions chosen both for their centrality to

Hume's writings and for their contemporary philosophical importance. These topics are, in order: the inductive origins of belief, the nature of causation, the freedom of human actions, belief in miracles, the nature of personal identity, the character of moral evaluations, and the status of skeptical arguments.⁴ Each of the book's ten chapters explicitly and formally reconstructs, primarily in his own words, Hume's central argument about its main topic. Furthermore, each of these chapters is organized around the attempt to resolve one or more serious interpretive puzzles—most of them famous—that arise in the attempt to understand his conclusions and their interrelations. In each case, an understanding of Hume's views about the nature of cognition proves to be essential, in one way or another, to the solution of the puzzle. Thus, each of these chapters aims to do more than simply to discuss or cover some central topic. Each also aims to *solve*—indeed, to be the last word about—a particular interpretive problem or set of problems that have long stood in the way of understanding Hume's philosophy. Whether this ambitious aim is wise or foolish, of course, the reader alone must judge.

Although my primary aim is to resolve some of the main puzzles that have hindered a fuller understanding of Hume's philosophy, I begin each chapter by explaining the context of his treatment of his topic within his own philosophy and the philosophy of his time, and I conclude by considering the significance of his contribution both for the philosophy of his own time and for the philosophy of our own. In doing so, I defend a general account of Hume's philosophical greatness and of the contemporary relevance of his philosophy. Hume was one of the first, and one of the most insightful, philosophers ever to be explicitly concerned with the interrelations among philosophy, psychology, and the psychology of philosophizing. Much of his historical greatness and continuing relevance lies, I judge, in the richness of the interrelations he uncovered and in the depth and originality of the detailed contributions he made to the discussion of a wide range of significant philosophical questions in the light of his concern with those interrelations. One essential pattern within those contributions lies in his development of ways to make stable and defensible human commitments to both science and morals, while at the same time understanding—and facing uncompromisingly—the underlying animal cognitive mechanisms that produce those commitments. In his view, a better understanding of the operations of human cognition is essential to improving not only our *understanding* of our commitments but, ultimately, the *character* of those commitments as well. The example of that project—of improving the character of our commitments through understanding the underlying processes of our cognition—constitutes, I believe, the most general basis for both his historical greatness and his contemporary significance. Hume was not, of course, a philosopher who was never wrong, but he remains a philosopher about whom and from whom there is still much to learn.

Cognition and Imagination

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a renewed interest in exploring the nature of the human cognitive instrument—that is, in understanding the *human understanding*. Many thinkers proposed that such understanding of understanding would prove essential to refining scientific method, improving the state of human knowledge, and fostering human progress. Hume was one of these thinkers.

Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature* is entitled “Of the Understanding.” At the very outset of his attempt to explain the nature of the understanding, he presents four crucial distinctions. He goes on to employ these four distinctions frequently, both in the *Treatise* and in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, and together with his two most frequently used principles—the Copy Principle and the Separability Principle—they constitute the basis of his cognitive psychology.

The first of these distinctions is the distinction of mental objects or entities, which he calls “perceptions,” into “impressions” and “ideas”:

ALL the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse, excepting only, those which arise from the sight and touch, and excepting the immediate pleasure or uneasiness it may occasion. I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking. (THN 1–2)

The second is the distinction between “simple” and “complex” perceptions:

There is another division of our perceptions, which it will be convenient to observe, and which extends itself both to our impressions and ideas. This division is into SIMPLE and COMPLEX. Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no

distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts. Tho' a particular colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple, 'tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other. (THN 2)

The third is the distinction between “impressions of sensation” and “impressions of reflexion”:

Impressions may be divided into two kinds, those of SENSATION and those of REFLEXION. The first kind arises in the soul originally, from unknown causes. The second is derived in a great measure from our ideas, and that in the following order. An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflexion, because derived from it. These again are copied by the memory and imagination, and become ideas; which perhaps in their turn give rise to other impressions and ideas. So that the impressions of reflexion are only antecedent to their correspondent ideas; but posterior to those of sensation, and deriv'd from them. (THN 7)

The first two distinctions are thus distinctions within the class of perceptions, while the third is a further distinction within the subclass of impressions. The fourth involves a distinction within the subclass of ideas—it occurs in a section entitled “Of the ideas of the memory and imagination” (THN I.i.3)—but Hume presents it as a distinction between two idea-forming faculties, memory and imagination:

We find by experience, that when any impression has been present with the mind, it again makes its appearance there as an idea; and this it may do after two different ways: either when in its new appearance it retains a considerable degree of its first vivacity, and is somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea; or when it intirely loses that vivacity, and is a perfect idea. The faculty, by which we repeat our impressions in the first manner, is called the MEMORY, and the other the IMAGINATION. (THN 8–9)

Questions may be raised about each of these four distinctions. First, no sooner does Hume draw the impression/idea distinction in terms of differing degrees of force and liveliness than he goes on to remark:

The common degrees of these are easily distinguished; tho' it is not impossible but in particular instances they may very nearly approach to each other. Thus in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas. But notwithstanding this near resemblance in a few instances, they are in general so very different, that no-one can make a scruple to rank them under distinct heads, and assign to each a peculiar name to mark the difference. (THN 2)

But if the difference between impressions and ideas consists only in degree of force and liveliness (which he also calls “vivacity” or, in the first *Enquiry*, “force and

vivacity”), why does he write of ideas that *approach* to impressions in this regard and of impressions that cannot be *distinguished* from ideas? Why do not ideas that approach to impressions in force and liveliness simply become impressions, and why do not impressions that cannot be distinguished from ideas thereby become ideas? Second, how does Hume’s example of the color, taste, and smell of an apple as simple perceptions square with the apple’s spatial complexity and his own later discussion of sensory *minima* in *Treatise* I.ii and I.iv.5? Is he concerned primarily with conceptual simplicity or with perceptual simplicity—or does he simply confuse the two? Third, why does Hume say that impressions of sensation arise “from unknown causes,” when the very term ‘impressions of sensation’ suggests that their cause is known to lie in the physical processes of sense experience?

I will try to answer each of these questions in the course of this book.¹ For the present, however, let us turn our attention to the fourth distinction and, in particular, to the second faculty that Hume distinguishes, that of the imagination. It appears, from the variety of contexts in which he refers to it and the variety of functions that he ascribes to it, that the imagination plays a major role in his philosophy. Yet his remarks about it have puzzled many readers, in at least three different ways.

First, in his original presentation of the impression/idea distinction, Hume treats the having of ideas as essential to, if not actually identical with, *thinking*. Yet in drawing the memory/imagination distinction, he goes on to imply that the only ways of having ideas—and hence, presumably, of thinking—are through memory and imagination. The term ‘imagination’, however, ordinarily suggests feigning, illusion, or mere supposition. How then can he maintain that all human thoughts beyond the bare recollections of memory—thus presumably including those expressed in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*—are a matter of mere *imagination*?

Second, Hume confesses rather casually in a footnote midway through Book I of the *Treatise* that he actually uses the term ‘imagination’ in two different senses:

When I oppose the imagination to the memory, I mean the faculty, by which we form our fainter ideas. When I oppose it to reason, I mean the same faculty, excluding only our demonstrative and probable reasonings. When I oppose it to neither, ’tis indifferent whether it be taken in the larger or more limited sense, or at least the context will sufficiently explain the meaning. (THN 117n)

Why should imagination be opposed to *memory* in one sense and to *reason* in another, and how are these two senses related to each other? Norman Kemp Smith, noting Hume’s reference elsewhere (THN 265) to “imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas,” suggests that the first sense of ‘imagination’ is concerned with feigning and the voluntary combination and separation of ideas, and hence with ideas insofar as they are *faint*, while the second sense is concerned with ideas insofar as they have *force and liveliness* (indeed, Kemp Smith suggests that the imagination in this second sense simply is vivacity of conception). Thus, Kemp Smith concludes that the two senses are “almost directly opposite [in] meaning,” agreeing “only in one respect, namely, that in both the imagination has to be contrasted with reason.”² Yet Hume says not that the two senses are opposite in meaning but that, with one exclusion, both senses apply to the same faculty, and he maintains that only the second sense is to be contrasted with reason.

Third, at *Treatise* I.iii.6, Hume opposes imagination to “the understanding”—the faculty that constitutes the primary topic of both Book I of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*—when he asks “whether experience produces the idea of an object [which we call cause or effect] by means of the understanding or of the imagination” (THN 88). Yet near the end of Book I, he claims, in contrast, that the “memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of ideas” (THN 265), and he then goes on to write of “the understanding, that is, . . . the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination” (THN 267). How can the understanding be opposed to the imagination while at the same time being founded on it and even consisting in certain properties of it?

These puzzles, in turn, raise several larger questions. Does Hume have any consistent conception of the imagination at all, and if so, what is it? In what relation does he think the imagination stands to memory, reason, and the understanding? And what are the consequences, if any, of his views about the imagination for the nature of his philosophy? In the first section of this chapter, I prepare to answer these questions by examining the role of imagination in several of Hume's most notable immediate philosophical predecessors. In the second section, I set out Hume's own conception of the imagination, outline his reasons for holding that memory and imagination are the only idea-forming faculties, and explain the basis of his confidence in those reasons. In the third section, I describe the relation of the faculty of imagination to the faculties of memory, reason, and understanding in Hume's cognitive psychology and, in doing so, seek to resolve the three puzzles just described. In the fourth section, I explore the role of Hume's theory of the imagination in his philosophy and discuss the significance of that theory for the common characterization of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as “empiricists.”

Imagination and Intellect in Early Modern Philosophy

Imagination and Intellect in Descartes

Hume uses the term ‘idea’ more narrowly than do his immediate predecessors. He uses the term ‘perception’ as his most general term for mental objects, using it to denote both (i) the vivid experiential contents that he calls impressions, and (ii) the representations occurring in thought that he calls ideas. Descartes, in contrast—like Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, and most other early modern philosophers influenced by him—uses the term ‘idea’ as his most general term for mental objects, thereby including not only what Hume calls ideas but also what Hume calls impressions. Accordingly, in Descartes's usage, sensation is itself a faculty of forming ideas.

In addition to sensation, however, Descartes distinguishes two further faculties of forming representations, faculties whose representations are not sensations. These further representational faculties are (i) the *imagination*, whose representations are, in a broad sense, “imagistic” ideas (visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, etc.) derived from the contents of sensations, and (ii) the *intellect*, a higher faculty whose repre-