Main Text

Approaches to Moral Philosophy (EHU section 1)

> Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.
>
> All polite letters are nothing but pictures of human life in various attitudes and situations . . .

General Introduction: Philosophy as the science of human nature

Hume was a radical philosopher, which is just to say that Hume had a radical conception of philosophy. For Hume (as he tells us in the very first sentence of *EHU*) philosophy is the *science of human nature*. It is on the basis of this claim that Hume asserts that philosophy is the most important of the sciences, standing above even physics, chemistry and biology. Why is the science of human nature more important than the science of physical nature? Surely human nature is just a part of physical nature? So shouldn't physics be thought of as the most comprehensive and thus fundamental science?

The science of human nature has priority for one simple reason: all sciences are forms of human knowledge or understanding - they are ways in which we come to understand or know about the world – and therefore if we are to avoid dogmatism and superstition then obviously we first need to know what human understanding and knowledge *is*. In other words, before we can be sure that physics, for instance, is a genuine form of understanding we need to know what understanding itself is. Hence, for Hume, the foundation for every science including the sciences of physical nature is the science of human nature and in particular the science of human understanding. Now it might be thought that while interesting this is hardly radical because it doesn't sound *that* different from what had already been said by philosophers as far back as Plato; indeed it could be argued that every truly great philosopher before Hume shared this conception of philosophy. Where then is the source of Hume's radicality?

Hume's scepticism

It is easy to overstate the extent of Hume's scepticism. Hume seems at many points to be the most ardent supporter of science and committed to its being the pinnacle of human knowledge. As we will see, there are deeper and more subtle forms Hume's scepticism takes, not least as

regards religion. What is most relevant here is the way Hume sought to transform the enlightenment ideal, the way he sought to uncover the *limits* and *pretensions* of human reason. One of the most obvious and important ways in which Hume attempted to uncover the limits of reason was to try to reclaim an essential place in any account of human nature not only for the passions or emotions but also the imagination. As has already been stated, famously, for Hume, reason is a slave to the passions. Now it is important to point out that it is this attempt to limit the claims of reason that is in many ways the basis of the claim that Hume is a sceptic: since total faith in reason is supposed to allow us to avoid scepticism, Hume's critical attitude to reason can only encourage the thought that he is a sceptic. It is vital to understand that Hume only wants to *limit* reason not *abolish* it. So nothing about Hume's scepticism regarding reason should be taken to imply a commitment to a form of *irrationalism* on Hume's part.

Hume's scepticism then involves two claims:

- other aspects of human nature - the passions, imagination, etc. - are just as important as reason;
- reason itself cannot be allowed to operate freely beyond the scope of experience.

Now, however moderate (or to use Hume's phrase, "mitigated") a form of scepticism this is it is clear nevertheless that in defending this view Hume is reacting quite violently against a set of deep prejudices in the philosophical tradition of his day. What are these prejudices?

Hume's naturalism

According to Aristotle man is the *rational animal*. Now this definition of man was almost universally adopted by the philosophers that followed Aristotle. As time went on philosophers came more and more to see that it was the rational part of this definition that was most significant; after all there are many sorts of animal but only one sort of *rational* animal. This focus on the purely rational part of human beings led to what for Hume seemed like a disastrous move: philosophers actually made the rational part of man a separate sort of thing from the animal part. In other words, philosophers separated minds - the rational part - from bodies - the purely physical part. This move was made most obviously and most famously by Descartes. While Aristotle stated that we are all rational animals, Descartes claimed we are most essentially *thinking things*. Notice the difference between Aristotle and Descartes here; what has been lost? What has been lost is reference to the fact that we are *animals* at least in the minimal sense that we are part of nature. Not so much for Aristotle (who certainly was not a dualist) but certainly for Descartes

(who was) the mind is not part of nature at all; the mind is outside the natural order of things. One of the most important and obvious signs of this being that the laws that govern the mind are the laws of reason such as the laws of logic while the laws that govern nature are purely natural laws such as the law of gravity. What this means is that for Descartes and many other philosophers human thought and indeed action inasmuch as they are rational are beyond the scope of normal, empirical science, or at least beyond what Hume calls the science of man. Equally, it is worth adding, this means that for Descartes we cannot say that any non-human animal is rational; in Descartes' terms this means no animals has a soul.

The whole force of Hume's science of human nature was to try to overcome this conception and reclaim the idea that man is essentially part of nature. Here we can see for one thing why Hume wants to focus on the passions - the passions or emotions, much more obviously than reason, are part of our animal nature, and indeed if reason is a slave to the passions, as Hume claims, then clearly even reason itself must be essentially related to our animal nature. This idea that man is part of nature is the basis of what we might call Hume's naturalism. In *EHU* this naturalism is most obviously at work in Section 9 which concerns the reason of animals. Hume thought that if we accept this model - if we see that far from standing above or outside nature, man is involved in and part of nature - then great possibilities open up for us. What then are these possibilities?

First it is important to stress that while Hume certainly thinks that philosophy must consider man from a natural perspective he does not thereby think that philosophy is reducible to physics, biology or even psychology. Today a great many philosophers call themselves naturalists but they tend on the whole not to be naturalists in the sense that Hume was; they are naturalists in a much more restricted and specialised sense. To make the difference between Hume and contemporary naturalists clear we should think about this: both Hume and your typical contemporary naturalist think that human beings and thereby by implication minds are a natural phenomenon - the mind and its workings can be accounted for without having to resort to supernatural or metaphysical speculation; where Hume and the contemporary naturalists disagree is over the question of what sort of thing the mind is, if it is accepted that it is a natural phenomenon. Contemporary naturalists tend to think that the only way we can understand the mind as a natural phenomenon is to think that the mind is in fact, in some more or less complicated sense, the brain. Nothing in Hume commits him to a thesis like this. Now this is a very difficult and live philosophical issue; in fact it can be presented as a dilemma.

Hume is certainly not committed to the kind of dualism defended by Descartes - the idea that each of us is essentially a soul-substance, a thinking thing - Hume is committed to the idea that

man is part of nature, not outside it - this is in part what makes Hume a naturalist. Equally however Hume is no more committed to the contemporary materialistic idea that our minds - the part of us that appears most essential - are in fact our brains. But then if the mind isn't the Cartesian soul or the brain, what is it? Perhaps Hume is more of a Cartesian than he might admit? Or perhaps Hume is after all committed to something like a form of materialism?

Returning to what was said above, for Hume although the science of man is committed to studying man from a natural perspective, it is still a distinctive form of science. What we need to remember is that the science of man understood as the science of human understanding is not only distinct from the physical sciences but that it is more fundamental than them. Having said that Hume is clear that the science of man or human nature has a lot to learn from the physical sciences. Indeed it was Hume's avowed intention to do for the human realm what the physical sciences and especially Newton had done for the rest of nature. This is a good way to think of Hume - as *the Newton of the human sciences*.

In his *Principia Mathematica* and elsewhere Newton had attempted to provide a very general explanation of why events in the world happen as they do. Crucially, Newton attempted to do this in terms of only a few, very general principles, principles discovered not through speculation and invention but through observation and experiment. Now, this is exactly what Hume set out to do for human nature; as Barry Stroud, a leading commentator on Hume, puts it,

> Hume wants a completely general theory of human nature to explain why human beings act, think, perceive and feel in all the ways they do . . . in terms of relatively few extremely general, perhaps universal, principles (Stroud, 3)

Hume's empiricism

Following on from this is Hume's commitment to what he calls "the experimental method of reasoning". Like Newton Hume was convinced that in pursuit of the general principles just mentioned, each and every science must proceed not through hypothetical conjectures and metaphysical speculation but through controlled observation and indeed even experiment. Here then in addition to what I called above Hume's naturalism and scepticism we have at least part of the basis of Hume's *empiricism*: his belief that science or scientific knowledge must ultimately rest on experience and not speculation.

But clearly unless we intend to reduce the science of man to physics or biology we need to be clear how the respective scientific methods differ. For instance, does Hume's talk of an experimental method in philosophy mean that in his opinion philosophers should be engaging in

laboratory based experiments? Indeed, why is Hume thought of as a philosopher at all? If he is the Newton of the human sciences then isn't he like Newton simply a scientist in the traditional sense, possible a psychologist, sociologist or even biologist? The answer to these questions is "no". Reading Hume it is clear that Hume is involved in philosophy and not empirical science - he presents arguments, defends claims, attacks conflicting views, etc. The philosophical basis of Hume's work is also obvious in the topics and problems he considers; Hume is interested in problems of reason, truth, knowledge, etc. As a matter of fact no scientist is or indeed should be interested in most of these problems. Scientists have to take such concepts for granted.

The difference between Hume's science of human nature and the more obvious empirical sciences is also made clear in the way in which Hume's conclusions are not defended through the collation and presentation of statistical data as they might be in even social sciences like economics. No, Hume is clearly doing philosophy. So why then does he stress the scientific or experimental character of his thought? What we have to be clear about is that we today have already in many ways come to adopt and absorb Hume's views about how we should do philosophy. This makes it hard for us to recognise what is so special about Hume. To see his real importance we need to compare him with the majority of philosophers who came before him. Many of these philosophers would claim to have reached their conclusions through the operations of pure reason alone, denying any role whatever to observation and experiment. Hume rightly thought this was ridiculous: how can you possibly say anything about human nature without observing how humans actually think and behave? Amazingly enough many philosopher before Hume thought it not only possible but essential that we avoid observation when it comes to such general and important matters. Why was this? Partly simply because of the kinds of problems made much of by, for example, Descartes in his *First Meditation*, such as the unreliability of the senses which obviously entails the unreliability of observation. Hume's view and I'm sure it is ours today is that it is just as stupid to think we can say anything insightful about human beings without considering how human beings actually think, see, behave as it is to suppose that we can say anything insightful about the world just by sitting in our armchairs and thinking very hard about it. To be more precise one way to understand Hume's minimal commitment, which seems eminently sensible, is that there is no point to be served by presenting a philosophical theory that is not at least compatible with accepted scientific theory

Hume is interested in developing a general theory of human nature that recognises the fact that humans beings are essentially part of nature; through his experimental method in philosophy Hume hopes to uncover the general principles that underlie human nature in much the same way that Newton hoped to and indeed did uncover the general principles that underlie physical nature. Hume's hope is that through this science of human nature he will come up with

a framework within which a great many of the most pressing philosophical problems can be solved or at least dissolved. We have distinguished three elements in Hume's conception of philosophy: his *scepticism*, his *naturalism* and his *empiricism*.

Specific Introduction: Philosophical method in EHU

In *EHU* section 1 Hume distinguishes two broad approaches to moral philosophy:

- Philosophy "in the easy and obvious manner". This is philosophy in a *practical* sense inasmuch as it 'cultivates our manners' and shapes our conduct. Such philosophy borrows from poetry and the art of rhetoric in order to engage and excite our attention, and to manage our feelings. Hume identifies Cicero, La Bruyere, and Addison as prime exponents of the art.

- "Abstruse" (deep and demanding) philosophy. This style of philosophy is more *theoretical* in character, and, Hume tells us, it is exemplified by Aristotle, Malebranche, and Locke.

In *EHU* 1 Hume talks of his hope to unite "the boundaries of the different species of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty!". Hume's expression of this hope is preceded by a discussion of the virtues and vices of the two approaches.

What is remarkable – indeed one might be tempted to say very nearly unique among the truly great philosophers - is the extent to which Hume wants to insist upon the *practical* significance of philosophy. This is articulated clearly in *EHU* 1 initially in terms of Hume's apparent endorsement of the common man's preference for the "easy and obvious" approach to philosophy at the expense of the "abstruse". Hume outlines the basis for his apparent preference:

> [the 'easy and obvious' approach to philosophy] enters more into common life; moulds the heart and affections; and, by touching those principles which actuate men, reforms their conduct, and brings them nearer to that model of perfection which it describes. On the contrary, the abstruse philosophy, being founded on a turn of mind, which cannot enter into business and action, vanishes when the philosopher leaves the shade, and comes into open day; nor can its principles easily retain any influence over our conduct and behaviour. The feelings of our heart, the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affections, dissipate all its conclusions, and reduce the profoundest philosopher to a mere plebeian.

In a way what is here being expressed can be seen as nothing more than a form of what above was called Hume's scepticism: Hume is here reiterating the vital importance of the passions, of that side of our character that provokes and sustains action. It is not enough that philosophy *describe* human nature – something that would perhaps be best done from a detached, purely objective perspective - philosophy must itself be seen as *expressive* of human nature, shaping and moulding not only our ideas and theories but in a more intimate sense our lives both individually and communally. Philosophy should not merely describe virtue but should bring us closer to it. At the same time however we need to keep hold of the more descriptive element of our philosophising inasmuch as that guarantees we come to recognise and acknowledge the vital role truth plays in our lives (what Hume calls "the spirit of accuracy"). The vice of the easy and obvious form of philosophy is its seductive nature embodied in its dependence on rhetoric: we can all too easily be swayed by beautiful words into believing something which is simply untrue. Hume insists though that truth is in fact not opposed or contrary to beauty, that as we can see from the work of great artists, genuine beauty in some sense always embodies truth:

> Accuracy is, in every case, advantageous to beauty, and just reasoning to delicate sentiment.

In the context of philosophy Hume's point is that accurate reasoning or argument can aid in the task of moulding our sentiments. This concern for truth is more readily identifiable in the abstruse, theoretical form of philosophy and constitutes its particular virtue. What is important for Hume is that abstruse philosophy take the proper form, in particular that it avoid pointless speculation ("fruitless efforts of human vanity . . . [to] penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding") and mere superstition (dogma). Here we find Hume expressing a commitment to at least one important element in his so-called empiricism: the rejection of speculative metaphysics. Philosophers should not spend time considering matters that cannot be demonstrated to be true. But at the same time philosophers should not spend any time considering issues which are obscure, remote and unimportant from the point of view of leading a good life. Hume's positive suggestion is that philosophy should involve "an accurate scrutiny into the powers and faculties of human nature". In this way we can begin to see the sense in which for Hume the perfect form of philosophy is and has to be a synthesis of both the easy and obvious and the abstruse. As the theoretical study of human nature philosophy will itself contribute to the development of human nature – philosophy as expressive of rather than just descriptive of human nature – and the value of this contribution will be indexed directly to the accuracy (or truth) of what is presented. In what is essentially an Aristotelian moment, for Hume, having a conception of what the good life is, is itself a vital aspect of living a good life; it is the task of philosophy to present such a conception (at one point in *EHU* 1 Hume suggests that the role of philosophy (as a form of "polite letters") is to present a "picture of human life"). An inaccurate description of human nature – an inaccurate picture of human life - might sway us – we might come to believe it if it is expressed well enough – but its inaccuracy will for all its

practical benefits ultimately represent a corruptive force: no genuinely good life can understand itself in terms of a picture that is "untrue". As Hume states,

> Indulge your passion for science . . . but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to society and action.

Having articulated the need for a science of human nature - a science that will do for us what Newton did for the natural world - in the rest of the *EHU* Hume goes on to present at least the outline of the core of such a science. Now while the full science of human nature is obviously going to involve considerations of politics, morals, aesthetics, etc., Hume's primary concern in the *EHU* 1 as its title makes clear is with the structure and operations of the human understanding. In a way that again shows Hume's debt to Newton, this enquiry starts by defining not only the basic units or atoms of understanding (section 2) but also the laws that govern those atoms (section 3). This brings us on then to the first stage of the science of human nature: *the philosophy of mind*.