

A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE

By David Hume

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VOL. I OF THE UNDERSTANDING.

ADVERTISEMENT.

My design in the present work is sufficiently explained in the Introduction. The reader must only observe, that all the subjects I have there planned out to myself, are not treated of in these two volumes. The subjects of the Understanding and Passions make a compleat chain of reasoning by themselves; and I was willing to take advantage of this natural division, in order to try the taste of the public. If I have the good fortune to meet with success, I shall proceed to the examination of Morals, Politics, and Criticism; which will compleat this Treatise of Human Nature. The approbation of the public I consider as the greatest reward of my labours; but am determin'd to regard its judgment, whatever it be, as my best instruction.

INTRODUCTION.

Nothing is more usual and more natural for those, who pretend to discover anything new to the world in philosophy and the sciences, than to insinuate the praises of their own systems, by decrying all those,

which have been advanced before them. And indeed were they content with lamenting that ignorance, which we still lie under in the most important questions, that can come before the tribunal of human reason, there are few, who have an acquaintance with the sciences, that would not readily agree with them. It is easy for one of judgment and learning, to perceive the weak foundation even of those systems, which have obtained the greatest credit, and have carried their pretensions highest to accurate and profound reasoning. Principles taken upon trust, consequences lamely deduced from them, want of coherence in the parts, and of evidence in the whole, these are every where to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seem to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself.

Nor is there required such profound knowledge to discover the present imperfect condition of the sciences, but even the rabble without doors may, judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision. Disputes are multiplied, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are managed with the greatest warmth, as if every thing was certain. Amidst all this bustle it is not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most

extravagant  
hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any  
favourable  
colours. The victory is not gained by the men at arms,  
who manage the  
pike and the sword; but by the trumpeters, drummers, and  
musicians of  
the army.

From hence in my opinion arises that common prejudice  
against  
metaphysical reasonings of all kinds, even amongst  
those, who profess  
themselves scholars, and have a just value for every  
other part of  
literature. By metaphysical reasonings, they do not  
understand those on  
any particular branch of science, but every kind of  
argument, which is  
any way abstruse, and requires some attention to be  
comprehended. We  
have so often lost our labour in such researches, that  
we commonly  
reject them without hesitation, and resolve, if we must  
for ever be a  
prey to errors and delusions, that they shall at least  
be natural and  
entertaining. And indeed nothing but the most determined  
scepticism,  
along with a great degree of indolence, can justify this  
aversion to  
metaphysics. For if truth be at all within the reach of  
human capacity,  
it is certain it must lie very deep and abstruse: and to  
hope we shall  
arrive at it without pains, while the greatest geniuses  
have failed  
with the utmost pains, must certainly be esteemed  
sufficiently vain  
and presumptuous. I pretend to no such advantage in the  
philosophy I am  
going to unfold, and would esteem it a strong  
presumption against it,  
were it so very easy and obvious.

It is evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature: and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even. Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties. It is impossible to tell what changes and improvements we might make in these sciences were we thoroughly acquainted with the extent and force of human understanding, and could explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations we perform in our reasonings. And these improvements are the more to be hoped for in natural religion, as it is not content with instructing us in the nature of superior powers, but carries its views farther, to their disposition towards us, and our duties towards them; and consequently we ourselves are not only the beings, that reason, but also one of the objects, concerning which we reason.

If therefore the sciences of Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, have such a dependence on the knowledge of man, what may be expected in the other sciences, whose connexion with human nature is more close and intimate? The sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas: morals and criticism regard our tastes and sentiments: and politics consider men as united in society, and dependent on each other. In these four sciences of Logic, Morals, Criticism, and



Politics, is  
comprehended almost everything, which it can any way  
import us to be  
acquainted with, or which can tend either to the  
improvement or ornament  
of the human mind.

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  
pore curiosity.  
There is no question of importance, whose decision is  
not comprised 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.

And as the science of man is the-only solid foundation  
for the other  
sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to  
this science  
itself must be laid on experience and observation. It is  
no astonishing

reflection to consider, that the application of  
experimental philosophy  
to moral subjects should come after that to natural at  
the distance of  
above a whole century; since we find in fact, that there  
was about the  
same interval betwixt the origins of these sciences; and  
that reckoning  
from THALES to SOCRATES, the space of time is nearly  
equal to that  
betwixt, my Lord Bacon and some late philosophers [Mr.  
Locke, my Lord  
Shaftesbury, Dr. Mandeville, Mr. Hutchinson, Dr. Butler,  
etc.] in  
England, who have begun to put the science of man on a  
new footing, and  
have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of  
the public. So  
true it is, that however other nations may rival us in  
poetry, and  
excel us in some other agreeable arts, the improvements  
in reason and  
philosophy can only be owing to a land of toleration and  
of liberty.

Nor ought we to think, that this latter improvement in  
the science of  
man will do less honour to our native country than the  
former in natural  
philosophy, but ought rather to esteem it a greater  
glory, upon account  
of the greater importance of that science, as well as  
the necessity it  
lay under of such a reformation. For to me it seems  
evident, that the  
essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with  
that of external  
bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion  
of its powers  
and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact  
experiments, and the  
observation of those particular effects, which result  
from its different  
circumstances and situations. And though we must  
endeavour to render all

our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, it is still certain we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical.

I do not think a philosopher, who would apply himself so earnestly to the explaining the ultimate principles of the soul, would show himself a great master in that very science of human nature, which he pretends to explain, or very knowing in what is naturally satisfactory to the mind of man. For nothing is more certain, than that despair has almost the same effect upon us with enjoyment, and that we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes. When we see, that we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contented, though we be perfectly satisfied in the main of our ignorance, and perceive that we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles, beside our experience of their reality; which is the reason of the mere vulgar, and what it required no study at first to have discovered for the most particular and most extraordinary phaenomenon. And as this impossibility of making any farther progress is enough to satisfy the reader, so the writer may derive a more delicate satisfaction from the free confession of his ignorance, and from his prudence in avoiding that error,

into which so many have fallen, of imposing their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles. When this mutual contentment and satisfaction can be obtained betwixt the master and scholar, I know not what more we can require of our philosophy.

But if this impossibility of explaining ultimate principles should be esteemed a defect in the science of man, I will venture to affirm, that it is a defect common to it with all the sciences, and all the arts, in which we can employ ourselves, whether they be such as are cultivated in the schools of the philosophers, or practised in the shops of the meanest artizans. None of them can go beyond experience, or establish any principles which are not founded on that authority. Moral philosophy has, indeed, this peculiar disadvantage, which is not found in natural, that in collecting its experiments, it cannot make them purposely, with premeditation, and after such a manner as to satisfy itself concerning every particular difficulty which may be. When I am at a loss to know the effects of one body upon another in any situation, I need only put them in that situation, and observe what results from it. But should I endeavour to clear up after the same manner any doubt in moral philosophy, by placing myself in the same case with that which I consider, it is evident this reflection and premeditation would so disturb the operation of my natural principles, as must render it impossible to form any just conclusion from the phenomenon. We must

therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures. Where experiments of this kind are judiciously collected and compared, we may hope to establish on them a science which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension.

## BOOK I. OF THE UNDERSTANDING

### PART I. OF IDEAS, THEIR ORIGIN, COMPOSITION, CONNEXION, ABSTRACTION, ETC.

#### SECT. I. OF THE ORIGIN OF OUR 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. The common degrees of these are easily distinguished; though 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 [Footnote 1.].

[Footnote 1. I here make use of these terms, impression and idea, in a sense different from what is usual, and I hope this liberty will be allowed me. Perhaps I rather restore the word, idea, to its original sense, from which Mr LOCKE had perverted it, in making it stand for all our

perceptions. By the terms of impression I would not be understood to express the manner, in which our lively perceptions are produced in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves; for which there is no particular name either in the English or any other language, that I know of.]

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. Though a particular colour, taste, and smell, are qualities all united together in this apple, it is easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other.

Having by these divisions given an order and arrangement to our objects, we may now apply ourselves to consider with the more accuracy their qualities and relations. The first circumstance, that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity. The one seem to be in a manner the reflexion of the other; so that all the perceptions of the mind are double, and appear both as impressions and ideas. When I shut my eyes and think of my chamber, the ideas I form are exact

representations of the impressions I felt; nor is there any circumstance of the one, which is not to be found in the other. In running over my other perceptions, I find still the same resemblance and representation. Ideas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other. This circumstance seems to me remarkable, and engages my attention for a moment.

Upon a more accurate survey I find I have been carried away too far by the first appearance, and that I must make use of the distinction of perceptions into simple and complex, to limit this general decision, that all our ideas and impressions are resembling. I observe, that many of our complex ideas never had impressions, that corresponded to them, and that many of our complex impressions never are exactly copied in ideas. I can imagine to myself such a city as the New Jerusalem, whose pavement is gold and walls are rubies, though I never saw any such. I have seen Paris; but shall I affirm I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions?

I perceive, therefore, that though there is in general a great, resemblance betwixt our complex impressions and ideas, yet the rule is not universally true, that they are exact copies of each other. We may next consider how the case stands with our simple, perceptions. After the most accurate examination, of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exception,



and that every  
simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it,  
and every  
simple impression a correspondent idea. That idea of  
red, which we form  
in the dark, and that impression which strikes our eyes  
in sun-shine,  
differ only in degree, not in nature. That the case is  
the same with  
all our simple impressions and ideas, it is impossible  
to prove by a  
particular enumeration of them. Every one may satisfy  
himself in this  
point by running over as many as he pleases. But if any  
one should deny  
this universal resemblance, I know no way of convincing  
him, but by  
desiring him to shew a simple impression, that has not a  
correspondent  
idea, or a simple idea, that has not a correspondent  
impression. If he  
does not answer this challenge, as it is certain he  
cannot, we may from  
his silence and our own observation establish our  
conclusion.

Thus we find, that all simple ideas and impressions  
resemble each other;  
and as the complex are formed from them, we may affirm  
in general,  
that these two species of perception are exactly  
correspondent. Having  
discovered this relation, which requires no farther  
examination, I am  
curious to find some other of their qualities. Let us  
consider how they  
stand with regard to their existence, and which of the  
impressions and  
ideas are causes, and which effects.

The full examination of this question is the subject of  
the present  
treatise; and therefore we shall here content ourselves  
with  
establishing one general proposition, THAT ALL OUR

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