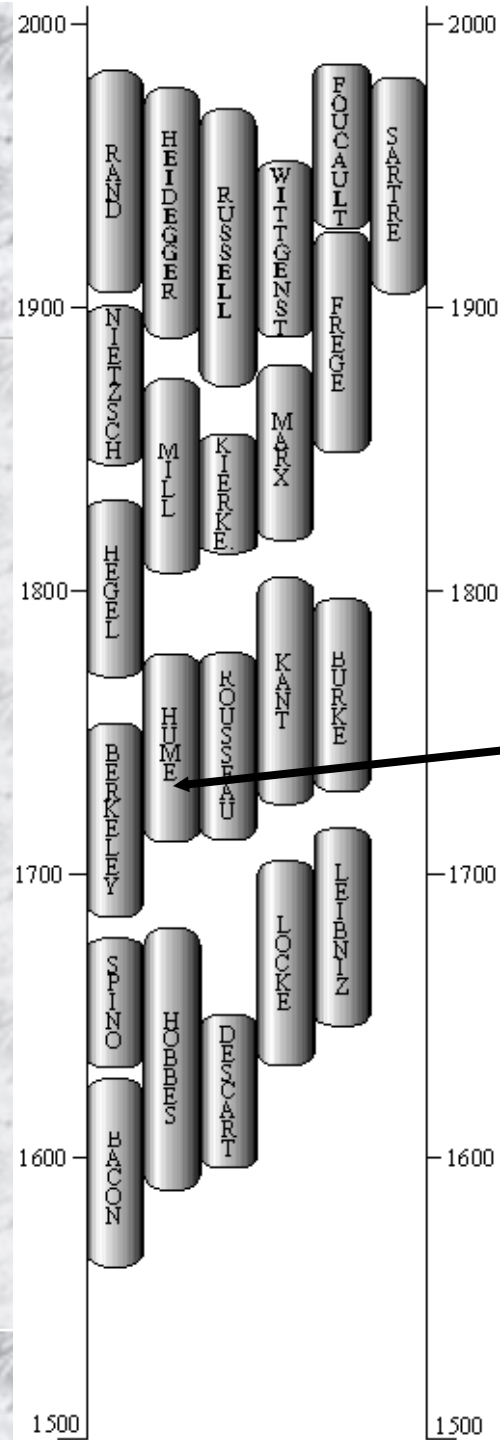


David Hume: Epistemology

Part 1



David Hume
1711-1776

Epistemology

- Like Locke and Berkeley, Hume was dissatisfied with the “abstruse speculations” that passed for philosophy among the learned
- He thought it was useful only to those who had a theological ax to grind and who, “being unable to defend [their superstitious beliefs] on fair ground, raise these entangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness.”

Epistemology

- He thought the only way to deal with this was with the , “. . .**only method of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions, is to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects**”

Epistemology

■ Reformulation of Locke's Position

- He abandoned Locke's distinction between **ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection**

■ Hume thought these **involved a metaphysics that ought to have been examined, not assumed uncritically at the outset**

Epistemology

- He also felt that making a change made possible a precise statement of an empirical criterion of meaning (more about that later)

Epistemology

■ Uses term “perception” rather than Locke’s terminology of “sensation”

- Hume makes this distinction in order not to uncritically accept Locke’s assumption there is a world “out there”
- Hume doesn’t know if there’s a world out there, but he will live as it is so because of psychological force rather than logical force (this is a sort of pragmatism)

■ Perception of the senses

- Hume wanted to call these perceptions “impressions” and conceded that he was using the term in a “somewhat different from the usual” way

Epistemology

- Hume introduced the distinction between “Impressions” and “ideas”
 - Impressions: “when we heard, or see, or feel or love or hate or desire or will” are distinguished from ideas (which we recall) which are the less lively perceptions
 - Though our thought seems to possess “unbounded liberty” to think what it wants, Hume things upon closer examination, that it is confined within very narrow limits
 - The creative power of our mind “amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, . . . augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience”
 - Our ideas or more feeble perceptions are **copies** of our impressions or more lively ones

Epistemology

■ Hume offered two arguments for this view

- When we analyze our thoughts we **always** find that they “resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment”
 - One could prove him wrong if you could come up with a counterexample that could NOT be traced to an impression
- If it happens that a person has a defect of one of his sense organs, we always find he “is as little susceptible of the correspondent ideas”
 - A blind man can form no notion of colors
 - A deaf man of sounds

Epistemology

- As a result, Hume asserts that he has found “a proposition” that is simple and intelligible, but also one *that can make every other dispute equally intelligible*
 - He asserts “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

Epistemology

- Therefore, when we entertain any suspicion that a philosophical terms “is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?*
 - If it is impossible to assign any this will “serve to confirm our suspicion”
 - This should remove “all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality”

Epistemology

- Some important implications of this view:
 - Hume allowed only an empirically observable difference between impressions and ideas—a difference in degree of “liveliness”
 - Note: Hume actually believed in an external world, he made no assumptions about where the impressions came from, what causes them, or **what makes them more vivid than ideas**
- What would make impressions more vivid than ideas?

Epistemology

- A major Humean assumption:

- Hume took for granted that every item in consciousness—every impression and every ideas—is a distinct, separate, isolated unit

- This view is called psychological atomism because it parallels the atomistic view of physical reality

- Note: this “psychological atomism” dominated psychology for more than a century
 - It led to the further assumption that the main business of psychology was to find the laws by which the supposedly separate “atoms” of experience become “associated”



Impressions and ideas are a distinct, separate, isolated unit; though he believed in the existence of an external world he made no assumptions about where impressions come from, what causes them, or what makes them more vivid than ideas