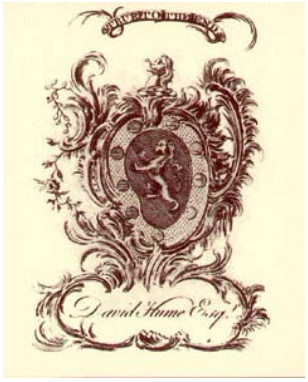

The Failure of Hume's *Treatise*

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THE FAILURE OF HUME'S TREATISE

The Treatise is, of course, a failure; Hume tells us so himself. Hume's reservations about the Treatise both in later writings and even within the work itself are well known.[1] What is less clear is exactly why Hume found the Treatise so unsatisfactory. This is a complicated question, for to explain why the Treatise does not live up to Hume's expectations presupposes an understanding of the more fundamental problem of what Hume's expectations were in the first place. In what follows I present a theory about what it was that Hume hoped to accomplish in the Treatise and why this project was ultimately unsuccessful.

In the first two sections of this paper I discuss three philosophical positions with which Hume was concerned, and I present three faculties of the understanding which he isolates in the Treatise. In the third section I argue that Hume's goal is to match these three philosophical positions with the three faculties, and by doing so to provide both a critique of unsatisfactory positions and a foundation for his own "science of man." I conclude by showing that this matching project is ultimately unsuccessful, thus dooming the Treatise to at least partial failure. My analysis is based primarily on Treatise I; without argument here I subscribe to Kemp Smith's thesis that Treatise I represents the most advanced stage of thinking in the Treatise.[2] This explains to me how Hume can continue to write Books II and III after the partial failure of the project which he registers in the conclusion of Treatise I. I read the conclusion to Book I as the conclusion of the whole project.

Three Philosophical Positions

The three philosophical positions which I wish to discuss are described by Hume at one point as *that of the vulgar, that of a false philosophy, and that of the true* (T222).

Let us discuss them in that order:

1. Vulgar Superstition. Hume frequently discusses and criticizes a set of beliefs and ways of thinking which for convenience I call "vulgar superstition." The real enemy here is popular religion, which for Hume is the clearest expression of this mode of thought. In the Treatise Hume is more wary of criticizing popular religion than he sometimes was in later works, but the general target of his remarks is still clear. The kinds of thought Hume has in mind here are bigotry, superstition, credulity, prejudice, and indoctrination. This type of thinking presents a constant barrier to human enlightenment and progress, and for Hume the role of philosophy is to attack superstition and keep it in check. As Hume expressed it a few years later,

> *One considerable advantage that arises from philosophy, consists in the sovereign antidote which it offers to superstition and false religion. All other remedies against that pestilent distemper are vague, or at least uncertain.*[3]

2. Dogmatism. Another target which Hume attacks in the Treatise is a dogmatic or rationalistic approach to philosophy, best exemplified by Cambridge Platonism and Cartesianism. This type of philosophy seeks to base ethics upon pure reason, to know things with certainty, and to penetrate the ultimate nature of man, God, and the universe. Hume hopes to show *the fallacy of all this philosophy* (T 413) by showing that reason can never motivate action, that only fools claim to know things with certainty (T 270), and that we must be content to understand the appearance of things rather than to know their *secret causes* (T 64).

3. The Science of Man. Hume's own position, the "science of man," is presented as a middle ground-empirical rather than a priori and scientific rather than superstitious.

The goal of this *true philosophy* is to discover the *original qualities of human nature* (T 562), resulting in a Newtonian analysis of man himself.[4] For Hume *true philosophers* are characterized by their *moderate scepticism* (T 224), so Hume's system is to be built on probable judgments rather than certain ones, and it will deal with appearances rather than essences. Here again Hume follows the "constructive scepticism" of Newton.[5] Hume sees considerable danger in following either rationalism or superstition, but he has great hopes for the science of man which he conceives as a master-science. *There is no question of importance,* he writes, *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* (T xx).

Three Faculties of the Understanding.

According to Hume there are at least three ways in which we make judgments. These three faculties of the mind have important consequences for the philosophical positions outlined above.

1. Demonstrative Reason. In the Treatise Hume distinguishes one faculty of the understanding which is responsible for making analytic or necessary judgments. In Hume's terms this involves making judgments based purely upon the comparison of ideas prior to any experience of how these ideas are related in experience. His insight about this kind of judgment is that it can never give us any substantive knowledge about the world. Although these judgments have the best possible claim on certainty they can account for *no single phaenomenon, even the most simple* (T 69). Demonstrative reason can supply us, according to Hume, only with sterile tautologies.

2. The General and Established Properties of the Imagination. Hume also isolates a faculty of the understanding which is responsible for our judgments of cause and effect. These judgments, for Hume, are ultimately made by universal and unavoidable properties of the imagination.

It is this aspect of the imagination which *peoples the world, and brings us acquainted with such existences, as by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of the senses and memory* (T 108). This operation of the understanding is responsible for our empirical or scientific beliefs. The general properties of the imagination are universal in that they are shared by everyone - philosophers, peasants, children, even animals. They are unavoidable in that without them we would surely die, since it is only this aspect of the imagination which allows us to make the simplest judgments concerning the causal operations of the world.

3. The Trivial Qualities of the Imagination. A third faculty of the mind is also based upon the imagination. This part of the imagination is responsible for making certain non-causal judgments about the world. The distinction between these trivial qualities of the imagination and the general properties which we have just discussed is very important for Hume:[6]

> *I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistable, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of* [the trivial qualities]. *The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition.* (T 225)

The trivial properties of the imagination resemble the general properties in that they form judgments with empirical content, rather than the barren tautologies formed by demonstrative reason. They do give us beliefs in matters of fact. Unlike the general properties, however, the operations of the trivial qualities can and should be avoided.

The Project of the Treatise

We are now in a position to see the project which Hume hopes to accomplish in the Treatise. What he wants to do is to match the three philosophical positions - vulgar superstition, dogmatism, and the science of man - to the three faculties of the understanding - the trivial qualities, demonstrative reason, and the general properties of the imagination respectively. Hume expects this matching to undercut dogmatism and vulgar superstition while leaving the science of man on a firm foundation.[7]

Let us begin by seeing how this works in the case of vulgar superstitions. In order to do this we must first examine in some detail the operations of the trivial qualities of the imagination.

The trivial qualities of the imagination are discussed by Hume at some length in his chapters on "The effect of other relations and other habits" (T 106 ff) and "Unphilosophical Probabilities" (T 143 ff). He describes a number of non-causal judgments which are made by the imagination, the most common of which involves the confusion of resemblance and identity. Hume isolates this tendency early in the Treatise and gives a mechanistic explanation of it in terms of *animal spirits* and "traces in the brain" (T 60-61). He explains that *resemblance is the most fertile source of error*, and he warns us that we shall see *many instances* [of this] *in the progress of this treatise* (T 61). This tendency of the mind to confuse resemblance and identity underlies Hume's account of both credulity, *a too easy faith in the testimony of others*, (T 112) and also prejudice (T 146).

The actual mechanisms which Hume postulates to explain these trivial beliefs are somewhat baroque and need not detain us here. The important thing to see is that the arsenal of vulgar superstition is entirely based upon the trivial operations of the imagination, rather than the general and established properties which form our causal judgments.

By showing that the vulgar superstitions are based on the trivial rather than the general operations of the imagination, Hume hopes to provide a critique of superstitious thought. Despite the fact that the trivial operations of the fancy are extremely common they can be avoided by a due contrast and opposition. Hume feels, at least at this point, that only the general operations of the understanding are truly uniform and unavoidable. Although the vulgar are commonly guided by such trivial judgments and unphilosophical probabilities, *wise men* reject this type of thinking because it is *of an irregular nature, and destructive of all the most establish'd principles of reasonings* (T 150).

The threefold division of the faculties of the mind also gives rise to Hume's well known critique of dogmatism. Since only demonstrative reason can give us judgments having certainty, and since demonstrative reason can never tell us anything about the world, the attempt to have certain knowledge of the world is doomed to failure from the beginning. If we restrict ourselves to certain knowledge we will never know anything other than the relations of our own ideas. This is not to say that rationalistic philosophers have never made substantive claims about the world, but that the claims they have made are not based upon demonstrative reason and thus do not have the pretended certainty. Hume argues, in fact, that many dogmatic philosophical beliefs are actually based on the trivial qualities of the imagination. Thus: *The opinions of the antient philosophers, their fictions of substance and accident, and their reasonings concerning substantial forms and*

occult qualities...are deriv'd from principles, which, however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature (T 226).

The victor in this three-way struggle should thus be Hume's own position, the science of man. Since the science of man is based on a causal analysis of human understanding, it is entirely founded in the general and established properties of the imagination. Although it cannot give us certain judgments about the ultimate nature of things as rationalism pretends to do, it does give us probable judgments about the appearances of things. The science of man is thus superior to rationalism in that it can give substantive judgments rather than the uniformative relations of ideas which are the only product of demonstrative reason. The science of man is also superior to vulgar superstition in that it has reliability and objectivity by being based on operations of the understanding which are *fixt and unalterable* (T 110). Superstition fails because it is based only upon *feeble and uncertain* operations of the imagination (T 109).

The Failure of the Treatise

If I am correct, a major goal of the Treatise is thus to establish a firm foundation for the science of man and, at the same time, to develop a critique of dogmatism and superstition. This project is carried out primarily in the first three parts of Book I, and if it had been successful the Treatise would have lived up to the confident claims which Hume makes in the Introduction. In what follows I argue that in Part IV of Book I, Hume discovers problems which cause the failure of this project and thus jeopardize the whole enterprise of the Treatise. I begin by spelling out this problem in a general way, and I then go on to give specific examples of how his project of matching faculties with philosophical positions turns out in a way unexpected by Hume himself.

The major discovery of Book I, Part IV is that the

general properties of the imagination do not support the science of man. Exclusive reliance on the general properties of the imagination is shown to lead to total scepticism rather than to the moderate scepticism which is called for by Hume's Newtonian program of the science of man. Hume discovers that the common sense moderate scepticism which he had hoped to establish can only be based upon the trivial qualities of the imagination. Rather than being an avoidable characteristic of weak minds, the trivial qualities turn out to be essential to human existence. By the end of Part IV Hume consistently refers to them as being only *seemingly trivial.*[8] Hume finds himself in an unappealing dilemma. To base the science of man upon the general properties of the imagination is to reduce it to total Pyrrhonism, a view which he wishes to reject as that of a *fantastic sect* (T 183). On the other hand to base the science of man upon the trivial qualities of the imagination is to rest it upon the same principles which underlie vulgar superstition. This is, if anything, even more unattractive; for if the science of man and superstition are both grounded in the same faculty of the imagination, it is hard to see how Hume could ever carry out his project of attacking vulgar superstition.

An examination of Hume's discussions of reason, external objects, and the self bears out this interpretation. In each case Hume discovers that our most fundamental and unavoidable beliefs about the world are based on the trivial qualities rather than the general properties of the imagination. The unavoidability of the trivial qualities spells the death, of course, of Hume's original project.

1. The Validity of Human Reason. In "Of scepticism regarding reason," Hume produces an argument to show that the probability of all judgments (both inductive and deductive) can be reduced to nothingness (T 180-83).[9] The details of this strange argument need not concern us here; what is important is that this destruction of all belief is

based upon evaluating human reasoning in terms of the general properties of the understanding. We are saved from this total Pyrrhonism only by the operation of the trivial qualities of the imagination:

> *The understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things.* (T 267-68)

Thus without the trivial qualities we would become total sceptics and would be unable to survive at all.[10] The moral of this chapter is that the trivial qualities are not something characteristic only of "weak minds." Instead they are discovered to be essential for human existence.

2. Our Knowledge of External Objects. Hume begins his discussion of external objects by saying that the belief in external objects is unavoidable and that our main concern is to discover the cause of this belief (T 187). The result of the long and tortuous analysis which follows is that the cause of our belief in external objects is the trivial propensity of the mind to confuse resemblance with identity. According to Hume, the smooth passage of the imagination along the ideas of the resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect identity (T 206). The whole operation is based on these *trivial qualities of the fancy* (T 217). If we consider the question of the existence of external objects from the point of view of the general and established principles we discover that there are scientific *experiments, which convince us, that our perceptions are not possest of any independent existence* (T 210). There is thus a direct opposition between the

conclusions we form from cause and effect [general qualities] *and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body* [the trivial properties] (T 231).

Here again the results of Hume's analysis are disastrous for his original project. What he wants to show is that the trivial qualities which underlie vulgar superstition can be avoided by the "wise." Vulgar superstition can thus be attacked by showing that it is grounded upon principles which are *changeable, weak, and irregular* (T 225). But if basic and unavoidable beliefs such as our commitment to the existence of an external world turn out to be based upon the trivial qualities of the imagination, Hume's original project is in serious trouble. If the trivial qualities are as fundamental as the general properties of the imagination, Hume has no real way to distinguish his own science of man from vulgar superstition. Hume ends this chapter in a mood of sceptical gloom, caused, if I am correct, by a recognition that his attempt to distinguish the science of man from both dogmatism and superstition has failed.

3. The Self. The reading of Hume which I have been developing is particularly persuasive, it seems to me, when we come to discuss Hume's view of the self. The most perplexing problem about this topic is Hume's discussion of the self in the Appendix. Although Hume expresses his dissatisfaction with the theory of the self expressed in the Treatise, Hume nowhere clearly explains what the difficulty is which he finds so overwhelming. This has led critics to reconstruct the difficulty which Hume must have seen as the fatal flaw in his theory of personal identity.[11]

My own view is that Hume tells us exactly what is unsatisfactory when he tells us that he has failed to present a theory of the intellectual world which is *free from those contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explication, that human reason can give of the material world* (T 633). I take this as an indication that

the problem of Hume's discussion of the self is identical to the problems which Hume found in discussing the external world. A reading of the text bears this out.[12]

As we have already seen, the difficulty which Hume discovers in his treatment of the external world is that this universal and unavoidable belief turns out to be based only upon the trivial qualities of the understanding. The same result can be found in the discussion of the self. Hume discovers that our belief in personal identity is only based on the trivial quality of the mind which confuses resemblance with identity (T 254). Thus our belief in personal identity has the same foundation as our belief in the external world; in each case they are based upon the trivial propensity of the imagination to confuse resemblance and identity.

This explains Hume's remark in the Appendix that he cannot find any satisfactory theory about the *principles, that unite our successive perceptions* (T 636). We should first note that, following Newton, Hume frequently uses the word "principles" interchangeably with the word "properties".[13] Hume's difficulty is with the properties of the imagination which unite the perceptions. Once again the problem is that he cannot choose between the general and established properties and the trivial properties of the imagination. The result of following the general properties of the imagination is a destruction of the belief in personal identity, which for Hume would be an inadmissable Pyrrhonism. Following the trivial qualities of the imagination gives us a foundation for our belief in personal identity, but it also gives further impunity to the foundations of vulgar superstition. What Hume wants to do is to develop a notion of the self which is sufficient for the science of man but which also allows him to criticize both superstition and dogmatism. In this respect his discussion of the self is a failure. This analysis further explains why Hume does not spell out in detail what difficulties he

finds with his discussion of the self. The difficulties are nothing new; he has already discussed them at length, especially, as we shall see, in the conclusion of Book I.

A False Reason or None at All

The conclusion of Book I is Hume's account of the failure of his initial project to develop a critique of both dogmatism and superstition while producing a foundation for the science of man. In the Introduction Hume had promised to *march up directly to the capital* in establishing the science of man (T xx), but by the conclusion Hume is content to bring the science of man *a little more into fashion* (T 273). Hume expresses his dilemma clearly; if he adopts *every trivial suggestion of the fancy* he finds that *beside that these suggestions are often contrary to each other; they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham'd of our credulity* (T 267). The point here is that an uncritical reliance on the trivial properties brings us into vulgar superstitions. On the other hand a reliance only on the general properties of the imagination will *subvert entirely the human understanding* (T 268), resulting in total Pyrrhonism by destroying our belief in the self, external objects, and even in human reasoning itself. We are left, Hume concludes, with the unsavory choice between a 'false reason' based upon trivial properties of the imagination, or 'none at all', the total Pyrrhonism of the general properties.[14]

Hume's Treatise is thus only a partial success. If I am correct Hume's original intention was to criticize both dogmatism and superstition while establishing the science of man as the only true alternative. The Treatise is successful in that it does carry out the critique of dogmatism. If Hume did not destroy rationalism altogether, he certainly left an indelible mark upon it. So far his program achieved everything he hoped for.

But Hume's program is not successful in its attack on superstition. He hoped to provide the same type of

critique of superstition that he provided of rationalism. Vulgar superstition would be perceived by Hume, after all, to be an even greater enemy than Cartesian dogmatism. In this Hume's project is completely unsuccessful. Rather than dealing the death blow to superstition, Hume has given support to it. By showing that the trivial qualities of the imagination are unavoidable and universal, Hume has given legitimacy to his worst enemy. Although in the conclusion Hume does say *I make bold to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination,* (T 271) it is clear that he has lost the battle. The strongest thing he can say in favor of philosophy is that it is the lesser of two evils, *the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous* (T 272).

Later commentators have expressed puzzlement with Hume's rejection of his greatest work. The destruction of rationalism seems to us an impressive accomplishment, and in this area the Treatise is an overwhelming success. But for Hume an equally important goal of philosophy is the attack on bigotry, fanataicism, intolerance, and superstition. In this respect the Treatise is a failure. Rather than providing a critique of superstition, it gives a legitimacy to that "pestilent distemper. My own reading is that Hume saw the same dangers himself and that this accounts for the reservations about the Treatise expressed in the work itself, and also for Hume's subsequent rejection of that work. I have suggested elsewhere that in the Enquiries Hume does present a theory which can criticize both rationalism and superstition, but that is a topic for another day.[15]

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1. I am assuming that Hume rejects the Treatise for philosophical rather than literary reasons. See John O. Nelson "Two Main Questions Concerning Hume's Treatise and Enquiry" in Philosophical Review, LXXXI, 3 (1972), pp. 330-350 for some passages where Hume rejects the Treatise in later writings as well as argumentation that Hume's dissatisfaction with the Treatise is primarily philosophical rather than stylistic. All references to the Treatise itself will be given in the text itself as T followed by a page number. The edition used is A Treatise of Human Nature, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). I am indebted to my graduate students at Villanova for their helpful criticism of the ideas which went into this paper.

2. Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London: MacMillan and Co., 1941) p. vi.

3. "Of Suicide" in Philosophical Works of David Hume ed. by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1966), IV 407.

4. For an excellent discussion of Hume on dogmatism and the science of man see Nicholas Capaldi, David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1975), p. 32 ff.

5. For the constructive scepticism of Newton see Henry G. Van Leeuwen, The Problem of Certainty in English Thought (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), pp. 106 ff.

6. Some passages where the trivial qualities are discussed include T 109-110, T 143, T 150, T 217, T 225, T 238, T 254n, T 265-69.

7. On a number of points I am in agreement with Passmore who writes that for Hume the problem is "to develop a scepticism deep enough to dispel the presumption that a developed science will be purely 'rational', but sufficiently 'mitigated' to allow of the supremacy of science over superstition." See John Passmore, Hume's Intentions (New York: Basic Books, 1968) p. 10. See also pp. 59-60 for a discussion of Hume's attempt to distinguish the trivial from the general properties of the imagination.

8. T 254n, T 265, T 238. Emphasis mine.

9. I have discussed this chapter in greater length in "A Sceptic's Progress," forthcoming in McGill Hume Studies ed. by Norton, Capaldi, and Robison. The present paper is generally an expansion of some of the ideas presented in the earlier paper.

10. Hume does not explicitly connect the trivial quality of the imagination which saves us from Pyrrhonism here with the tendency of the mind to confuse resemblance and identity. However, Hume does connect the argument of "Of scepticism with regard to reason" to an earlier and very similar argument regarding "Printers and Copyists" (T 144-146, the connection is made at T 146n). The printers and copyists argument clearly involves the confusion of resemblance and identity and if pressed Hume would probably admit the same of the reiterated probability argument in Part IV, section I. Since all the reiterated calculations of probability are so similar Hume would say that *as most of these proofs are perfectly resembling, the mind runs easily along them... and forms but a confus'd and general notion of each link* (T 146).

11. See for example Wade L. Robison, "Hume on Personal Identity," Journal of the History of Philosophy, XII (1974) pp. 181-93; Stephen Nathanson, "Hume's Second Thoughts on the Self," Hume Studies, II (1976), pp. 73-76.

12. The parallelism between Hume's discussion of the self and his discussion of the external world is also suggested by Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited," Dialogue, XIV (1975), pp. 389-409, p. 393.

13. Kemp Smith, p. 55.

14. The most similar treatment of Hume which I have been able to discover is Daniel Breazeale, "Hume's Impasse," Journal of the History of Philosophy, XIII (1975), pp. 311-33. Although I agree in general terms with Breazeale's account of the failure of the Treatise, I have worked it out in quite a different way.

15. "A Sceptic's Progress."