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A portrait of David Hume, a Scottish philosopher, economist, and historian. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a reddish-brown turban and a brown coat with a white cravat and a gold chain. The background is dark and textured.

A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE

DAVID HUME

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A Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume.

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Contents

Introduction

Book I. Of The Understanding

Part I. Of Ideas; Their Origin, Composition, Abstraction, Connexion, Etc

Section I. Of The Origin Of Our Ideas

Section II. Division Of The Subject

Section III. Of The Ideas Of The Memory And Imagination

Section IV. Of The Connexion Or Association Of Ideas

Section V. Of Relations

Section VI. Of Modes And Substances

Section VII. Of Abstract Ideas

Part II. Of The Ideas Of Space And Time

Section I. Of The Infinite Divisibility Of Our Ideas Of Space And Time

Section II. Of The Infinite Divisibility Of Space And Time

Section III. Of The Other Qualities Of Our Ideas Of Space And Time

Section IV. Objections Answer'd

Section V. The Same Subject Continu'd

Section VI. Of The Idea Of Existence, And Of External Existence

Part III. Of Knowledge And Probability

Section I. Of Knowledge

Section II. Of Probability; And Of The Idea Of Cause And Effect

Section III. Why A Cause Is Always Necessary

Section IV. Of The Component Parts Of Our Reasonings Concerning Cause And Effect

Section V. Of The Impressions Of The Senses And Memory

Section VI. Of The Inference From The Impression To The Idea

Section VII. Of The Nature Of The Idea Or Belief

Section VIII. Of The Causes Of Belief

Section IX. Of The Effects Of Other Relations And Other Habits

Section X. Of The Influence Of Belief

Section XI. Of The Probability Of Chances

Section XII. Of The Probability Of Causes

Section XIII. Of Unphilosophical Probability

Section XIV. Of The Idea Of Necessary Connexion

Section XV. Rules By Which To Judge Of Causes And Effects

Section XVI. Of The Reason Of Animals

Part IV. Of The Sceptical And Other Systems Of Philosophy

Section I. Of Scepticism With Regard To Reason

Section II. Of Scepticism With Regard To The Senses

Section III. Of The Antient Philosophy

Section IV. Of The Modern Philosophy

Section V. Of The Immateriality Of The Soul

Section VI. Of Personal Identity

Section VII. Conclusion Of This Book

Book II. Of The Passions

Part I. Of Pride And Humility

Section I. Division Of The Subject

Section II. Of Pride And Humility; Their Object And Causes

Section III. Whence These Objects And Causes Are Deriv'd

Section IV. Of The Relations Of Impressions And Ideas

Section V. Of The Influence Of These Relations On Pride And Humility

Section VI. Limitations Of This System

Section VII. Of Vice And Virtue

Section VIII. Of Beauty And Deformity

Section IX. Of External Advantages And Disadvantages

Section X. Of Property And Riches

Section XI. Of The Love Of Fame

Section XII. Of The Pride And Humility Of Animals

Part II. Of Love And Hatred

Section I. Of The Objects And Causes Of Love And Hatred

Section II. Experiments To Confirm This System

Section III. Difficulties Solv'd

Section IV. Of The Love Of Relations

Section V. Of Our Esteem For The Rich And Powerful

Section VI. Of Benevolence And Anger

Section VII. Of Compassion

Section VIII. Of Malice And Envy

Section IX. Of The Mixture Of Benevolence And Anger With Compassion And Malice

Section X. Of Respect And Contempt

Section XI. Of The Amorous Passion, Or Love Betwixt The Sexes

Section XII. Of The Love And Hatred Of Animals

Part III. Of The Will And Direct Passions

Section I. Of Liberty And Necessity

Section II. The Same Subject Continu'd

Section III. Of The Influencing Motives Of The Will

Section IV. Of The Causes Of The Violent Passions

Section V. Of The Effects Of Custom

Section VI. Of The Influence Of The Imagination On The Passions

Section VII. Of Contiguity, And Distance In Space And Time

Section VIII. The Same Subject Continu'd

Section IX. Of The Direct Passions

Section X. Of Curiosity, Or The Love Of Truth

Book III. Of Morals

Part I. Of Virtue And Vice In General

Section I. Moral Distinctions Not Deriv'd From Reason

Section II. Moral Distinctions Deriv'd From A Moral Sense

Part II. Of Justice And Injustice

Section I. Justice, Whether A Natural Or Artificial Virtue?

Section II. Of The Origin Of Justice And Property

Section III. Of The Rules, Which Determine Property

Section IV. Of The Transference Of Property By Consent

Section V. Of The Obligation Of Promises

Section VI. Some Further Reflections Concerning Justice And Injustice

Section VII. Of The Origin Of Government

Section VIII. Of The Source Of Allegiance

Section IX. Of The Measures Of Allegiance

Section X. Of The Objects Of Allegiance

Section XI. Of The Laws Of Nations

Section XII. Of Chastity And Modesty

Part III. Of The Other Virtues And Vices

Section I. Of The Origin Of The Natural Virtues And Vices

Section II. Of Greatness Of Mind

Section III. Of Goodness And Benevolence

Section IV. Of Natural Abilities

Section V. Some Farther Reflections Concerning The Natural Virtues

Section VI. Conclusion Of This Book

Appendix

Book I. Of The Understanding

Part I. Of Ideas; Their Origin, Composition, Abstraction, Connexion, Etc

Section 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; 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 difference².

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.

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

² 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 term 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.

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, tho' 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 tho' 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, 'tis 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 'tis 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 discover'd 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 simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*

In seeking for phænomena to prove this proposition, I find only those of two kinds; but in each kind the phænomena are obvious, numerous, and conclusive. I first make myself certain, by a new review, of what I have already asserted, that every simple impression is attended with a correspondent idea, and every simple idea with a correspondent impression. From this constant conjunction of resembling perceptions I immediately conclude, that there is a great connexion betwixt our correspondent impressions and ideas, and that the existence of the one has a considerable influence upon that of the other. Such a constant conjunction, in such an infinite number of instances, can never arise from chance; but clearly proves a dependence of the impressions on the ideas, or of the ideas on the impressions. That I may know on which side this dependence lies, I consider the order of their *first appearance*; and find by constant experience, that the simple impressions always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas, but never appear in the contrary order. To give a child an idea of scarlet or orange, of sweet or bitter, I present the objects, or in other words, convey to him these impressions; but proceed not so absurdly, as to endeavour to produce the impressions by exciting the ideas. Our ideas upon their appearance produce not their correspondent impressions, nor do we perceive any colour, or feel any sensation merely upon thinking of them. On the other hand we find, that any impressions either of the mind or body is constantly followed by an idea, which resembles it, and is only different in the degrees of force and liveliness. The constant conjunction of our resembling perceptions, is a convincing proof, that the one are the causes