

Hume's Science of Human Nature

[course proposal]

David Hume aspired “to introduce the experimental method into moral subjects.” He wanted, that is, to give a properly scientific account of human nature, including our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. His efforts produced what is arguably the greatest work of philosophy in the English language: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In this advanced course, we will engage in a careful study of the *Treatise*, engaging with its major themes, which have left a marked imprint on the history of Western metaphysics, moral philosophy, and philosophy of perception. We will also inquire into the puzzling character of Hume's skepticism.

Part I: The Science of Human Nature

We begin by getting a sense of Hume's goals in studying human nature, and what his methods are for this study. Of particular importance is his taxonomy of perceptions, which form the basis of our thinking.

Readings: Hume, “My Own Life”
Hume, *Treatise*, 1.1.1; 2.1.1; 3.1.1

Optional: Hume, *First Enquiry*, sections 2–3; Stroud, *Hume*, chapter 2

Part II: Induction and Causation

Two of Hume's most striking doctrines emerge in his treatment of inductive reasoning and causation. We will analyze his negative arguments against commonsense views of induction and causation and his positive arguments about why we are inclined to reason in these commonsense ways.

Readings: Hume, *Treatise*, 1.3.1–1.3.7; Abstract paragraphs 8–27

Optional: Hume, *First Enquiry*, section 4; Millican, “Hume's Sceptical Doubts Concerning Induction”; Winkler, “Hume's Inductive Scepticism”; Garrett, “The Representation of Causation and Hume's Two Definitions of Cause”

Part III: Belief and Body

Hume takes up a question that strikes at the heart of his conception of human perception: the relation between our perceptions and the external world. What goes on out there, what do we have beliefs about, and why do we form these beliefs?

Readings: Hume, *Treatise*, 1.1.4–7; 1.2.6; 1.3.7–16; 1.4.2; 2.3.6–7

Optional: Hume, *First Enquiry*, sections 5–7, 12 part 1; Pears *Hume's System*, chapter 4; Butler, “Hume on Believing the Vulgar Fiction of Continued Existence”

Part IV: The Passions

We move from the reasoning to the feeling. Hume's treatment of the passions surpasses—in breadth and depth—anything written by his early modern predecessors. We see here the explanatory scope of Hume's account of the mind's mechanisms.

Readings: Hume, *Treatise*, 1.1.5; 2.1.1–6; 2.1.11; 2.2.5–9; 3.3.2

Optional: Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, chapter 1; Davidson, “Hume's Cognitive Theory of Pride”; Baier, *A Progress of the Sentiments*, chapter 6

Part V: Morals

Hume's sentimentalist account of our moral life is one of his signature achievements. While it has been enormously influential, it is controversial in displacing reason from its place in the moral world. We will see how Hume's morals extend to his political theory.

Readings: Hume, *Treatise*, 3.2.1–2; 3.3.1
Hume, “Of the Original Contract”; “Of Passive Obedience”

Optional: Darwall, “Motive and Obligation in Hume's Ethics”; Wiggins, *Ethics*, chapter 2

Part VI: The Self and Skepticism

Hume's system challenges many of our most deeply held beliefs—not least of which is our conception of personal identity. But where does his system leave us, when it comes to changing our beliefs to accord with philosophy?

Readings: Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.3–7; Appendix

Optional: Pears, *Hume's System*, chapters 8–9; Stroud, “Hume's Scepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection”; Broughton, “The Inquiry in Hume's Treatise”

Assignments

There will be eight assignments for this course: six reading quizzes, each of which counts for 10% of your grade (total 60%) and two papers, each of which counts for 20% of your grade (total 40%).

Reading quizzes will be on each of the six **Parts** of the class.

The two papers will be on **Parts III and V**. [5 pages each]