

A COMPLEAT PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK OF DAVID HUME

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ABSTRACT: A little more than three hundred years have elapsed since David Hume's birth but the highly skilled philosophical system developed by him lives on as a genuine and unique torch of guidance. The Scottish Philosopher, Historian and Economist was more concerned about the society which was reveling in ignorance. When traditional values filled with religious sentiments begin to dominate the very functioning of the society, there is always an alarming danger. Unfortunately for the fear of defamation, insecurity on personal and social levels, generally no one dares to take on the artificially created active adverse forces. The scientific outlook is dismissed only because it does not subscribe to the traditional values and is viewed as a handiwork designed to go against the image of God, nurtured from centuries. However, when the results of the much publicised principles from the texts fail to generate the anticipated results, even a common man begins to suspect the validity claimed. This would eventually give birth to Scepticism, Agnosticism and Atheism too. David Hume stood for empiricism throughout his life firmly and asserted the metaphysical speculations and claims therefrom as wrongly concluded. Unless we study properly human personality scientifically with the assistance of human Psychology and pure Sciences, according to Hume, we may not be able to understand it properly. Most of the philosophers who eagerly and hurriedly drew a connection between philosophy and human reasoning arrived at no concluding remarks convincingly. Human nature which has varied shades, can be grasped only by adopting the scientific principles than testing it merely in the realm of metaphysics. Therefore, Hume felt there is too much of reliance on the human speculative power and this would lead us to yet another domain filled with imagination and confusion. There are certain unintelligible terms in vogue even today which have taken a complete charge of the subject by either discarding or belittling the working of the scientific approach and principles. This paper attempts to bring forth select aspects of Hume's contention and concern for humanity, so that the reality would surface without disqualifying the metaphysical points in toto.

KEYWORDS: Empiricism, Scepticism, Metaphysical claims, Human Reasoning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Born on May 7, 1711 in Edinburgh, United Kingdom, David Hume lived a little over sixty five years. His work tremendously influenced great giants in the field of philosophy like Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith and a few more. To a large extent which he himself admitted, he got influenced by the philosophies of Rene Descartes, Jean -Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes etc. But his childhood did not in the least indicate clearly any sign of his self moulding into the challenging field of Philosophy to present a fresh and much needed outlook. He had the cheerful habit of living with confidence. As a boy having a total trust in his sanguine temperament but was also quite cautious and wary towards the society's whims and changing norms. The living standards in the childhood had no grace much because of the carefree attitude adopted by most of the members of the family. With all this the family as a whole was quite happy and complacent, with hardly any regrets or complaints of life. There was indeed a study atmosphere and therefore children picked up subjects of their choice. The house was having though not many but selective and important books as Reference Volumes related to Religion and Literature. His character building in the formative years was chiefly because of the lonely mansion he lived in and the freedom enjoyed. Therefore there was always a lively fountain of compassion combined with typical Idealism of own which demanded critical thinking, tolerance but also a diplomatic outlook. It is surprising that what is oft quoted about Hume's nature has been from his own self-qualitative estimation.

He said, "To conclude historically with my own character, I am, or rather was (for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself, which emboldens me the more to speak my sentiments), I was, I say, a man of mild disposition, of command of temper, of an open, social and cheerful humor, capable of attachment but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling

passion, never soured my temper, not withstanding my frequent disappointments. My company was not unacceptable to the young and careless, as well as to the studious and literary; and as I took a particular pleasure in the company of modest women. I had no reason to be displeased with the reception I met with from them. In a word, though most men, anywise eminent, have found reason to complain of calumny. I never was touched or even attacked by her baleful tooth and though I wantonly exposed myself to the rage of both civil and religious factions, they seemed to be disarmed in my behalf of their wonted fury. My friends never had occasion to vindicate any one circumstance of my character and conduct; not but the zealots, we may well suppose, would have been glad to invent and propagate any story to our disadvantage, but they could never find any which they thought would wear the face of probability.”¹

In his youthful days his mother had nurtured the desire of seeing him as a successful advocate. For a certain duration he took little interest but that too half heartedly which eventually could not produce the expected results. Moving across the important streets of Edinburgh his astute vision could record the shrewdness of the businessmen, clergies, and also the put on snobbish behaviour of young ladies. David Hume was very sensitive to the cultural activities of the society. He was greatly upset. At the same time he felt this world cannot be repaired or redesigned when it is moving at such a pace. His lofty ideals for a while, forcibly took a back seat with absolutely no hope in the near future. He felt he and his thoughts are not in the least understood. He was a prolific writer covering subjects on Morals and Political Science. He got certain attractive assignments as a private docent. However he would always think that, ‘The truth that there is no truth.’ Hume got a job but it was so horrible that he had to teach and discuss with a mentally deranged person, Marquis George, on whom Nature had bestowed all fortunes except a stable mind. Finally out of frustration he had to call it a day and even otherwise as anticipated his services were finally terminated. Hume was totally relieved. He felt his freedom restored and so could breath fresh air. Later he had a short stint travelling by ship to different countries, particularly Canada in which he was interested, but that also got abruptly aborted. At this stage, Hume took a decision to work on own. He had fallen in love with a married lady and had openly declared the same without any fear or thought. Nothing worked out fruitfully for him. His health had started deteriorating and willingly he accepted the falling shades of life with sportive spirit. He had no regrets or complaints about it.

II. GENERAL PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE AND SKETCHES : IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

Generally it is claimed that to understand Hume’s initial approach towards a philosophical analysis of knowledge, one has to refer to Locke and Berkeley. According to Hume every shade of knowledge can be brought to the level of what we are gaining or concluding as Impression or Idea. It is always the intensity that decides the level of one’s own perception. Based on individual’s capacity and avidity, the impressions make their own ground for the self. Further reasoning out the same or analysing to the logical conclusions would mean gathering of an Idea, which emerges from the personal impressions. There have been many examples sighted by the followers of Hume to make it more simple but the fact is that Hume himself had presented everything in a lucid manner without any confusion or contradiction. This can be easily followed from his own work, “Treatise of Human Nature”.

“The difference between these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind and make their way into our thought and Consciousness. Those perceptions which enter with most force and violence we may name impressions and under the name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions as they make their final appearance in the soul. By Ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning; such, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse excepting only those which arise from the sight and touch and... the immediate pleasure or uneasiness it may occasion...Everyone of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking.”²

Hume further brings up a division in Impressions as well as Ideas. They are Simple and Complex. Not all ideas could be clearly derived straight away from the impressions perceived by us. There are certain ideas which are simple, but could be a translated form of the simple impressions. However according to Hume, this may not be true with regard to the complex Ideas. Our mind as such is filled with this kind of stuff which comprises of various impressions that are either transformed into ideas or remain without getting correlated. Every individual’s potential differs and so the ultimate level of perception would also indicate variations.

III. SCEPTICISM

Scepticism is a conception in philosophy which is doubtful about the possibility of knowledge of Objective Reality. This approach seems to be pretty close to the ideas entertained by Agnosticism and to certain extent in Nihilism too. This is because the very limitation of human capacity is an open reality which is experienced by one and all. It could be proved very easily. Therefore, Scepticism got a very widespread canvas for support in the social development, particularly when the social ideals had become unsteady and manipulated. It was 4th century BC when Scepticism could effectively rise as a reaction to the preceding philosophical

systems. Most of them had based the arguments on a platform which encouraged speculative reasoning to describe or explain the sensual world. However, all these efforts landed the philosophical systems into open contradictions. Doubt was considered merely a possibility of any recognised knowledge. Therefore Scepticism at its inception stressed upon abstention from judgements for seeking peace of mind. This in turn could lead to happiness and that is bound to be the chief aim of philosophy. But history shows Sceptics continued their attacks on the philosophical dogmatic systems.

David Hume believed that the task of our knowledge does not delimit in the comprehension of being in its ability to be of some assistance in practical life. Therefore, he insisted on the fact that the only objects of authentic knowledge were closely aligned to mathematics and the concepts therein. All other objects of study concerned about facts can only be deduced on the basis of experience only. Therefore, so long as we concentrate on the subject the philosophical principles may continue to go along our concepts but when we withdraw our thought process, the reality would surface. We are attracted to an idea and so it transforms itself into a belief depending upon the intensity. Due to this our mind is caught between reality and the world of reasoning. Well, Hume brings out the question which is rather the confusion of a common man by asking, ‘Does it mean absolute Scepticism is the only yardstick required in Philosophy?’ In this regard he strongly suggests the dictates of Nature. This is because Nature on own unfolds the truth. All our so called methodical reasoning power is, in fact, pulled out of our cause and effect theory cum practice. It has its own limitations but is customary with us. Hume is trying to show the severe limitations of our belief system but at any rate he does not intend to rule it out. It is habitual for us to trust in certain principles though we are not capable enough to prove our opinions. It is mostly by the force of the circumstances that not that we believe. Many a time, our belief is due to the prevailing custom and instinct but not relying on reason alone. In Atkins’ ‘Philosophy of Hume’, this is clarified.

“ Most fortunately it happens that, since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds (doubts), nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation and lively impression of my senses which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play, a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends and when, after three or four hours’ amusement, I return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”³

IV. ETHICS

When it comes to Ethics, Hume’s sceptical outlook does not seem to be active enough with its usual parameters. Human beings, needless to say, do form opinions and ideas from the impressions gathered. Usually these opinions further crystallize into judgements which are expressed overtly. Hume expects any judgement without an empirical base, would lose its value. Being an empiricist he thinks our moral judgements generally are composed of feelings and the impressions that are moulded into typical characteristic dispositions. With this stance he thinks our judgements of justice, honesty, esteem, gratitude and all virtues in general are covered. He further expects a common string to hold all these virtues in the Ethical theory proposed. But the reality is that all of them do not have the same status or social acceptance. This is because it is but natural that society looks mainly to the utility factor. Any of the virtues when practised strictly or applied thoroughly and for some reason the consequences produce wrong results, then generally we try to find fault with us than doubting the efficacy of the virtues. This is due to the fact that virtues have traditionally earned moral approbation. In case the workings of the virtues lead to different results than those theoretically promised, Hume thinks utility must be given the utmost importance. It is clear that Hume’s viewpoint matches with Utilitarianism because there too, happiness is the aim of every action. In other words even if an act qualifies itself on the scale of morality and has an ethical base, yet if it fails to contribute to human happiness and comfort, it cannot be accepted as a genuine act. Despite this Hume wants us to catch up with some common attribute, as not all acts though morally clean, would be able to contribute to social happiness to same extent. Some of them may be capable of generating happiness to self only, although a social approval may not be gained at the end. Hume thinks it could be a serious flaw if the virtue practised by an individual is rejected as an incapacity, when it has clearly a limited scope. It is also an indication that only utility on a larger canvas should never be taken as the only faultless criterion. It may serve only the self and or society. So a virtue must be provided freedom to spread as per its capacity or the owner’s strength to wield it. Its contribution to happiness on a small or large scale is a secondary qualification. There has been criticism against Hume regarding his ethical doctrine, stating that it delimits the working. “Hume does not deny this; and in his earlier and less popularly written book on ethics, *The Treatise*, he seems rather to enjoy stating his doctrine in a way to call attention to its unorthodox character. Virtue and Vice, he tells us, are not qualities in objects, but principles in the mind; so that in calling an action vicious we mean nothing but that from the constitution of our human nature we have a feeling or sentiment of blame in the contemplation of it...here his scepticism is theoretical rather than practical.”⁴

V. CONCLUSION

When we trace back history we realize that human reasoning power had been held in high esteem. Obviously it continues even in the present age of Science. In philosophy while working on the topics related to metaphysics many times the religious sentiments disperse unaccountably and therefore necessity of human reasoning becomes essential. Much owing to this there was tidiness or a sort of discipline in the proposed philosophies, failing which everything was entering into a dreamy zone with a large scope for wishful thinking. Relying on the empirical proofs created a directive character and that marginally at least erected a support system. This immensely helped the philosophers to seek or propose an 'ism' with its limitations. In psychology too, this approach cleared many pathways for cognizing human nature and further personality as a whole. Therefore every behavioural science has helped humanity by being a corrective factor and promoting scientific temper. It is at this juncture that David Hume cautions us by announcing the limitations of the powers of human reason, which according to him, both ancient and modern philosophers had exaggerated. Hume felt that although many routes have been suggested by philosophers and thinkers alike to understand the paradigm of this universe involving God, Human beings and their connection, our knowledge is only through the five senses only. Therefore, nothing stands as eternal or there is hardly any scope for the abstract ideas that we entertain. Experience is the main yardstick on which we can depend. Our eagerness to connect cause and effect has become customary. Due to this severe limitations come to our knowledge. Traditions to which we are tied down, do not bring on the Truth which we seek. As Hume put it, "Experience only teaches us, how one event constantly follows another; without instructing us in the secret connexion, which binds them together, and renders them inseparable...Nature has kept a great difference from all her secrets and has afforded us only the knowledge of a superficial qualities of objects; which she conceals from us those powers and principles on which the influence of these objects entirely depends,"⁵

One of the key factors which drew attention towards his writings was simple expressions that he used, so that it could reach all. He felt, various proofs proposed to prove the existence of God were purely out of human speculating capacity, leading us nowhere. Finally to understand Hume's philosophical attempts to guide the society in general it would be apt to refer to Bertrand Russell who sums it up in a brief manner by presenting Hume's interpretation as, "The ultimate outcome of Hume's investigation of what passes for knowledge is not what we must suppose him to have desired...It is evident that he started out with a belief that scientific method yields the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; he ended, however, with the conviction that belief is never rational, since we know nothing. After selling forth the arguments for Scepticism (Book I, part iv, seci) he goes on, not to refute the arguments but to fall back on natural credulity."⁶

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