

Hume (1711-1776)

Impressions – sense (internal and external) perception

Ideas – thoughts about the impressions

Ideas are less lively copies of impressions (think of Plato's theory being turned "upside down"), though they can become very complex.

Even if they are complex, ideas can only ever be sophisticated combinations of impressions already perceived.

By the term impression, then, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned.

It seems a proposition, which will not admit of much dispute, that all our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, or, in other words, that it is impossible for us to think of anything, which we have not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses.

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

From this, Hume distinguishes between two types of belief:

1. Relations of ideas. These are the relations between ideas that are formed within the mind. E.g. Mathematical and logical reasoning. These beliefs are verified internally i.e. in the mind. (Think of a priori)

2. Matters of fact. These are beliefs about the nature of existing things. E.g. scientific statements. These beliefs can be verified only through experience. (Think of a posteriori)

Any claim that cannot be justified in one of these ways should be dismissed.

Hume's "Fork"

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Hume, ***An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748)***

It is important to note that abstract reasoning (relations between ideas) can tell us nothing about the existing world.

The ontological argument for God's existence is therefore invalid as it uses abstract reasoning to tell us that something really exists.

Implications of Hume's empiricism:

1. Rejection of God – No experience of God, so God cannot be shown to exist. We must, therefore, remain sceptical.
2. Rejection of self – No experience of self. I experience a "bundle of sensations", nothing else
3. Rejection of causation – No experience of causes. Event A is followed by event B, but causation is not experienced. It is instead a habit of the mind. It cannot be shown rationally to exist.