



## Hume's Theory of Knowledge

**Review of Constance Maund**  
*Hume's Theory of Knowledge*

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# Hume's Theory of Knowledge

Review of Constance Maund, *Hume's Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1937: Macmillan), *Oxford Magazine* 57 (1938–9), 24 November 1938, 224–5



*David Hume by Allan Ramsay, 1766*

THIS IS A BOOK of very unequal merit. Its main thesis consists in the assertion that Hume, far more than any of his predecessors, is the true founder of the modern subject of epistemology; that he was himself well aware of this; and that his statements concerning the revolutionary nature of his discoveries refer to his invention of this new study, and not, as has hitherto been generally assumed, to his denial of natural necessity.

This interpretation, unpalatable enough in any case, is now definitely ruled out of court by Hume's own statement, in the *Abstract*, which he wrote as a puff for the *Treatise* (and republished by Messrs Keynes and Sraffa several months after Mrs Maund's work had appeared in print),<sup>1</sup> in which he explicitly declares that his most original contribution is his new analysis of the notion of causality. Nor is her view of the paramount importance of Hume's contribution to epistemology rendered more palatable by her very summary dismissal of the claims of Berkeley and Descartes (p. 23).

This false start does not, however, diminish the value of Mrs Maund's discussion of individual points of Hume's doctrine: indeed, she is at her best in the section of the book devoted to a painstaking analysis of the various meanings and uses of Hume's best-known terms, in the course of which she notes several obscurities and inconsistencies overlooked by previous critics, and restates many well-known objections, carefully if not always very clearly. Thus she successfully convicts Hume of confusing objects with 'mental' accusatives (p. 34), specific sensible qualities with particulars, both of these with sense-given complexes (pp. 43, 48, 70), and degrees of force and vivacity with the relation of impressions and ideas (a familiar point well argued on pp. 78–80 against Stout).

On the other hand, she freely perpetrates obscurities of her own, as when S. G. Moore's celebrated doctrine that knowing a proposition to be true does not entail a knowledge of its analysis is not only taken for granted without discussion (p. 22), but attributed to Hume himself, with highly eccentric consequences. A rambling discussion of Hume's psychological atomism ends with the undefended assertion that relations between sense data are apprehended differently from their qualities (p. 104), and the consideration of his phenomenalism (pp. 109 f.)

<sup>1</sup> [David Hume, *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature 1740: A Pamphlet Hitherto Unknown*, introduction by J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge, 1938: Cambridge University Press).]

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leads to no conclusions at all. Certain doctrines, extreme phenomenalism and extreme nominalism, for instance, seem so silly to Mrs Maund that she cannot bring herself to believe that so sensible a thinker as Hume could possibly have entertained them seriously; with the result that on p. 109 he is made to subscribe to something very like direct awareness of physical objects, and later of 'accusatives' other than those of perception or sensation, in fact of abstract universals.

So transformed, Hume emerges as a half-hearted and perplexed phenomenalist, who distinguishes two types of object, perceptual and physical, and then becomes involved in an attempt to represent the latter as complexes compounded out of the former. Mrs Maund adds two more types of entity, 'perceptions' and 'philosopher objects', but does not explain whether these stand for real or verbal distinctions, or even separate existents.

After this a cloud of darkness descends upon the argument, and it becomes almost impossible to indicate, at any given point, what is the subject at issue. Hume's actual views are liable to be confused with views which, in Mrs Maund's opinion, he might have held, or should have held, or did hold, but in an implicit fashion, the relations of implication being nowhere clearly indicated. The terminology of logical constructions and incomplete symbols may be inadequate and breed its own pseudo-problems: but it is an exacter and more rigorous instrument than Mrs Maund's diffuse, indeterminate, half-Humean language. In the prevailing mist points are rarely pressed, or implications drawn: the most resolute, alert, clear-headed reader must sooner or later lose his way in Mrs Maund's meandering pages. This is a great pity, since she has much to say which is both original and valuable, but which may well escape the notice it deserves for want of a more adequate prose style.

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