Chapter 3

Analysis and Examination of the Epistemology and Ontology of David Hume

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we shall present an exposition and critical examination of the epistemology and ontology of David Hume. Following the same methodology as in the case of Locke (in the preceding chapter), we shall study Hume's epistemology and ontology as interconnected aspects, and not in isolation.

Like Locke, Hume regards 'impression' (which Locke calls 'simple ideas') as the only immediate data of our knowledge. However, Locke accepts the ontological reality of matter, mind and God. Hume attempts to show that if we carry the empiricism of Locke and Berkeley consistently to its logical end, it is not possible for us to assert the existence of anything else except momentary 'perceptions' (i.e., impressions and ideas.) To quote him,

"Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as
possible; let us chase our imaginations to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can achieve any kind of existence, but those perceptions which have appeared in that narrow compass.”

Denying the substantial reality of matter and mind, he interprets them as 'bundles of perceptions'.

Although Locke ascribes higher positions to Intuitive and Demonstrative knowledge, yet he considers Sensitive knowledge as a kind of 'knowledge', Hume, however, is of the opinion that in so far as we are confined within the realm of 'Matters of Fact' involving experience, we can have probability alone, not knowledge. He defines knowledge and probability in the following terms:

"By knowledge I mean the assurance arising from the comparison of ideas ... By probability, that evidence, which is still attended with uncertainty."  

Hence, in his view, we can have knowledge only in the sphere of 'Relations of Ideas'. However, he brings even this narrow field of knowledge into question. Thus, he expresses his scepticism towards knowledge as a whole. This seems to be the reason behind Hume's categorization of 'Relations of Ideas' and 'Matters of Mind' not under 'knowledge', but under 'Human Reason or Enquiry', which has a wider connotation.

Hume strives to show that what we call material or mental sub-

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stances are only creations of mind out of 'impressions and ideas'. He elaborates how our beliefs in material and mental substances are formed through the operation of the laws of association together with memory and imagination. We shall analyse and examine the basic concepts such as impression, idea, laws of association, memory, imagination and the like. We shall mark how Hume uses these terms in specific senses in order to vindicate his special epistemological and ontological positions. In the context of Hume's actual position in philosophy, we shall put forward the controversy of realism versus subjective idealism, and try to assess the arguments on both sides.

It is not possible to comprehend the transition of thought from Locke to Hume without taking into account the relevant philosophical thoughts of George Berkeley, the immediate predecessor of Hume. Because of this reason, we shall begin the next section of this chapter with a probe into Berkeley's epistemology and ontology. The following section will deal with Hume's 'Matters of Fact'. It will include a detailed account of his views on matter and mind, together with a brief account of his views about God. In the last section under 'Relations of Ideas', we shall discuss his views about the mathematical sciences, which he claims as having nothing to do with existence.

3.2 George Berkeley

While enquiring into the philosophy of George Berkeley, we shall focus only on those aspects which will help us in comparing the epistemological and ontological positions of Locke with those of
Hume. We find that Berkeley, like Locke, accepts the mental side of Cartesian dualism, because he also declares ‘ideas’ as the only direct objects of our knowledge. However, while Locke through his empiricism, attempts to establish the materialistic side of Cartesian dualism, Berkeley rejects materialism outright and tries to vindicate idealism. In order to refute the materialism of Locke, he attacks Locke’s abstract general ideas standing for material substances, his distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and his realism.

Berkeley starts with Locke’s premises that sense-perception is the only source of our knowledge and what we know through sense-perception are ideas, not objects. However, as distinguished from Locke, he takes it for granted that the being or existence of a thing consists in its being perceived i.e., known. From these premises, he draws the conclusion that ideas alone exist in the perceiving mind. Referring to objects such as rivers, mountains, books, etc he argues in the following way:

“What are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived.”

Berkeley’s point is that objects are only what we perceive them to be. Since what we perceive are ‘ideas’, it necessarily follows that things are ‘ideas’ in our mind, which depend upon the mind for their existence. Hence, it is implied that the perceiving mind

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is the ultimate reality. In this context, showing the influence of Descartes on Locke, and to some extent on Berkeley also, Suman Gupta says,

"it was Locke ... who had prepared the ground for Berkeley's idealistic empiricism ... by debarring human mind from directly acquiring the knowledge of the material world." 4

Berkeley attempts to clarify what he means by the existence of a thing in the following terms:

"The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study, I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit does actually perceive it." 5

It follows from the above paragraph that Berkeley uses the term 'existence' in an unusual sense. In our every day life as well as in science, existence of something means its mind-independent endurance. However, for Berkeley, 'existence' means to be perceived, to be an object of the mind: Esse est percipi. With reference to Berkeley's explanation of 'existence', A. A. Luce remarks,

"in denying to the table any existence other than perceived existence, Berkeley is denying so called material existence." 6

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6Luce, A. A. Berkeley's Immaterialism. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.), 1945, p.62.
It is on the basis of the thesis *Esse est percipi* that Berkeley refutes Locke’s concept of material substance, the ‘unknown support’ of the qualities. To suppose the unperceived existence of material substance, according to Berkeley, is an abstraction of thought, which is an impossibility. Through the criticism of Locke’s process of ‘abstraction’, Berkeley attempts to abolish Locke’s concept of material substance (as the abstract general idea) and the distinction between its primary and secondary qualities.

Berkeley argues that it is not possible to abstract in the Lockean manner, some aspects of a particular object from its other aspects, which, in experience, are always found to be inseparable. To quote him,

“I deny that I can abstract one from another, or conceive separately, these qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated, or that I can frame a general notion by abstraction from particulars in the manner aforesaid.” ⁷

In Berkeley’s contention, it is not possible to frame the general idea of ‘man’, for example, who has some colour but no particular colour, some stature but no particular stature, and so on. Berkeley holds that Locke’s general ideas made through abstraction are ‘imperfect’ in which some parts of several

“inconsistent ideas are put together.” ⁸

It seems to us that Locke’s point is not that a general idea is formed out of the different inconsistent ideas taken as a whole, but

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out of only those parts in respect of which all of them agree with each other. That is why Locke maintains that the general idea 'triangle' stands for all particular triangles at once, not being any one of them in particular.

As far as Locke's abstract general ideas are concerned, we find that Hume follows the same strain of criticism as Berkeley. Since both Berkeley and Hume confine knowledge to sense-perception only, particulars alone exist for them. However, in order to make knowledge possible, Locke recognizes the 'universals' also, which, in his view, are formed through the mental operations.

While discussing his theory of meaning, Berkeley accepts that there are general words. However, in his view, general words do stand not for general ideas but only for particular ideas. To quote him,

"a word becomes general by being made the sign, not of an abstract general idea but, of several particular ideas, any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind." 9

He emphasises that an idea considered in itself, is always a particular though it may function as a general idea when its generality lies only in its reference to other particulars. Hence unlike Locke, Berkeley does not accept the being of 'general' or 'universal'.

In order to refute Locke's materialism, Berkeley also levels his criticism against Locke's distinction between ideas of primary qualities and those of secondary qualities, because Locke claims the ideas of primary qualities as the resemblances of the real qualities

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of objects. First, Berkeley argues that it is only an abstraction of thought to separate qualities like colour, sound, smell etc. from the qualities of solidity, extension, figure, number, and motion/rest. In our experience, Berkeley holds, they are always found co-existing with each other.

"In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable." 10

Berkeley's point is that extension, for example, is not conceivable without some colour, or motion without some velocity or some moving body.

Here, we may mark that for Berkeley, what is not conceivable is not possible, or the reverse of it, that is, what is conceivable is possible. It is under the influence of Berkeley that we can say that Hume uses 'conceivability' as a mark of 'possibility'. Another ground for Berkeley's rejection of the primary-secondary quality distinction is that if secondary qualities are considered as mind-dependent because of their relativity, then primary qualities are on the same footing. This is so because they also vary in accordance with different perspectives. Berkeley's point lies in showing that all qualities alike are mind-dependent. Here, it may be noted that Berkeley ignores the main point of Locke that the secondary qualities are actually the 'powers' of material objects, not just creations of mind. Berkeley's strongest argument seems to be that if ideas are all that we know through sense-perception, then it is not possible for us to know whether some of our ideas are like the real qualities of external objects or not. It is on this very ground

that Berkeley refutes Locke’s realistic claim that material objects exist with their primary qualities independent of our mind. In Berkeley’s words,

“though it were possible that solid, figured, movable substances may exist without the mind; corresponding to the ideas we have of bodies, yet how is it possible for us to know this?” 11

Berkeley argues that neither do our senses inform us about the existence of material objects, nor can we infer their existence as the cause of our ideas (which is the view upheld by Locke). First, our senses, according to Berkeley, inform us only of our own sensations or ideas. Second, even the materialists are, he argues,

“unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind.” 12

We may mark that it is this line of arguments which gives shape to Hume’s arguments against Locke’s material substance and its necessary causal connections.

With regard to Berkeley’s criticism of Locke’s realism, we notice that the main thrust of Berkeley’s arguments lies in the assumption that

“an idea can be like nothing but an idea.” 13

Berkeley’s point is that since extension, figure and motion are only ideas in our mind, it is not possible for them to resemble

things which are not ideas. Hence, it is not possible for ideas of the so-called primary qualities to represent mind-independent real qualities. In this context, Jonathan Dancy says,

"Don't we all know that pictures can represent objects to which they bear not the slightest resemblance? Indeed, we do, and so did Locke, I imagine. But the only remarks he makes in the 'Essay' do seem to express the view that representation can only be achieved by a resemblance between the representer and the represented."\(^{14}\)

From the above remark, it seems to us that like Locke and Berkeley, Dancy also believes in intermediaries such as 'ideas' as the direct objects of knowledge. However, he agrees with Locke in the point that it is possible for ideas to represent real things, which Berkeley denies. As for Berkeley, things are only what we perceive them to be i.e., ideas, therefore, his contention is that 'ideas' can exist only in perceiving minds, not in inert material substances.

Having denied material substance, Berkeley declares that

"there is not any other substance than spirit or that which perceives." \(^{15}\)

He defines mind or spirit as

"one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the understanding, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the will." \(^{16}\)


From the above definition, it becomes clear that there is a close resemblance between Berkeley’s mind and the Cartesian mind. For Descartes too, the mind is essentially thinking and active. Descartes also divides the activities of the mind mainly into two: perception and volition. Now, with regard to Berkeley’s mind, the first question that arises is: how do we come to know about its existence? In Berkeley’s view, whatever is known through sense-experience is an idea i.e., the object of knowledge. However, the mind or spirit is the subject of knowledge. Hence, it cannot be known through sense-experience. In his words,

“which being an agent, cannot be like unto or represented by, any idea whatsoever.”  

Here, Berkeley introduces the term ‘notion’ through which we become aware of spirit. By our ‘notion’ of spirit, he means

“we understand the meaning of the word, otherwise we could not affirm or deny anything of it.”  

Thus, as far as our knowledge of self is concerned, we observe that both Locke and Berkeley agree that it cannot be known through ideas: it can only be directly apprehended. It is on this point that Hume rejects the assertion of an enduring self which cannot be known through sense-experience.

There are inconsistencies in Berkeley’s definition of spirit as simple, undivided and active being. In his analysis of spirit, he holds that the spirit is active only in respect of the ideas of imagin-

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ation, but with regard to the ideas of sense, it is passive. Therefore, it follows that within the same spirit, there are active and non-active parts. In that case, it is inconsistent to consider the mind as a simple, indivisible and active whole.

Let us now see how Berkeley introduces the concept of Infinite Spirit or God in his epistemology and ontology. According to Berkeley, things depend for their existence on the perceiving mind. In that case, how do we explain their continuity when no mind is there to perceive them? Berkeley attempts to explain the continuity of things in terms of the Infinite Spirit or God who is always present to perceive everything.

He claims that because all our ideas of sense are caused by the will power of God, they signify real things.

"The ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called real things." 19

According to Berkeley, the 'steadiness, order and coherence' of our ideas of sense clearly refer to the All-knowing, All-powerful mind as the cause of all those ideas. Hence, Berkeley regards ideas in our mind which are excited by the will of God as 'real things'. Such an interpretation of 'reality' is just the opposite of our normal use of the term. Suman Gupta points it out in the following terms,

"Berkeley by applying the expression real to unreal things obliterated the difference between the real and the unreal." 20

From an overall study of Berkeley's position, we notice two points in respect of which he differs from Locke. Locke emphasises that ideas are in our mind and that material objects are there in the external world. Berkeley reduces objects to ideas. Secondly, in Locke's view, all our ideas are caused by material substances having the primary qualities. Berkeley snaps all relations of ideas with the material world. He views the Infinite Mind as the cause of our ideas. That is why George Novack comments,

"Berkeley stood empiricism on its head by expunging the last traces of materiality from it." 21

Hence, we find that like Locke, Berkeley starts with the mental side of Cartesian dualism. However, he denies the reality of matter and ascribes the ultimate reality to mind alone, together with its ideas, which depend on the perceiving mind for their existence. Berkeley thus reduces Locke's dualistic empiricism into subjective idealism.

Now, we shall move to the analysis and examination of the epistemological and ontological aspects of Hume's philosophy. In course of our analysis, we shall try to trace his thoughts from those of Locke and Berkeley. We shall begin our enquiry with Hume's 'Matters of Fact'.

3.3 Matters of Fact

As we have stated in the introduction of this chapter, we shall discuss the epistemological and ontological issues in Hume's philo-

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sophy under the two heads of 'Matters of Fact' and 'Relations of Ideas', into which Hume divides all objects of human enquiry.

"All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact." 22

In this section, we shall deal with his views regarding 'Matters of Fact'. The major part of his epistemology and ontology is contained within this broad category. Here, we shall expound and examine his denial of external, enduring material substances and abiding mental selves. We shall enquire into his constructions of matter and mind out of internal, perishing 'perceptions' i.e., impressions and ideas. It will comprise an analysis of the key concepts of his epistemology and ontology, namely impression, idea, laws of association, memory, imagination and so on. We shall discuss his views about the possibility of knowledge in the realm of matters of fact. Due to its great importance, we shall deal with his account of the necessary causal connections in a separate chapter (the next one) along with the views of Locke on that account.

At the very outset of his book "A Treatise of Human Nature", Hume holds,

"All the perceptions of the human mind divide themselves into two different kinds, which I shall call Impressions and Ideas." 23

It follows from the above paragraph that Hume accepts two basic premises of Locke. First, sense-perception is the only source of knowledge. Secondly, what we apprehend through sense-perception are impressions and ideas. Here, we may point out that what Hume calls ‘impressions’ are nothing other than the ‘simple ideas’ of Locke and ‘ideas’ of Berkeley. ‘Ideas’, for Hume, refer to the copies of impressions. It shows that all three of them – Locke, Berkeley and Hume, accept the Cartesian assumption, namely, the mind knows only its own ideas. Even with ideas as the immediate data of sense-perception, Locke attempts to establish materialism. Though Hume agrees with Locke that what the mind directly knows through sense-experience are ideas, yet as to Locke’s materialism, he takes the side of Berkeley. Following Berkeley, Hume rejects Locke’s abstract general ideas signifying material substances. On the ground that we cannot assert the existence of anything which is not ‘given’ through our sense-perception, Hume rejects not only the material substance of Locke, but also Berkeley’s spirit or mental substance. He advocates the reality of impressions and ideas, alone. To quote him,

"Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, it follows that it is impossible for us to so much as conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions."  

His implication is that as our concepts of matter and mind as enduring substances are specifically different from impressions and ideas, we cannot assert their existence. We find that the whole of

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Hume's epistemology and ontology stands on these two concepts, viz. impressions and ideas. Hence, we are going to analyse and examine the meaning and inter-relationship of these two concepts.

Hume defines impressions and ideas in the following terms,

"Those perceptions, which enter with the most force and violence, we may call 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."  

In the above definition, Hume makes it clear that both 'impressions' and 'ideas' are 'perceptions' of our mind, and the difference between them lies not in kind, but only in the

"degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind."  

'Impressions', in his view, are the lively perceptions. When we reflect on these lively perceptions, we receive 'ideas', which are less lively copies of these 'impressions'. In order to emphasise the mental character of 'impressions' and 'ideas', Hume maintains that the difference between them is a difference of feeling and 'thinking'. Thereby, he means that impressions are directly felt, strong and vivid perceptions, whereas 'ideas' are comparatively feeble perceptions acquired through recollection or imagination. Thus, putting

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all the stress on the degree of vivacity with which 'impressions and ideas' are received by the mind, he says,

"Everyone of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking." 27

Here, we notice the difference between Locke and Hume. According to Locke, the strength and vivacity of the simple ideas of sensation assure us of the presence of external material objects as the causes of these ideas. It is this fact of being caused by extramental reality which, in Locke's view, distinguishes the ideas of sensation from the ideas of memory and imagination.

Hume, however does not refer to any substantial reality, material or mental as the cause of our 'impressions'. By 'impressions', he simply means those mental awarenesses or 'perceptions' which are distinguished from 'ideas' in respect of the degrees of 'force and liveliness' with which they are felt. He does not distinguish between impressions and ideas by the manner of their production. To quote him,

"By the term 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." 28

In this context, J. P. Wright contends that though Hume claims that by 'impressions', he does not signify the manner of their production, yet it is implied by his description of the term. According


to Wright, by the force and liveliness of the 'impressions', Hume actually refers to the forceful motions of the brain. Impressions and ideas do not only stand for the contents of our awareness, they also signify the physical motions of the brain. Wright says,

"Hume speaks of perceptions themselves as if they were physical motions in the brain as well as objects of our awareness ..." 29

Wright refers to Hume's description of how impressions and ideas

"strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness." 30

Hence, according to Wright, the difference between impressions and ideas lies in the degrees of force of motions in the brain, which is strong in the case of impressions but feeble in the case of ideas. However, Hume clearly states that we cannot form an idea of anything specifically different from impressions and ideas. The Brain is a part of the material body. Hume denies the possibility of knowing any mind-independent or continuous existence. In such a case, Hume leaves no scope for assuming the motions of the brain causing our impressions and ideas.

In the course of his exposition, Hume himself states that liveliness cannot be the adequate criterion of distinction between impressions and ideas. He takes into account that in some cases, impressions are so low in vividness that they come to the same level with ideas. Similarly, in some cases, ideas are so strong that

they are mistaken for impressions. In consideration of this fact, he contends that it is the causal priority of impressions to ideas, which is the actual ground of their distinction. Though impressions and ideas correspond to each other, he maintains that impressions always precede the ideas and never vice versa. In his words,

"this priority of the impressions is an equal proof that our impressions are the causes of our ideas, not our ideas of our impressions." 31

We find that A. J. Ayer agrees with the basic thoughts of Hume. He also thinks that it is the fact that impressions are the immediate data of our sense-perception, which distinguishes them from 'ideas', which we receive when we afterwards reflect on those impressions. Hence, he says,

"The salient feature of impression is not their force or vividness but their immediacy." 32

We mark that A. J. Ayer, like Hume, does not refer to any objective sources of the impressions but interprets them only in their relation to the mind.

Hume attempts to exhibit the priority of impressions through different examples. For instance, he argues that if we lack any one of our sense-organs, then in the absence of specific impressions, we cannot have the corresponding ideas also.

"A blind man can form no notions of colours, a deaf man of sounds." 33

We mention another example cited by Hume where he says,

"We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pineapple, without having actually tasted it." 34

He means that we cannot form the accurate idea of anything without the previous impressions of it. In these examples, we observe Hume's attempt to give a realistic interpretation of his epistemology and ontology. However, all these examples, in the process of showing the temporal priority of impressions, proves the existence of material objects also. In his first example, the sense-organs, on which depend the impressions as well as the corresponding ideas, are nothing but material entities. In the second example also, the right idea of the taste of a pineapple depends on tasting the real pineapple. Hence, it follows from Hume's own examples that the distinguishing feature of impressions is not vividness or temporal priority but the fact that they are caused by objective reality which is lacking in the case of ideas. Whereas Locke emphasises the objective ground of the simple ideas of sensation, Hume puts all the stress on the subjective characteristics of 'impressions'.

Just like Locke's division of simple ideas into those of sensation and reflection, Hume draws a similar distinction within impressions: namely, impressions of sensations and impressions of

reflection. An impressions of sensation, in Hume's view,

"arises in the soul originally from unknown causes." 35

This view implies that there are existents other than impressions and ideas but because they are not given in our sense-perception, they are 'unknown' to us. This statement contradicts his view, which we have already mentioned in the Introduction of this chapter, that

"we never ... can conceive any kinds of existence, but those perceptions ..." 36

Hence, it seems to us that two different interpretations of Hume’s ontological position are possible. On the one hand, we cannot conceive any other existences than 'perceptions' i.e., impressions and ideas; on the other hand, his view implies that there are existences other than 'perceptions' but they are 'unknown' to us. Herein lies agnosticism in Hume. According to Locke, material substances together with their primary qualities cause our simple ideas of sensation; for Berkeley, it is the Infinite Spirit which excites ideas in the finite minds. As according to Hume, we do not know either external material substances or identical mental substance, the origin of the impressions of sensation is unknown for us.

Impression of reflection, in Hume's view,

"is derived in a great measure from our ideas ..." 37

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An impression leaves its copy i.e., idea in the mind, and reflecting on this idea, the mind may again receive a new impression like desire or aversion. Hume calls it the impression of reflection. As this kind of impression is directly derived from an idea, we observe that neither of Hume's two criteria, namely 'liveliness' or 'priority' is properly applicable to it.

Now, we shall probe into Hume's denial of material substances. As according to Hume, 'impressions and ideas' which are all particulars, are the sole objects of our mind, he rejects the reality of 'generals' or 'universals'. Hume attacks Locke's abstract general ideas standing for material substances. In this context, his arguments are actually derived from those of Berkeley. He fully agrees with Berkeley that it is not possible for the mind to form such abstract ideas which do not signify any particular degree of quality or quantity, but common quality or quantity of a number of particulars. In Hume's words,

"the mind cannot form any notion of quality or quantity without forming a precise notion of the degrees of each."\(^{38}\)

He attempts to prove it with three different arguments, each of which is based on one of his fundamental principles. His first argument is based on the principle that whatever is different is distinguishable, and whatever is distinguishable, is separable, the inverse of which is equally true. Now, Hume argues that the the degree of any quality or quantity is not different or distinguishable from the quality or quantity of that which it is a degree; con-

sequently, it follows that degree is not separable from its quality or quantity. For instance, the general idea of a line, Hume says,

“notwithstanding all our abstraction and refinement, has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality...” 39

Here, he admits that we can have ideas of quality or quantity; but quality or quantity logically implies the idea of substance to which they belong. Hence, he is contradicting his claim that there is no substantial reality.

His second argument is based on his principle that ideas are nothing but copies of impressions. It is on this basis that he contends,

“as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the case must be the same with its copy or representative.” 40

Thirdly, it is a fundamental principle of Hume that

“everything in nature is individual.” 41

In that case, Hume thinks it impossible to form an idea of a thing with no precise degree of quality or quantity. Hence, he thinks that an abstract idea in itself is an idea of an individual object only, even though it represents many other individuals. To quote him,

“Abstract ideas are therefore in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation.” 42

We note that Hume uses the terms ‘individual’ and ‘particular’ synonymously. Hume argues that it is actually the idea of a particular object which may bring to our mind the idea of any other particular object resembling that object. We just apply the same name to all of them. In his words,

“when we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them.” 43

In Hume’s view, once this habit is formed, the very hearing of the name brings the idea of one of those objects to our mind with all its particularity. With reference to the above passage of Hume, N. K. Smith comments,

“Hume is cutting the ground from under his own theory.” 44

Smith’s point is that the very theory of Hume for establishing the reality of particulars implies the presence of something general or universal. In his contention, the ‘resemblance’ which Hume acknowledges, is surely not a particular determinate image, but that in respect of which a number of determinate images agree with

one another, in spite of their other differences. Hence, Smith emphasises that the ‘resemblance’ signifies nothing but the common characters of the individuals i.e., the general. N. K. Smith accepts the Kantian categories of understanding. In the process of criticising Hume, he tries to establish the reality of the category ‘universal’.

We mark that with both Berkeley and Hume, the ground of their rejection of Abstract General Ideas is that individuals (or particulars) alone exist. In this context, we may refer to the views of Alexander Spirkin who holds that the very existence of individuals imply the existence of the general. He argues in the following way:

"The individual cannot arise, survive or change without being connected with a multiplicity of other things. And since various things are interconnected, interact and inter depend, they must have some point of contact, they must possess generality." 45

Having argued against the possibility of abstract general ideas, Hume now attempts to show that our belief in the existence of material substances as something existing continuously and independently of the mind, is a belief without any rational justification. Hume ventures to prove that neither sense-experience, nor experiential reasoning justifies either of these two characteristics, namely

1. continuous existence, and

2. distinct existence

These two are supposed to be essential aspects of material substance. Though Hume’s attempt lies in denying these two aspects,

he mentions a scientific truth about them. He points out that these two aspects are interconnected i.e., if objects continue to exist even when they are not being perceived, it means that they are independent of perception or mind. Further, if again they exist independent of perception, it implies their continuous existence. At this point, A. J. Ayer comments that continuity implies distinct existence, but not vice versa. To quote him,

"It might be and indeed has been maintained, ... that the objects which are immediately present to the senses are distinct from the mind and yet have only a momentary existence, because of their causal dependence on the bodily state of the percipient." 46

A. J. Ayer, as already stated, agrees with the general stand-point of Hume. He criticises Hume only when he finds some minor loopholes in Hume's position. He tries to interpret Hume in terms of semantics. Hume denies continuous material substance, but he endeavours to explain the continuity of 'perceptions' through the laws of association. Ayer, however, interprets material substance completely in linguistic terms. 'Objects' for Ayer mean only the 'sense-contents', consequently even if they are distinguishable from the mind, they can actually exist only as long as sensation lasts. As for Hume also, all that we receive through sense-perception are 'internal and perishing' impressions, He strives to disprove the notions of 'continuity' and 'distinct existence' as attributed to material substances. He argues that as far as our senses are concerned, neither can they guarantee the continuous existence of

material objects, nor can they bring forth the idea of distinct existence of the objects. In his view, the first is true because objects are not always present to the senses; the second is equally true because all that the senses convey to us is 'perception' alone, not both 'perception' and the original of which it is a 'perception' or copy. In his view, we are conscious of all the contents of the mind. Hence, all our 'perceptions' are only what they appear to us. To quote him,

"since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear." 47

Thus, we observe that for Hume, there is no reality behind appearance.

Next, Hume attempts to rule out the possibility of 'reason' as the foundation of our belief in material substances. In this context, Hume distinguishes between an ordinary man's view and a philosopher's view and intends to show that in neither case is it possible to infer the existence of external, enduring material objects on the basis of our 'perceptions'.

According to Hume, an ordinary man accepts what he immediately sees or feels i.e., his 'perceptions' as the external material objects. He makes no distinction between 'perceptions' and objects. A little bit of reflection, Hume argues, brings out the falsity of his view. Reflection shows that our 'perceptions' can neither be continuous, nor independent. This is so because according to

Hume,

"all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirit." 48

He refers to a number of examples such as objects appearing double when one eye is pressed, the seeming increase or decrease in the size or shape of objects due to the variation of distance, changes in colour or taste due to our sickness, and so on. All such cases, he emphasises, prove that

"our perceptions have no more a continued than an independent existence ..." 49

However, what Hume projects as the ordinary man's view is actually the opposite of it. Ordinary men think that what they directly perceive are the material objects, not the mental images of objects. Hume claims that ordinary man mistakes the mental, momentary 'perceptions' for enduring material objects, and philosophers attempt to improve upon the vulgar (i.e., the ordinary man's) view by distinguishing the 'perceptions' from the objects. Here, by the philosopher's view, Hume tacitly refers to Locke's Causal Theory of Perception according to which simple ideas are caused in our mind due to the influence of external material objects. Hume opposes this Causal Theory by arguing that

"as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions", 50

it is not possible to know whether there are material objects as the causes of our perceptions. Hume, thus denies the philosopher's distinction between 'perceptions' and objects. Through this denial, he intends to obliterate the distinction between reflections of objects in the mind and independently existing material objects in the outside world. Hume tries to show that neither in the ordinary man's view, nor in the philosopher's, are we justified in inferring material substance with continuous and distinct existence.

Having argued that neither senses, nor reason can be the basis of the belief in material substances, Hume proceeds to establish that it is our non-rational faculty of imagination which creates this belief out of 'perceptions'. In Hume's view, 'perceptions' are all discrete and unconnected because he does not accept either an identical material substance in which they inhere, or an identical mind to which they belong. In that case, how does he explain 'continuity', the essential feature of material substances? It is for this purpose that Hume introduces his Principle of Association comprising three laws. Not finding the laws themselves sufficient for explanation, he introduces various other concepts such as 'constancy', 'coherence' and 'memory'. These concepts constitute the cementing materials of Hume's epistemology and ontology, while 'impressions and ideas' may be compared to building blocks. We shall analyse and examine these basic concepts of Hume's philosophy for the proper comprehension of his theories of matter, mind and causation. Let us start with his Principle of Association of Ideas which plays a pivotal role in his philosophy.
Principle of Association

In his 'Abstract', which is his self-assessment of the 'Treatise', Hume holds that

"if anything can entitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an inventor, it is the use he makes of the principle of association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy." 51

It is in terms of the association of ideas that he endeavours to explain our beliefs in external material substances, identical selves and necessary causal connections. As it is not possible in the logical sense of the term to construct enduring substances or necessary causal connections out of isolated, mental impressions and ideas, Hume resorts to the mechanism of association. He upholds that ideas have

"some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another." 52

He recognizes three such associating qualities namely, resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect. As these qualities relate the ideas, they are also called Relations. As in the presence of any of these qualities, one idea

"naturally introduces the other ... " 53


Hume calls them 'natural relations', as distinguished from 'philosophical relations', which he discusses under 'Relations of Ideas'. According to him, these three qualities act as a 'gentle force' on our imagination and bind two ideas together.

Drawing an analogy with Newton's law of gravitation, Hume considers his principle of association as a 'kind of attraction'. T. E. Jessop interprets this comparison between Hume and Newton in the following terms:

“Hume thought that just as Newton had shown that the fundamental changes in the physical world can be explained by the principle of gravitation, so the processes of knowing, so far as they consist in inferring presumed fact from actual fact, can be explained by the principle of association.” 54

From the above interpretation, it seems to us that T. E. Jessop accepts the basic position of Hume. We mark that by 'actual fact', he means Hume's 'impressions and ideas'; whereas by 'presumed fact', he implies external material objects, identical selves and causal connections of objects. However, in our ordinary life as well as in science, actual facts signify all the latter ones, i.e., all objective realities. Hence, we find that Hume uses the word 'Fact' in an unusual sense.

He explains the influence of the three laws of association on our imagination in the following way,

“Our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that resembles it.” 55

Similarly, imagination moves smoothly from one idea to another when they are contiguous to one another in respect of time or space. About Cause and Effect, Hume observes,

“there is no relation, which produces a stronger connection in the fancy, and makes one idea more readily recall another, than the relation of cause and effect betwixt their objects.” 56

As we shall discuss the positions of Locke and Hume in causal relation in the following chapter, here we may present Hume’s view in a nutshell only. Hume maintains that when we observe constant conjunction between two events in a number of instances, these two ideas get connected in our imagination as cause and effect. Hume illustrates the three relations which he also designates as the laws of association in the following terms:

“A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original: the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an enquiry or discourse concerning the others: and if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it.” 57

Here, we mark that though Hume claims that these relations associate our ideas only, all the examples he cites concern independently

existing objects, not ideas.

In this context, pointing towards the inconsistency in Hume’s expression, A. D. Lindsay holds that Hume

“*frequently uses the language of a common sense realism when it suits his purposes.*”

58

Memory and Imagination

Hume observes that the three qualities – resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect – themselves are not sufficient to generate the association amongst ideas. He finds that the faculties of memory and imagination are essential for the operation of these laws. According to Hume, in the process of association, while memory helps by reproducing the past ideas exactly, imagination contributes by its power of creation. In order to clarify their roles in association, he refers to some important points of distinction between the faculties of memory and imagination though he thinks that both of them revive our past impressions in the form of ideas. In his own words,

“The imagination is not restrained to the same order and form with the original impression; while the memory is in a manner tied down in that respect, without any power of variation.”

59

Hume’s point is that imagination is free in its operations. It associates or dissociates ideas as it pleases; but memory in its reproduc-

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tion has to preserve the form and order of the original impressions. Now, it seems to us that since what Hume calls 'impressions' are actually the reflections of objective reality in our mind, therefore the order and form of the impressions reflect those of objective reality. Hence, memory retaining the same order, comes closer to objective reality than imagination. We find a similar observation in N. K. Smith's view. He says,

"in memory the order of the ideas, like the order of sense-impressions, is determined for the mind and not by it ... The order of nature is disclosed to us in the co-existence and sequence of our impressions - an order made for and not by us." 60

His point is that in the case of memory, it is the order of nature that is disclosed through the revived ideas; and as memory preserves the order of original impressions, memory informs us of the order of nature, it is not its own creation. Though Hume recognises that memory as distinguished from impression, maintains the order and form of the original impressions, he does not go beyond the apparent feature, to its real ground. According to Hume, this feature only implies that the ideas of memory are more vivid than the ideas of imagination. Whereas the ideas of memory retain the vivacity of the original impressions to a considerable degree, the ideas of imagination lack it.

Continuing the same line of thought, Hume maintains that memory and imagination differ from each other in respect of the feeling their ideas arouse in us. In his words,

"those faculties are only distinguished by the different feeling of the ideas they present." \(^{61}\)

What Hume stresses is that it is the liveliness of the ideas of memory which produces belief in us. The ideas of imagination, lacking this vividity cannot generate the feeling of assent in us.

**Belief**

In ordinary life, to believe something is to take it for real, as distinguished from fantasy. In the case of Hume, we find that what is believed is only a lively idea. He means that an enlivened idea operates on the mind in the same manner as does its corresponding impression\(^{62}\). He expresses the characteristic of belief in the following terms,

"The belief or assent which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present." \(^{63}\)

We notice that for Hume, belief has nothing to do with objective reality. It is only the subjective manner in which the ideas are conceived that gives rise to the feeling of belief. To quote him,

"belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in


Thus, we notice how Hume deviates from the commonsense implications of these terms.

3.3.1 Matter

Now, let us see how Hume attempts to construct enduring, independent material substances out of internal and fleeting impressions through his Principle of Association.

In this context, Hume introduces the concepts of 'constancy' and 'coherence' which, according to him, are the qualities peculiar to some impressions. In Hume's view, it is the presence of these qualities in some impressions which induce our imagination to form the notions of continued and distinct existence. Though he claims that 'constancy' and 'coherence' are the qualities of certain impressions, yet when he actually describes them, we find him referring to the constancy and coherence of external material objects. To quote him,

"all those objects to which we attribute a continued existence have a particular constancy, which distinguishes them from the impressions, whose existence depends upon our perceptions." 65

Similarly, with regard to 'coherence', he says,

"Bodies often change their position and qualities ... But here it is observable that even in these changes they

preserve a coherence and have a regular dependence on each other.” 66

In the above passages, by 'constancy' and 'coherence', he clearly signifies these qualities as belonging to the objects of impressions. This is an inconsistency on his part. This is also a case of begging the question, because here, the very existence of material objects is in question.

In fact, constancy, coherence and continued existence - all of these are essential characteristics of objective reality. Although Hume intends to show that it is due to the 'constancy' and 'coherence' of impressions that we mistakenly attribute continued existence to objects, he ends up in showing the 'constancy' of mountains, houses and books, and the 'coherence' of fire in the fireplace, and so on. With reference to this inconsistency of Hume, Suman Gupta points out the close relation between language and objective reality, and comments,

"This is bound to be the case ... because our language, which Hume had to use, is meant to communicate a real world and not the distorted world-view of the idealist philosopher.” 67

Her point is that though Hume wants to project an idealistic world, the language through which he attempts to do so gives way to a materialistic world.

Now, in Hume's view, 'constancy' and 'coherence' of impres-

sions serve as the basis of our belief in external material substance. At this point, he differs from Locke according to whom it is the 'involuntariness' or the 'force' of the simple ideas which indicate external material substances. Hume objects to this view on the ground that our impressions of pleasure or pain, for instance, are as involuntary and forceful as our impressions of motion, figure or colour, but nobody regards pleasure or pain as external. But for Locke, who accepts the existence of external material substances, pleasure or pain is as objectively real as colour or figure, because all our simple ideas of sensation, in Locke's view, are produced by the action of material objects on our senses. Hume denies the reality of enduring, external material substances. Hence, he attempts to reduce them to 'impressions.'

Now, let us see how according to Hume, 'constancy' and 'coherence' contribute to the association of ideas. He contends that the constancy of impressions makes them appear as resembling each other. And the coherent order of their changes i.e., their regular succession makes them causally related. Though what we actually sense, Hume claims, are only temporally discontinuous impressions, yet due to their resemblance and causal relation, we tend to imagine them as the same temporally continuous object. He tries to clarify the point with an example:

"the perception of the sun or ocean, for instance, returns upon us after an absence or annihilation with like parts and in a like order, as at its first appearance, we are not apt to regard these interrupted perceptions as different, (which they really are) but on the contrary consider them as individually the same, upon account
In Hume's view, our imagination induces us to think that our resembling 'perceptions' have continuous existence, whereas our reflection tells us that all our 'perceptions' are interrupted in their existence, because they are dependent on bodily as well as other conditions. This contradictory condition of the mind, according to Hume, gives rise to the natural propensity of the imagination to unite the interrupted perceptions by the fiction of a continued existence. As Hume has already stated that imagination is not bound by the form and order of the original impressions, he maintains that imagination feigns the notion of a continued being which exists even in the gaps in between its appearances i.e., it exists independently of its perceptions. In his view, even if this notion of continued existence is only a fiction of imagination, we do believe it. He refers to memory as the other essential faculty which aids imagination. Memory revives a vast number of resembling 'perceptions'. The ideas of memory, being lively copies of impressions, make us believe in the idea of continued existence formed by imagination.

Reacting to Hume's explanation of our belief in material substances, Robert J. Fogelin comments:

"We are simply appalled that our beliefs should be formed on such an arbitrary basis. Furthermore, when this arbitrary basis for our fundamental beliefs is revealed to us, then, for a time at least, belief itself evaporates."

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69 Fogelin, R. J. "Hume's Scepticism". In Norton, D. F. (Ed.), The Cambridge Companion
Fogelin’s point seems to be that what ‘our belief in material substance’ signifies in our ordinary life does not fit with Hume’s account at all. In Fogelin’s view, no one believes that the substances he sees, feels, or handles in his everyday life are only congeries of mental perceptions resembling and succeeding each other. What we, ordinary persons, believe is that material objects which we sensually perceive, exist continuously to and independently of our mind or perceptions. It seems to us that Hume’s theory of material substance actually follows from his starting premises. To quote him,

“The mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connection with objects.”  

Hume starts with the assumption that through sense-experience, the mind is furnished only with ‘perceptions’ (impressions and ideas), and it is not possible to know the existence of anything which is supposed to be other than ‘perceptions’. Hence, he reduces material substances to impressions and ideas. Opposing Hume’s initial assumptions, Bruce Aune holds,

“Our senses disclose perceptual objects to us; they are not inlets through which mysterious representations are conveyed ... Hume opened his discussion with a serious blunder that started him off in the wrong direction.”


One point that we may note here is that although Hume attempts to establish that our belief in continuous and mind-independent material substance is without any rational foundation, he nevertheless holds that we cannot discard that belief on that account. He is of the opinion that as belief in material substance is practically necessary for our survival and our mind conforms to it, we accept it by our natural instinct. In his words,

“There is a great difference betwixt such opinions as we form after a calm and profound reflection, and such as we embrace by a kind of instinct or natural impulse, on account of their suitableness and conformity to the mind.” 72

He seems to retain the same opinion about our other basic beliefs also, such as beliefs in objective causal connections and in identical selves. This is a mark of the pragmatic trend of Hume – a trend which we have noticed in Locke also.

So far, we have dwelt upon Hume’s Principle of the Association of Ideas and its operation in constituting continuous and mind-independent material substances out of mental fleeting ‘impressions’. We come across this association of ideas in Locke’s philosophy also. However, the role that it serves in Locke’s philosophy is entirely different from that of Hume’s Association of Ideas. Locke introduces this issue in order to account for the errors of our mental operations. According to him, these errors, to a great extent, result form the wrong association of ideas. Locke holds that

some ideas are connected by their very nature and it is the task of reason to ascertain these connections. Here, his reference is towards the connections holding between mathematical ideas. In all other cases, in his view, ideas become associated only by chance or custom. In his words,

"there is another connexion of ideas wholly owing to chance or custom: ideas, that is themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some men's minds that it is very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the understanding but its associate appears with it ... " 73

Locke has provided a number of examples to explain such association of ideas which lead to erroneous judgments. To mention one, it may be the case with a person that when he was a child, an overdose of honey made him sick; now when he has grown up, still the very sound of the word 'honey' brings the ideas of dislike and sickness along with it. Here, Locke's point is that two completely independent ideas thus may get wrongly associated due to chance and habit. However, the difficulty in Locke's theory of association, as John Passmore puts it, is if

"ideas have no intrinsic connection one with another, it is impossible to explain why the understanding should conjoin these, rather than those, ideas into complex wholes." 74

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J. Passmore's criticism is actually from the Humean point of view. Hume denies the reality of both enduring material substance and identical mind, and attempts to explain them in terms of discrete 'perceptions'. Consequently, he has to bring in the laws of association for binding the unconnected ideas into a unity. Locke, however, accepts enduring material as well as mental substances. Hence, he does not stand in need of explaining how the 'ideas' get united to form matter or mind. Locke introduces the 'association of ideas' only to explain the root of our unreasonable conduct. Hence, though in Locke's philosophy, 'association of ideas' is used in an important context, in Hume's philosophy, it occupies the central position, as he attempts to explain all our fundamental beliefs in matter, mind and necessary causal connections through it.

So far, we have dealt with Hume's theory of matter. We have observed how Hume, having denied continuous and mind-independent material substances, endeavours to explain it in terms of momentary 'perceptions'. Now, we shall probe into Hume's theory of the self.

3.3.2 Self

Hume sums up his views about the self or mind in the following words:

"what we call a mind is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and supposed, though falsely, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity." 75

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He denies the substantiality of mind, just as he denies the substantiality of matter, on the ground of the same principle:

"Nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions." ⁷⁶

According to Hume, the concept of 'mental substance' springs out of the necessity of providing a support to our mental contents (which Hume terms as 'perceptions'). However, in Hume's view, 'perceptions' do not stand in need of a support. He provides the following reason for his view:

"Since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from everything else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be considered as separately existent, and may exist separately and have no need of anything else to support their existence." ⁷⁷

In this sense, Hume thinks that 'perceptions' even satisfy the Cartesian criterion of 'substantiality' because they do not depend on anything else for their existence. (We have discussed this point in connection with Descartes in the first chapter of our thesis.) Hence, Hume argues that we have no reason for postulating a separate mental substance over and above our 'perceptions'. However, Hume's argument does not seem to be conclusive to us. Two things may be different and distinguishable, but it does not necessarily follow from this that they are also separable in their existence. They may be complementary to each other. For instance, 'substance'

and ‘quality’ are no doubt different and distinguishable from each other, but it does not imply that they can exist separately. It is only in and through the one that the other exists. It seems to us that the same type of relation holds between the ‘perception’ and the ‘mind’, too.

As according to Hume sense-experience is the only source for knowing the existence of anything, and sense-experience provides us with only ‘perceptions’, he denies the existence of a simple, identical self. At this point, he differs from Descartes, Locke and Berkeley. According to rationalist Descartes, our very thinking makes us aware of ourselves. Existence of the mind or self is indubitably certain for him. Following Descartes, Locke also accepts mind or soul as the substratum of mental activities. But as for Locke, the ‘nature’ of ‘substance’ is ‘unknown’, he faces the problem of the identity of the self. How can we know whether the self is a continuous one or not? Locke attempts to resolve it by considering the self as pure consciousness which implies self-consciousness. Through the same principle of self-consciousness, it becomes aware of its continuity also. In course of our discussion of Berkeley in the beginning of this chapter, we find him stating that we have a direct awareness of the meaning of the term ‘self’ whenever we use it. He uses the expression ‘notion’ for our awareness of the self. Both Locke and Berkeley realize that it is not possible to know the self through sense-experience, because the self then becomes the object of our knowledge, and loses its character as the ‘subject’ of knowledge. Berkeley states the problem explicitly. Hence, according to both of them, we know the existence of the self directly. Hume finds it inconsistent with the empiricist standpoint.
In his view, we cannot accept the existence of anything which is not furnished through our sense-experience.

Hume claims that our belief in the existence of the self as something distinct from the 'perceptions' is without any rational foundation. He is of the opinion that reason cannot provide us with any information about the existence of the 'self', because reason concerns only the relations between ideas. Nor does sense-experience, he contends, support its existence, because the idea of the self cannot be traced to any original impression. His point is that whereas 'impressions and ideas' are all that we know, our supposition of the self as the substratum of all our impressions and ideas implies that the self is something different from or something over and above our impressions and ideas. The self of our common belief, Hume says,

"is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas, are supposed to have a reference."  

Moreover, he argues that the idea of an identical (i.e. invariable) self can only be derived from an invariable impression while, in his view,

"there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time."  

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In the absence of any impression corresponding to our idea of the self, Hume claims that there is no such idea. In this context, Suman Gupta comments that the denial of an identical self is quite natural with Hume because he accepts the ultimate reality of fleeting 'perceptions' only. To quote her,

"it is obvious that if fragmentary perceptions are the only existents in the world there cannot even be a unitary integrated mental self." \(^{80}\)

Hume is of the view that sense-perception does not acquaint us with anything like self or mental substance. All that our inward reflection reveals to us, Hume insists, are only distinct perceptions. In his words,

"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception." \(^{81}\)

Form the above passage, it becomes evident that for Hume, the self signifies nothing but a

"bundle or collection of different perceptions." \(^{82}\)

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In Hume's contention, the features of 'simplicity' and 'identity', which we ascribe to the self, are incompatible with the nature of a 'bundle or perceptions'. Here we need clarification of what he means by 'simplicity' and 'identity' of the self, which he denies. We find that in Hume's view, 'simple' means something that is one and indivisible, and 'identical' stands for something which remains

"invariable and uninterrupted through a supposed variation in time." 83

Now for Hume, the self is a bundle of perceptions. Hence, he argues that first, the self is not a simple thing, but a composite one - an aggregate of different perceptions. Second, he states that these perceptions are constantly changing, one succeeding another. The 'perceptions' constituting a self, Hume views to be in a

"perceptual flux and movement." 84

Thus, he attempts to present the self as changing and complex by nature. He pronounces,

"There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, not identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity." 85

As far as Hume's concept of the identity of the self is concerned, we notice the influence of the Aristotelian laws of thought on him. Hume's view seems to imply the following three things:

1. If the self is identical, it is always identical. (Law of Identity)

2. It must be either identical or not-identical (i.e., changing). (Law of Contradiction)

3. It cannot be both identical and not-identical. (Law of Excluded Middle)

What we want to emphasise through this explanation is that 'identity' for Hume means absolute identity, which is incompatible with change, and which can be ascribed only to simple, indivisible entities. Hence, the 'identity', which we attribute to the self, in Hume's view, is only a 'fictitious' or an imperfect one. He tries to establish that what we take for an identical self is actually a succession of related perceptions. He brings in a number of analogical cases, in which, according to him, we ascribe the identity wrongly, just as we do in the case of the self. He cites the instances of plants, animals, ships, common-wealth, and in short,

"all the compounded and changeable productions either of art or nature." 86

The point that Hume attempts to make through these instances is that in all these cases, though the constituent parts undergo constant changes, we mistakenly attribute identity to the composite object. Hume is of the opinion that in such cases, we overlook the changes because of the following factors. The change may be very small in proportion to the whole, e.g. if a small part is replaced in

a huge ship, the change is not noticed; the change may be gradual, as in the case of plants or animals, which evades our attention; or the changes may not hamper the function of the whole or may be taken as natural, and so on.

It seems to us that all these cases, instead of proving Hume's point, prove just the opposite, namely, that a composite thing can remain identical through perpetual changes. We may refer to Terence Penelhum's comment in this context. He says,

“there is no contradiction in saying that certain kinds of things are composed of a succession of parts, and yet are each only one thing ... Hume's fundamental error is his assertion that the idea of identity is the idea of an object that persists without changing.”  

Penelhum's view is that there is no incompatibility in being an identical object while at the same time having its constituent parts undergoing changes. What he wants to imply, and to which we also agree, is that the identity of a composite thing depends on retaining its essential characteristics through changes.

However, in Hume's contention, it is imagination which creates our belief in a simple and identical self, whereas all that sense-experience acquaints us with are only succeeding 'perceptions'. He attempts to build the unitary self out of the fleeting 'perceptions' just in the same way as he tries to construct the material substance through the mechanism of association. Hume is aware that even in his own framework, it is not possible to construct enduring matter or abiding self out of the meagre foundations of

'perceptions' only. Hence, for explaining the continuity of both matter and mind in terms of momentary 'perceptions', he brings in the concepts of association, resemblance, contiguity, causation, memory and imagination.

According to Hume, our 'perceptions' are all distinct from each other. There is no real bond among them. To quote him,

"every distinct perception which enters into the composition of the mind, is a distinct existence." 88

Notwithstanding this distinctness of the 'perceptions', Hume contends, we ascribe 'identity' to them

"because of the union of their ideas in the imagination." 89

In Hume's view, when we reflect upon the past 'ideas' we mark resemblance and causal relation amongst them. It induces imagination to associate all our 'perceptions' into a continuous whole. We may point out here that while in his theory of 'matter', Hume uses the term 'impression', in his theory of 'mind', he uses the term 'perception' instead of 'impression'. It is a bit confusing because at the initial stage, he brings the division of 'impressions and ideas' under the head of 'Perceptions'.

Coming back to Hume's 'bundle theory' of mind, Hume stresses the role of 'memory' to a great extent in the association of ideas through 'resemblance' and 'causation'. He emphasises that it is because memory revives the images of our past 'perceptions' that

we become aware of the succession in our 'perceptions' as well as of their resemblance.

In this context, Daniel E. Flage refers to an important point. He holds that in explaining our belief in mental identity,

"it is primarily on the basis of resemblances among 'actions of the imagination' that Hume explains the conflation of identity and diversity." ⁹⁰

Flage's point is that in forming our belief in mental identity, the resemblance that we detect is not the resemblance of the 'perceptions', because the perceptions in the mind are of different kinds. By resemblance, Hume here means that the act of imagination by which we reflect on the succession of related perceptions is felt to be the same as the act of imagination by which we consider an uninterrupted and invariable object ⁹¹. Flage points out that it is this resemblance of the acts of imagination which, in Hume's view, facilitates the smooth passage of the mind along the successive 'perceptions' and makes us confuse them for an identical self.

Hume has already stated that through memory, we become aware of the succession of our 'perceptions', all of which form a train of thought. He explains the succession in the following way:

"Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas; and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expell'd in its turn." ⁹²

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Hence, due to 'resemblance' and 'causal relation' (i.e., regular succession), the ideas become so smoothly associated with each other that imagination confounds this train of related perceptions with an identical self. To quote Hume,

"Our notions of personal identity, proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected ideas ..." 93

From Hume's account of memory as

"a faculty by which we raise up the images of past perceptions" 94,

we discern a close relation of it with his 'ideas', because ideas for him are

"faint images of these (impressions) in thinking and reasoning." 95

Hence, in Hume's sense of the term, 'memory' is concerned with these 'ideas' only. In Hume's theory of personal identity, we notice that memory plays a pivotal role. We have already observed that in his view, memory enables us to notice the resemblance among our acts of imagination and it is through memory that we discover the causal relation of our 'perceptions'. We have found in the previous chapter that Locke also recognizes the importance of memory in his account of the identity of the self. However, as distinguished

from Locke, Hume maintains that once we discover the causal chain through memory, we can

"extend the same chain of causes beyond our memory, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our memory." 96

According to Hume, though it is on the basis of memory that we discover the causal links of our 'perceptions' to which we attribute an identity, yet the identity is not limited by memory. Extending the causal chain beyond memory, identity is also extended beyond it. At this point, he criticises the Lockean view that identity of the self reaches as far as our consciousness (in the form of recollection) reaches. However, we should bear in mind that Locke believes in the reality of an identical self and with the help of memory, he attempts to account for its identity or continuity. For Hume, on the other hand,

"The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one." 97

He introduces 'memory' in order to explain our fictitious belief in identity. Hence, while examining Hume's criticism of Locke's theory of personal identity, we must keep this difference in mind.

The ordinary senses of the terms 'memory', 'imagination' and all other mental activities necessarily presuppose a concrete biological man who 'memorises', 'imagines' or excercises his mental powers. However, we find that Hume reverses the order and


attempts to construct the self or person through memory, imagination, etc. All the mental operations to which Hume refers throughout his theory imply not simply a concrete biological man, but a socio-historical man. It is only through social interaction that man learns language, forms ideas, becomes able to memorise and imagine, learns to form beliefs, and ultimately to practise them. In Alexander Spirkin’s words,

“A personality is a socially developed person, who is part of a certain specific historical and natural context.”

As Hume’s ‘person’ is just a ‘bundle of perceptions’, it is not capable of interacting either with nature or with man. As for Hume, the self signifies the ‘mind’ (bundle of perceptions) only, it becomes a problem as to how one can unite the contents of the mind which are changing by their very nature. Actually, it is by physical features that we distinguish one person from another or identify a person at different times. By self or person, since neither Locke nor Hume imply the embodied man, both of them face the problem of personal identity.

We have observed that. Locke accepts the existence of God. As the present study is a comparative one between Locke’s and Hume’s epistemological and ontological positions, we shall look into Hume’s position also with regard to God.

3.3.3 God

While discussing Locke in our second chapter, we have noticed that though he accepts the reality of God, yet, unlike Descartes and Berkeley, he does not assign any important role to Him, either in his ontology or in his epistemology. He attempts to prove God’s existence not as an All-Perfect Being or as the Designer of the world, but simply as a case of demonstrative knowledge derived from the intuitive knowledge of the self. As we find in the beginning of this chapter, Berkeley, on the other hand, makes the existence of everything dependent on God. In his view, all that we know are “ideas” and all our ideas of sensation are caused by the Will of God. Hence, God reigns supreme in Berkeley’s ontology as well as epistemology. When we come to Hume, we mark that he treats God just in the same way as he treats material or mental substance. According to Hume, any enquiry about God lies beyond the reach of human comprehension. In his words,

“This, I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us. The essence of that supreme mind, his attributes, the manner of his existence, the very nature of his duration; these and every particular, which regards so divine a Being, are mysterious to men.”

What Hume implies is that all that we can know about the existence of anything or about any matter of fact is through sense-perception only. In his view, reason concerns solely the rela-

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tions between ideas. But God - His nature, attributes, existence and everything - are supposed to be super-sensuous. Hence, any enquiry about God, Hume emphasises, falls outside the range of human understanding. Thus, it appears that his views about God are related to his general position in epistemology and ontology. As God does not come under either of the two categories of 'Matters of Fact' and 'Relations of Ideas', which according to Hume, exhaust the sphere of human knowledge, he denies any possibility of knowledge about Him.

In order to refute the claim of knowledge about God, Hume chooses the Argument from Design as the target of his criticism. In the words of N. K. Smith,

"This was the view almost universally held in Hume's day. Whatever supplementary arguments for God's existence might be put forward, the argument from design was regarded as the all-sufficient ground of belief." 100

The argument runs as follows. Just as in the case of a human artefact, the workmanship points to an artist, similarly the intricate design of Nature refers to the Author of Nature i.e., God. Hume's first objection against this argument is that if God is known only from His creations, then we are not entitled to ascribe qualities such as omnipotence, omniscience and the like, which are not found in nature. Secondly, Hume considers the analogy between the works of nature and human contrivance as an imperfect one. In his view, while we experience the origin of human artefacts, we have no experience of the origin of Nature.

Hume’s criticisms, we observe, are based on his theory of causation. In Hume’s view, it is only on the basis of the causal connection that we can infer the existence of one thing from the presence of the other. However, the essential condition for being thus causally connected is the constant conjunction between the two things in a number of instances. Hume contends that this essential condition is lacking in the case of our inference of God as the cause of Nature. As both God and Nature as a whole are unique, there is no possibility of observing several instances of their constant conjunction. To quote him,

“when two species of objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, I can infer by custom, the existence of one when I see the existence of the other: But how this argument can have place, where the objects, as in the present case (nature as a whole and its Author), are single, individual, without parallel ... may be difficult to explain.” 101

The whole of Hume’s criticism of the argument for the existence of God, we notice, lies within the framework of materialist language. In the above passage for example, he uses expressions such as ‘two species of objects’, ‘see the existence of the other’, etc. We have already discussed this point regarding language while analysing Hume’s theory of matter. To emphasise, we repeat the point: as language originates out of the need of communicating the mind-independent objective world, Hume cannot avoid the objective connotations of the words even though he claims to deny

external, enduring material substances. It seems to us that for Hume, when it is not possible to know even independently and continuously existing material substances or enduring mind, no question of knowing the supersensible reality arises.

To outline what we have discussed so far in the section 'Matters of Fact', we have analysed his view that 'impressions and ideas' are the sole objects of our mind. We have elucidated and examined his rejection of material substances as continuous and mind-independent existences. We have dwelt upon his denial of an identical mind, which, in his view, is the knowing subject. We have enquired into his theories of matter and mind as 'bundles of perceptions', where he introduces his famous 'Principle of Association' along with the concepts of memory, imagination and belief. We have also discussed in brief his rejection of knowledge about the existence and nature of God.

From our study of the above-mentioned issues, it becomes evident to us that all the views of Hume are based on the assumption that as far as any matter of fact or existence is concerned, the only source of our knowledge is sense-experience. He also emphasises that whenever we have to go beyond the immediate testimony of our senses or memory, we do it only on the evidence of causal relation which, again, is based on experience. To quote him,

"All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. By means of that relation alone, we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses." \(^{102}\)

In the following words, he also clarifies that 'experience' is the basis of causal relations:

"When again it is asked, what is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation? it may be replied in one word, Experience." 103

Hence, in Hume's view, experience is the ultimate source of all our knowledge concerning matters of fact. Even though causal relation lies at the core of matters of fact, we shall not elaborate it here. We shall discuss both Locke's and Hume's account of causal connection in detail in the succeeding chapter. At present, we may point it out that according to Hume, it is our experience of constant conjunction between two events which makes us accustomed to expect one from the appearance of the other i.e., to relate them as cause and effect. However, the whole lot of experience of this constant conjunction belongs to the past alone, and Hume is of the opinion that past experiences cannot guarantee the future occurrences of the conjunction. In his view, even if in all past cases we have observed that whenever there is fire, there is heat, it does not ensure that in future also they will be so conjoined. In his contention, it is only probable that in future also, fire will be attended with heat. The ground of his argument, in his words is the following:

"The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinct-

ness, as if ever so conformable to reality." 104

Hume's view is that the denial of any matter of fact is just as conceivable as the fact itself. Its denial does not involve any contradiction, and whatever can be conceived without contradiction, Hume thinks it to be possible. In his attempt to clarify this point with an example, he holds that either of the propositions, "The sun will rise tomorrow" and its opposite, "The sun will not rise tomorrow" is equally possible. According to Hume, therefore, both these propositions are probable, and we cannot be certain about either of them. Here, we may note that by a 'certain' proposition, Hume means that which is logically necessary, and consequently, the opposite of which is contradictory and impossible.

It is in this sense that he denies the certainty of all empirical propositions. Experience, he claims, furnishes us with probability alone. By probability, he means

"that evidence, which is still attended by uncertainty." 105

He does not consider 'probability' as 'knowledge'. Distinguishing the two, he says

"knowledge and probability are of such contrary and disagreeing natures, that they cannot well run insensibly into each other ... " 106

At this point, we notice that Hume differs from Locke. Although Locke also maintains that through sense-experience we cannot have anything more than 'probability', yet he regards 'probability' as a degree of knowledge. Sensitive knowledge, in Locke's view, is a kind of knowledge, though enjoying the lowest degree of certainty. However, for Hume, the indispensable condition of knowledge is the logical necessity (where the denial of the proposition is contradictory or inconceivable) and as experience cannot provide us with this logical necessity, he claims that we cannot have knowledge in the realm of 'Matters of Fact'.

It seems to us that the reason why 'experience' in Hume's view, cannot provide us with knowledge is that he uses the term 'experience' in an abstract sense. He snaps all relations of 'experience' with the objective material world as well as with the practical activity of the concrete person. With reference to Hume's use of 'experience' in abstraction, Suman Gupta says,

"By experience Hume meant just having of 'impressions' and 'ideas' without there being neither a self who has the impression nor the material substance which causes the impressions." ¹⁰⁷

Her point is that while 'experience' for Hume consists in having 'impressions and ideas', these 'impressions and ideas', in his view, neither belong to an identical self, nor are they caused by the action of material substances on us. Hence, Hume abstracts 'experience' from the objective material world as well as the unitary self. Experience for him does not mean the discovery of the causal

connections of objects by a concrete person; it only stands for the mental reception of impressions and ideas. As it is for Locke, for Hume also, impressions and ideas being the only materials of our knowledge, knowledge consists in the ascertainment of the relations holding between ideas.

We shall now focus our attention on Hume’s account of Relations of Ideas.

3.4 Relations of Ideas

In the present section, we shall enquire into Hume’s views regarding ‘Relations of Ideas’. As the very name suggests, the realm of ‘Relations of Ideas’ as distinguished from ‘Matters of Fact’, in Hume’s view, concerns only the relations holding between ideas without taking into account the existence of anything. By ‘Philosophical Relations’, Hume signifies those particular circumstances in which two ideas may be compared, and he enumerates seven such relations. He classifies three of them under Matters of Fact, which we have already discussed in the preceding section. He specifies the remaining four relations brought under ‘Relations of Ideas’ as: resemblance, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in quality and contrariety. He distinguishes these four relations from the other three (namely, identity, contiguity in time and place, and causation) on the ground that these

“depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together.”

By the fact that these four relations depend solely on ideas, Hume implies two points. First, so long as the ideas or the meanings of the symbols remain the same, there cannot be any change in these relations. For example, referring to the relation of equality between the three angles of a triangle and two right angles (which is specifically a relation of proportion in quantity), Hume holds that

"this relation is invariable as long as our idea remains the same." ¹⁰⁹

Again from this ‘invariability’, it follows that the denial of this relation i.e., the proposition expressing this relation, involves contradiction and inconceivability. As in the above example, as long as the ideas ‘triangle’ and ‘right angle’ (i.e., their meanings) are constant, it is self-contradictory and therefore, impossible, to deny the relation of equality between the two ideas.

The second point about the relation of ideas on which Hume emphasises is that

"Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe." ¹¹⁰

As these relations follow from the ideas themselves, Hume maintains that we can ascertain them simply by analysing the idea; and we do not have to consider whether there is anything existent corresponding to these ideas or not. This amounts to saying


that the truth of these propositions is independent of experience. We apprehend the relations of ideas through the mere operations of thought, by which Hume means intuition and demonstration. We have discussed these two mental processes in connection with Locke in the previous chapter. Out of the four relations, Hume views resemblance, contrariety and degrees in quality as coming under the province of intuition because these, he thinks,

"are discoverable at first sight."\(^{111}\)

Hume means that when two ideas resemble each other, or when they are contrary to each other (he provides the example of 'existence' and 'non-existence'), or when the difference between them in respect of 'degrees in quality' is considerable, we apprehend it immediately or directly. When it comes to proportion in number or quantity, Hume holds that in such cases, we discover the relations demonstratively through a chain of intuitive steps. All the mathematical propositions, according to Hume, are concerned with this type of relation.

We mark that though Hume enlists the relation of resemblance under 'Relations of Ideas', he includes it under 'Matters of Fact' also as an associative principle. Moreover, while describing resemblance as a relation of ideas, we find him using the following terms:

"When any objects resemble each other, the resemblance will at first strike the eye ... "\(^{112}\)


This seems to us to be inconsistent with his claim that relations of ideas are independent of experience and observation. In his later work *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, he does not mention any of the above four relations. There, he explicitly states that by the relations of ideas, he signifies the mathematical propositions. In the Enquiry, dividing all the objects of human enquiry under Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact, he holds,

"Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra and Arithmetic and in short every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain." \(^{113}\)

Hume is of the opinion that relations of ideas,

"depending solely upon ideas, can be the objects of knowledge and certainty." \(^{114}\)

As by relations of ideas he signifies the mathematical propositions, he thereby implies that mathematical propositions provide us with certain knowledge. However, the certainty of the mathematical propositions, he entails, follows from the fact that they do not make any claim about any empirical fact. They are concerned only with the relations, which logically follow from the ideas.

Hume’s account of mathematics has been severely criticised by philosophers. A. D. Lindsay, for example, criticises Hume’s view that certainty of mathematics is based on the fact that it is not concerned with any matter of fact or existence. He comments,


“Hume saves the certainty of mathematics by denying their validity or their application to objects. But that two and two are four is not merely an assertion of a relation between ideas: it implies also that the sum of any two pairs of objects will be four objects.” 115

Hence with a solid example, Lindsay shows that mathematical propositions are meant for their application in our objective life and it cannot be held that they are concerned only with the relations of ideas.

Suman Gupta also emphasises that it is objective reality wherein lies the origin as well as the application of mathematics. To quote her,

“mathematics in fact originates during man’s process of acquiring knowledge of objective reality. And, its validity consists in its application to objective reality.” 116

In her view, we form mathematical ideas only in the process of exploring objective reality. Again, it is only when the mathematical theories are successfully applied in the objective world that we consider them as valid.

In consideration of the above views, it seems to us that mathematics cannot be regarded as completely independent of the empirical world.

We have observed that Locke also holds that we can acquire certain knowledge only when we are confined to


the logical relations between ideas which follow necessarily from the ideas. He specifies the ‘identical’ as well as the mathematical propositions as being of this kind. To quote him,

“In sense of our ideas, there are certain relations, habitudes, and connexions so visibly included in the nature of the ideas themselves, that we cannot conceive them separable from them by any power whatsoever. And in these only, we are capable of certain and universal knowledge.” 117

But even with regard to mathematical knowledge, we find fundamental differences between Locke and Hume. Locke claims the absolute certainty of the mathematical sciences in general. Hume, on the other hand, confines certainty only to algebra and arithmetic. With regard to geometry, he holds that it is not possible to attain ‘perfect exactness and certainty’ in this field. The reason that he provides, in his Treatise, is that

“its original and fundamental principles are deriv’d merely from appearances.” 118

Consequently, Hume thinks its judgments are likely to suffer from the same defects associated with senses and

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imagination. In this context, Frederick Copleston objects against Hume's discrimination between geometry and the other two mathematical sciences. To quote him,

“If the truth of algebraic and arithmetical propositions depends solely on 'ideas' or definitions, the same can be said of geometry, and sensible 'appearances' are irrelevant.” 119

His point is that if algebra and arithmetic are conceived by Hume as working deductively from definitions, geometry can also be conceived in the same manner.

We notice a discrepancy between Hume's views in the Treatise and those in the Enquiry. In the Treatise, he does not treat geometry at par with algebra and arithmetic, but in the Enquiry, he ascribes an equal position to all three of them. In the Enquiry, while stating that the certainty of the relations of ideas (i.e., mathematical propositions) is independent of existence, he holds,

“though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would forever retain their certainty and evidence.” 120

James Noxon also points out that in the Enquiry, Hume places algebra, arithmetic and geometry on the same

footing. He states that as far as Hume's Enquiry is concerned, in case of all these three kinds of mathematical propositions, the truth of the propositions is independent of experience. As it follows necessarily from the ideas, its denial involves self-contradiction. In Noxon's words,

"It is significant that in the Enquiry he dropped his attempt to distinguish the logical standing of the propositions of geometry from those of algebra and arithmetic; all alike express analytic truths which rest upon the law of non-contradiction." 121

Even though in the Enquiry Hume treats all the mathematical sciences equally, and maintains that we can achieve logical certainty in them, he implies that this certainty is only verbal or tautologous. At this point, we mark that Hume differs from Locke. In Locke's view, mathematical propositions are not only certain, but informative, too. According to Hume, the mathematical propositions are demonstratively certain because the denial of them involves contradiction. Thereby, he signifies that these relations are actually contained in the ideas involved. Hence, mathematical relations, in Hume's view, do not furnish us with any new information.

In the Treatise, Hume not only brings the certainty of geometry to question, but also expresses doubt with regard to the very capacity of reason. He says,

“Our reason must be consider’d as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconsistency of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented.” 122

His point is that though our faculty of reasoning usually leads us to the truth, but it often fails to do so due to some other reasons. In case of factual or causal reasoning, Hume argues, one cause is followed by its usual effect only under normal circumstances, but when some other causes disrupt the normal situation, one cause may appear without being followed by its regular effect. With regard to demonstrative reasoning also, he contends that there is the possibility of an error even here. His contention is that though the rules of demonstrative reasoning are infallible, our faculties are ‘fallible and uncertain’. As every human being is liable to make mistakes in exercising his reasoning power, Hume argues that it is never possible to claim certainty about a chain of reasoning as a rational proof. First of all, our judgment about the proof is probable and not completely certain. Then, our assessment of this judgment about the

proof is also probable. Further, the evaluation of our ability to judge our judgment is also probable. Thus, the process leads to an infinite regress.  

In the words of R. H. Popkin,

"Hume tries to establish that we can never have adequate rational evidence for claiming a chain of reasoning to be a legitimate proof."  

For Hume, therefore, there is no guarantee of certainty even in the field of 'Relations of Ideas'. In the previous section, we have observed that Hume denies the possibility of certainty in the realm of 'Matters of Fact'. Thus for Hume,

"all knowledge degenerates into probability."  

In Hume's view, probability is all that we can aspire for in our life.

From an analysis of Hume's position with regard to both 'Matters of Fact' and 'Relations of Ideas', we have found that these two realms are completely exclusive of each other. While the former is purely empirical, the latter is purely rational. As according to Hume, it is only through experience that we can know about the existence of anything, all questions concerning 'existence' come under 'Matters of Fact'. As on the other hand, the sole concern of reason is with those relations which involve ideas only, not the existence of anything, rational knowledge, for Hume, is non-existential.


Hume is of the view that all our statements must be either factual or non-empirical (i.e., mathematical). A statement which does not fall under either of the two categories, in Hume’s contention, cannot be considered as an object of human understanding.

It seems to us that reality is a complex whole; it cannot be comprised under the clear-cut division of ‘Matters of Fact’ and ‘Relations of Ideas’. Propositions expressing different aspects of reality must be of various kinds, including moral statements, aesthetic statements etc. If something does not state either a matter of fact or a mere relation between ideas, it does not follow that it is not an object of human knowledge.

We observe the effects of Hume’s philosophy in the Logical Positivists of the twentieth century. They accept Hume’s distinction between ‘Matters of Fact’ and ‘Relations of Ideas’, under the names of ‘Synthetic’ and ‘Analytic’ propositions. However, they accept it not as a distinction between the objects of knowledge, but as a distinction between meaningful propositions. According to them, only those propositions are meaningful, the truth of which either follow from the meaning of the symbols involved, or which are verifiable by experience. The former kind of propositions they call ‘Analytic’, and the latter, ‘Synthetic’; they discard all other statements as meaningless.

3.5 Conclusion

Having analysed and examined different aspects of Hume’s epistemology and ontology, we would now conclude the chapter with an assessment of Hume’s general position in philosophy. In this
context, the main controversy that we face is whether Hume should be regarded as a realist or as a subjective idealist. Before presenting the views on both sides, it is essential first to state the general stand-point of realism and subjective-idealism. Broadly speaking, realism, as opposed to idealism, advocates that objects exist independent of our mind and perception; they have a real existence. Subjective idealism on the other hand, denies the existence of objective reality, independent of the perceiving mind or subject. According to this philosophical trend, everything exists as a content of the mind. We come across a number of philosophers who attempt to establish Hume as a realist. Under this camp, we shall discuss the views of Galen Strawson, A. J. Ayer and John Bricke. Under the other camp, we shall discuss the views of Suman Gupta, N. K. Smith and John Biro, who explicitly or implicitly try to interpret Hume as a subjective idealist. Through a scrutiny of the arguments on both sides, we shall try to find out Hume’s actual position.

To begin with Galen Strawson, he contends that though according to Hume we cannot have a ‘positively contentful conception’ of mind-independent external material objects, yet Hume grants that we can form a ‘relative idea’ of such objects. To confirm this point, Strawson quotes Hume,

“The furthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when supposed specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them.” 126

Strawson emphasises,

"a relative idea is not no idea at all." 127

In his view, this relative idea stands for

"something which our perceptions are (relationally) of, something which give rise to our perceptions." 128

According to Strawson, Hume accepts that we may conceive of material objects as the causes of our ‘perceptions’ even though their nature is completely ‘unknown’ to us.

We may respond to Strawson that though at some places Hume mentions about the unknown causes of our ‘impressions’, he by no means specifies the external objects as their causes. In the following passages of the Treatise, Hume makes it clear that he does not allude the causes of our ‘impressions’ to external objects:

“As to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and it will always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produced by the creative power of the mind, or are derived from the author of our being.” 129

Hence, Hume states it clearly that it is never possible for a human being to know whether it is matter or mind or God that is the cause of our ‘impressions’. In such a case, there is no scope for thinking that Hume refers to external material objects as the causes of our ‘impressions’.

In fact, by his claim that

“nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions,”

Hume leaves no ground for supposing that our perceptions are perceptions of something, or for forming a ‘relative idea’ of material objects.

Strawson, in his bid to interpret Hume as a realist, further holds that

“His conclusion is not ... that there are no external objects. It states that our actual grounds for believing in them ... cannot be supposed to provide any decent rational foundation or justification for the belief ...”

Here, it seems to us that if Hume would have accepted external, enduring material objects, he would not have tried to prove that our belief in them is without any rational justification. Nor would he have taken so much of pains to exhibit that our belief in continued and distinct existence of material objects is a mere ‘fiction’ of the imagination.

Now, we turn to A. J. Ayer’s interpretation of Hume. In Ayer’s words,

“whatever scepticism Hume may have professed, there is no doubt that he believed in the existence of what may be called the physical objects of common sense.”

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As the ground of his opinion, he puts forward the following fact. Hume, all throughout his *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, refers to mountains, trees, sun, ocean, eyes, muscles, nerves, billiard balls and such others as examples of matters of fact, not to colour, sound, smell and the like (i.e., impressions). Constant reference to these physical objects, in Ayer's view, goes to show that Hume believes in their existence and hence, he should be considered to be a realist.

However, Hume's citation of material objects which Ayer uses as the ground for interpreting Hume as a realist, seems to us to be only a linguistic necessity which Hume cannot avoid. Hume has to express his views through language, and language necessarily presupposes objective reality. The very origin of language consists in the necessity of communicating the objective reality, which we encounter in our everyday life. Referring to this inseparable connection of language with objective reality, Suman Gupta holds,

"No communication among human beings is possible without assuming human beings, their surrounding world, and their practical activity, and their power of acquiring knowledge." 133

When we take John Bricke's view into our account, we find that he directly opposes the interpretation of Hume as a subjective idealist. He offers his reason in the following terms,

"If Hume were a subjective idealist he could not provide a satisfactory account of self-identity based on causal-

ity. At least, he could not do so without giving up fundamental elements in his theories of causality and the mind. For the crux of my present objection is Hume’s need to provide for causal continuity.” 134

Bricke’s point is that if Hume were a subjective idealist, he would not need to explain the identity of the self in terms of causal continuity. A subjective idealist believes in the ultimate reality of the mind or self on which depends the existence of everything else. However for Hume, distinct perceptions constitute the ultimate reality. It is because he does not believe in the reality of a continuous self that he attempts to explain the continuity of the self i.e., the bundle of ‘perceptions’ in terms of their association in imagination through the principle of causation. It is on this ground that Bricke objects to the subjective idealist interpretation of Hume’s position.

However, the reason on the basis of which Bricke argues that Hume is not a subjective idealist does not seem to prove his point. Hume’s causal account of the self, instead of replacing the identical self, presupposes it. Can ‘perceptions’ be causally associated without a continuous self memorizing past ‘perceptions’ and taking notice of their succession? The causal continuity of the ‘perceptions’, forming the illusion of an identical self, is inexplicable without a unitary self. Hence, the ground of Bricke’s opposition breaks down, together with his argument.

Having analysed and examined John Bricke’s denial of the exposition of Hume as a subjective idealist, we shall now focus on

the positive interpretation of Hume as a subjective idealist. Suman Gupta, we find, views Hume as a subjective idealist. She argues in the following terms,

“All that existed, for Hume, are the “impressions” and “ideas” which are the only entities given in sense-experiences. Logically, ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’ cannot have an ontological status without existing in some kind of a mind however abstract it may be. This is the reason we regard Hume’s position to be an empiricist subjective idealist.”

Her point is that although Hume claims to deny the reality of an enduring mind, his very assertion of ‘impressions and ideas’ as the ultimate reality implies the existence of such a mind. The ground of her argument is that as ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’ are mental perceptions, they logically presuppose a perceiving mind. As by ‘impressions and ideas’ Hume signifies the objects of perceptions, there must be a subject receiving the objects. Consequently, the subject cannot be just a bundle of the objects. We further find that Hume relates ‘impressions’ to feeling and ‘ideas’ to thinking. Now, feeling and thinking as mental operations must belong to an active agent or mind executing them. It seems to us that it is in consideration of these facts which logically entail the existence of a mind in Hume’s system, that Suman Gupta renders Hume’s position as that of a subjective idealist. She points out that the mind which is implied by Hume’s theories is an abstract mind, separated from the body and the material world.

In Hume's contention, we have found that 'perceptions' are independent existents and hence, do not need the support of a substance for their existence. His argument rests on the principle that since perceptions are different and distinguishable from each other and from everything else, they are separable and may exist separately. However, that two things are distinguishable in thought does not necessarily mean that they are separable in reality also. 'Perceptions' are no doubt different and distinguishable from the perceiving mind, but that does not imply that they can come into being without the conscious activity of the mind.

When we turn our attention to the views of N. K. Smith and John Biro, we observe that though they do not explicitly state Hume to be a subjective idealist, their views may be taken to impart the same line of thought. Both of them attempt to show that Hume implicitly accepts the existence of an active identical mind, on which is based all his analyses.

To quote N. K. Smith,

"So far, indeed, is Hume from denying the existence of a continuing self, that ... he seeks the solution of his problems, both theoretical and moral, in that 'human nature' - determinant of our perceptions, propensities, instincts, feelings and emotions - which is but the self under another name." ¹³⁶

According to Smith, all that Hume means by the term 'human nature' is nothing but the self because in Hume's view, all our perceptions, propensities, instincts, etc. belong to that human

nature. In support of N. K. Smith's view that by 'human nature', Hume has actually meant the self or mind, we may refer to one of Hume's letters. In it, Hume makes it clear that the study of human nature involves

"examining the mind ... to discover its most secret Springs and Principles." 137

John Biro points out that Hume, in course of his analysis of our basic beliefs, resorts to different mental activities such as associating, memorising, imagining, taking notice of, and so on. Without these mental activities, even the presence of the qualities of resemblance, contiguity, or causal connection among the 'perceptions' would not enable Hume to explain the association of ideas or the formation of our beliefs.

"Were it not for this active contribution on the mind's part, the mere presence of such properties and regularities would not be sufficient to explain the combinations and transitions that actually occur among our ideas, nor the genesis of the beliefs we actually form." 138

Biro contends that each of these activities involves a duration of time over which it occurs. Hence, the mental activities imply the continuity of the mind. In his words,

"For talk of a mind doing something to make sense, there must be a temporally extended item of some sort

Hence, from the analysis of the above three views, it follows that Hume’s theories imply the reality of an abiding mind. Without the presupposition of a unitary self, all the following questions remain inexplicable, namely how does a bundle of distinct perceptions memorize, imagine or take notice of all those resemblances, contiguity or regular succession of ‘perceptions’? Therefore, weighing the views on both sides of the controversy, it seems justifiable to us to interpret Hume’s position as that of a subjective idealist.

Hume strives to explain not only enduring mind and self in terms of mental momentary perceptions, our concept of necessary causal connections also, in his view, has its origin in the mind. Next, we shall discuss the views of Hume on causal connection, in connection with Locke’s views on the same subject.