

**Philosophy 428M**  
**Topics in the History of Philosophy:**  
**Hume**  
**MW 2-3:15**  
**Skinner 1115**

**Syllabus**

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**Course description:**

We will study the first book of Hume's *Treatise*, with the aim of understanding the claims and arguments he makes about the nature, origin, and legitimacy of our ideas and beliefs. The main issues we will focus on are Hume's account of causal inference and of the notion of causal necessity; his discussion of our ideas of material objects and of the self. We will also address more general questions, such as: What lines of thought lead Hume to skeptical conclusions? How are Hume's naturalism and skepticism related to one another?

**Books:**

Required:

- Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch and L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

Recommended:

- David Pears, *Hume's System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977).

**Rough Schedule of Readings:**

WEEK 1 (8/30&9/1)

**Introduction:** "Science of Man."

WEEK 2&3 (9/8, 13, 15)

**I.i.1-7:** Impressions and ideas, memory and imagination, general ideas.

WEEK 4 (9/20&22)

**I.ii.1-6:** Infinite divisibility; the nature of space and time.

WEEK 5-6 (9/27&29, 10/4&6)

**I.iii.1-6:** The causal maxim, causal inference.

WEEK 7 (10/11&13)

**I.iii.7-13:** The nature of belief, probabilistic belief.

WEEK 8-9 (10/18,20,25,&27)

**I.iii.14-16:** The idea of necessary connection; the role of "custom and habit."

WEEK 10 (11/1&3)

**I.iv.1-4:** The reliability of reason; ideas of physical objects.  
WEEK 11 (11/8&10)

**I.iv.5-6:** Personal identity.  
WEEK 12 (11/15&17)

**I.iv.7:** The upshot of these investigations.  
WEEK 13-15 (11/22, 24, 29, 12/1, 6&8): TBA

### Course Requirements:

The aim of this course is to read and study Hume's *Treatise* together. For this purpose it is absolutely essential that you do the weekly readings ahead of time and come to class prepared. I will post weekly study questions on the web that should help you while you read the text ([http://www.wam.umd.edu/~mfrisch/PHIL428M\\_Study\\_Questions\\_1.htm](http://www.wam.umd.edu/~mfrisch/PHIL428M_Study_Questions_1.htm) later weeks will have higher numbers)

- Ten times in the semester you have to hand in a written answer (1-2 pages) to one of the week's questions. I will grade 5 of these papers, for 30% of your grade. For each paper fewer than 10 that hand in you will be graded down a third of a grade (on the overall grade on the short papers). But if you hand in fewer than 8 papers, you will receive an F in the course, independently of what your other grades might be.
- There will be a final paper, tentatively due the week of Dec. 6<sup>th</sup>, worth 40% of your grade.
- There will be a final exam on Dec 16, 1:30 to 3:30, worth 30% of your grade.

Failure to hand in the final paper or failure to take the final exam will result in an F in the course.

### Tips for writing a paper:

- 1) It is important that you proofread each of your papers and check it for typos, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. I will grade your paper down, if it contains a large number of such errors. It is part of the criteria for an A paper that the paper contain hardly any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors.
- 2) Use the active voice and try to avoid the passive voice. For example: 'Hume argues' instead of 'it is argued by Hume.'
- 3) Write in complete sentences! Reading what you have written out aloud can help you identify sentence fragments.
- 4) Write in a straightforward, clear style. Use only words whose meaning you yourself understand. If you need to use a 'technical term' whose meaning is not widely understood, explain how you are using it.
- 5) Your paper needs to begin with a short and focused introductory paragraph. In your introduction you should briefly introduce the question or problem you will be addressing and state your thesis. Also you should provide an outline of the strategy you will use to discuss the problem. It is best, if you use the first person voice in introducing what you will write about.

- 6) The point of a philosophy paper is to present an argument. One strategy for writing a paper is to present a position you disagree with, discuss the reasons one might offer in support of that position and then raise objections to these reasons.
- 7) Start writing your paper early enough to allow yourself time for revisions. Often it is helpful after you complete a draft of your paper to wait a couple of days before you return to it. By gaining a little distance you will be able to assess your own work more critically. You might also consider giving your paper someone else to read. (If you feel like you have trouble writing papers, you might take it to the Writing Center here on Campus.) Someone who is not familiar with the course material will be able to tell you if your paper is sufficiently clear and self-contained.

### **A note about the reading philosophy:**

Even though the number of pages we will read for each class is going to be relatively small, you should budget enough time for the reading to be able to read each piece at least three times. Don't expect to be able to 'breeze through' the texts and you can avoid a lot of frustration. Hume is a pleasure to read, but he is often making difficult and subtle arguments and obviously is not writing in modern American English. For all the readings you should have a pen and paper ready to take notes as you read. Hume's text, like all philosophical writing, is concerned with advancing and defending arguments. Your task will be to try to reconstruct the arguments and to critically evaluate them.

The first reading of the text should be fairly quick. Your goal here should be to get a first, rough sense of the general argument Hume is advancing and the rough structure of the text. What is his main thesis? (write this down!) Where in the text is he arguing for it? Where does he address objections? Where does he discuss qualifications? Where does he motivate the argument? Don't worry, if during the first reading you don't yet understand how precisely Hume is arguing for a thesis.

The second reading should be devoted to giving a reconstruction of the argument that is as sympathetic as possible. Now you should spend a lot of time on trying to understand how the author supports the main thesis, and how s/he might address potential objections. Here it is usually useful to try to jot down the following: What are the premises of the argument? How are the premises themselves supported? For example Hume might appeal to shared intuitions or might claim that the premises are self-evident. (e.g., "Obviously all our beliefs are ultimately based on observation...") What are the steps which are meant to get the author from the premises to the conclusion? (Here words like 'because' and 'therefore' can provide a clue.) You might think of yourself as engaging in a dialogue with the text here. Ask critical questions of the text, such as "You say that all simple ideas are copies of impressions. Why should I be compelled to accept this?" Then search the text for answers. At this stage your aim should not yet be to try to discover flaws or problems in the argument. Aim to make the argument as strong as possible.

Finally it is time to be critical. During a third reading you ought to try to see if you can uncover weaknesses in the arguments. If someone would want to disagree with a conclusion, there are two general ways in which one might attack the author's arguments. One, you can disagree with one or more of the premises. That is you might accept that *if* we grant the premises, *then* the conclusion follows, but you might disagree with one or more of the premises. (But then you should ask yourself how you would respond to the attempt to motivate the premises.) Or, two, you might disagree with one or more of the steps in the argument. That is,

you might be willing to accept the premises, but you might deny that this commits you to the conclusion as well. If you have an objection of the latter kind you should try to explain why it is possible to accept the author's premises and yet deny his or her conclusions. (Of course you also might have objections of both kinds.)

A careful reading of a difficult text takes time. Learn to read patiently and slowly, and before you get frustrated, remember that even professional philosophers struggle with some of the texts you are reading. One of the most wonderful aspects of reading philosophy is that it allows you to engage in conversations with some of the deepest and most original thinkers of all times. Enjoy the challenge!

#### ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

As you know, the university has a student-administered Honor Code and Honor Pledge which commits you neither to give nor receive any unauthorized assistance on any of your assignments. Unauthorized assistance includes plagiarizing papers. Whenever you quote from an author directly you must identify the quote and add a reference to the source. The same goes for very close paraphrases of someone else's ideas.

#### ACCOMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:

If you need special accommodations please let me know at the beginning of term so that we can work out appropriate arrangements.

#### RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES:

If you will need to miss class for religious observances, please let me know within the first couple of weeks of class.

**Some important terminology:  
(courtesy of Prof. Janet Broughton)**

Here are some terms that people use when they talk about broad aspects of Hume's philosophy. Many of the terms are used without a great deal of precision, so you will often need to figure out the intended use from context. Of course, you will also need to think about whether you yourself believe Hume should be interpreted as holding these various views.

**“Naturalism”:** This is a notoriously flexible term. Here are some of its meanings.

- (1) The view that some subject-matter that philosophers have traditionally investigated *a priori* should instead be investigated empirically.
- (2) The view that philosophical investigation is in general continuous with scientific investigation in its methods, subject-matter, or both.
- (3) The view that reality contains no supernatural beings (like God) or causes (like fate); or the view that we don't know whether there is anything supernatural; or the view that at any rate our philosophical investigations shouldn't appeal to anything supernatural.
- (4) The view that human beings are basically very smart animals, not beings that are in some way higher and fundamentally different in kind from, e.g., dogs and horses.
- (5) The view that evaluative claims (e.g., “Telling a lie is morally wrong”) can in some way be reduced to non-evaluative claims.
- (6) The view that although there are aspects of our cognition for which we cannot offer grounds, this does not license a criticism of, or doubt about, the products of these aspects of cognition.

**“Skepticism”:** Another flexible term. Again, some of its meanings:

- (1) The view that we cannot be *absolutely certain* of the truth of some or all of our beliefs.
- (2) The view that some or all of our beliefs are *entirely unjustified*.
- (3) The view that we know less than we think we do.
- (4) The view that some or all of our concepts somehow fall short of what we take them to be.

**“Empiricism”:**

- (1) The view that our sensations and feelings, along with our reflection on our own minds, provide all of the materials of thought, or all of the content of our concepts.

- (2) The view that some or all of our most important beliefs about the world can be justified only by appeal to experience (sensation, feeling, and reflection).

**The “theory of ideas”:**

This is a view thought by many people to have been embraced by many of the leading philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, including Descartes and Locke. Its core is the view that in having sensory cognition, we are *immediately* aware only of the contents of our own minds and *not* of things that are independent of our minds (physical objects). If this theory is correct, then it seems that in order to have sensory cognition of independent objects, we must be able to justify drawing some sort of inference from the contents of our minds (our “ideas”) to the existence and character of the independent objects.

Hume uses the term “perception” as a quite general term for all of our mental states; he reserves the term “idea” for a subset of our mental states.