



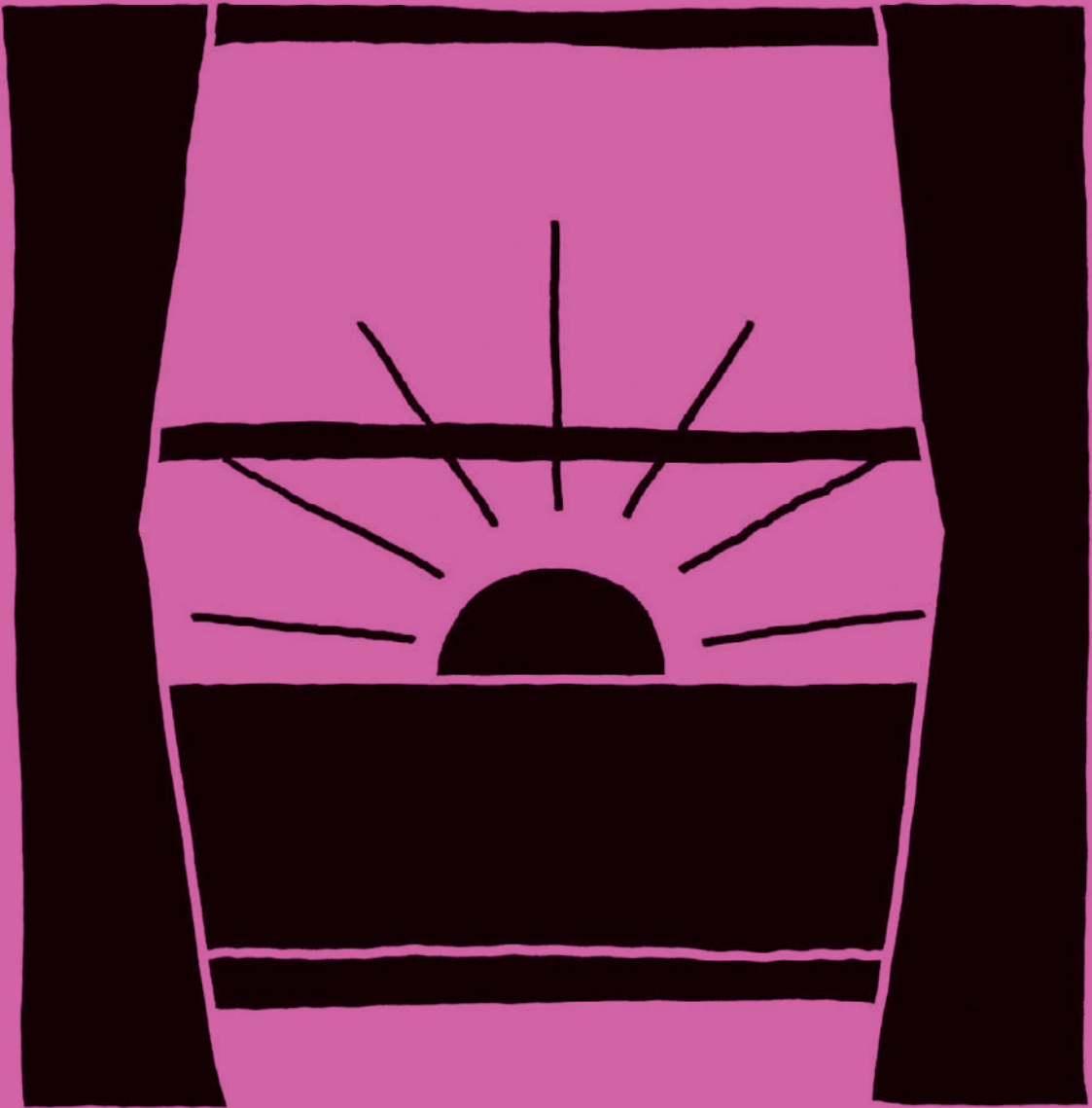
CUSTOM

IS THE GREAT GUIDE OF HUMAN

LIFE

DAVID HUME (1711–1776)





IN CONTEXT

BRANCH

Epistemology

APPROACH

Empiricism

BEFORE

1637 René Descartes espouses rationalism in his *Discourse on the Method*.

1690 John Locke sets out the case for empiricism in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

AFTER

1781 Immanuel Kant is inspired by Hume to write his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

1844 Arthur Schopenhauer acknowledges his debt to Hume in *The World as Will and Representation*.

1934 Karl Popper proposes falsification as the basis for the scientific method, as opposed to observation and induction.

David Hume was born at a time when European philosophy was dominated by a debate about the nature of knowledge. René Descartes had in effect set the stage for modern philosophy in his *Discourse on the Method*, instigating a movement of rationalism in Europe, which claimed that knowledge can be arrived at by rational reflection alone. In Britain, John Locke had countered this with his empiricist argument that knowledge can only be derived from experience. George Berkeley had followed, formulating his own version of empiricism, according to which the world only exists in so far as it is perceived. But it was Hume, the third of the major British empiricists, who dealt the biggest blow to rationalism in an argument presented in his *Treatise of Human Nature*.

Hume's fork

With a remarkable clarity of language, Hume turns a sceptical eye to the problem of knowledge, and argues forcibly against the notion that we are born with “innate ideas” (a central tenet of rationalism). He does so by first

dividing the contents of our minds into two kinds of phenomena, and then asking how these relate to each other. The two phenomena are “impressions”—or direct perceptions, which Hume calls the “sensations, passions, and emotions”—and “ideas”, which are faint copies of our impressions, such as thoughts, reflections, and imaginings. And it is while analyzing this distinction that Hume draws an unsettling conclusion—one that calls into question our most cherished

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In our reasonings concerning fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance. A wise man therefore proportions his belief to the evidence.

David Hume

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David Hume

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1711, Hume was a precocious child who entered the University of Edinburgh at the age of 12. Around 1729 he devoted his time to finding “some medium by which truth might be established”, and after working himself into a nervous breakdown he moved to La Flèche in Anjou, France. Here he wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*, setting out virtually all his philosophical ideas before returning to Edinburgh.

In 1763 he was appointed to the Embassy in Paris, where he befriended the philosopher

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and became more widely known as a philosopher. The controversial *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* occupied Hume's final years and, because of what he called his “abundant caution”, were only published after his death in Edinburgh in 1776.

Key works

1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature*
1748 *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
1779 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

See also: Plato 50–55 ■ Aristotle 56–63 ■ René Descartes 116–23 ■ John Locke 130–33 ■ George Berkeley 138–41 ■ Immanuel Kant 164–71 ■ Ludwig Wittgenstein 246–51 ■ Karl Popper 262–65

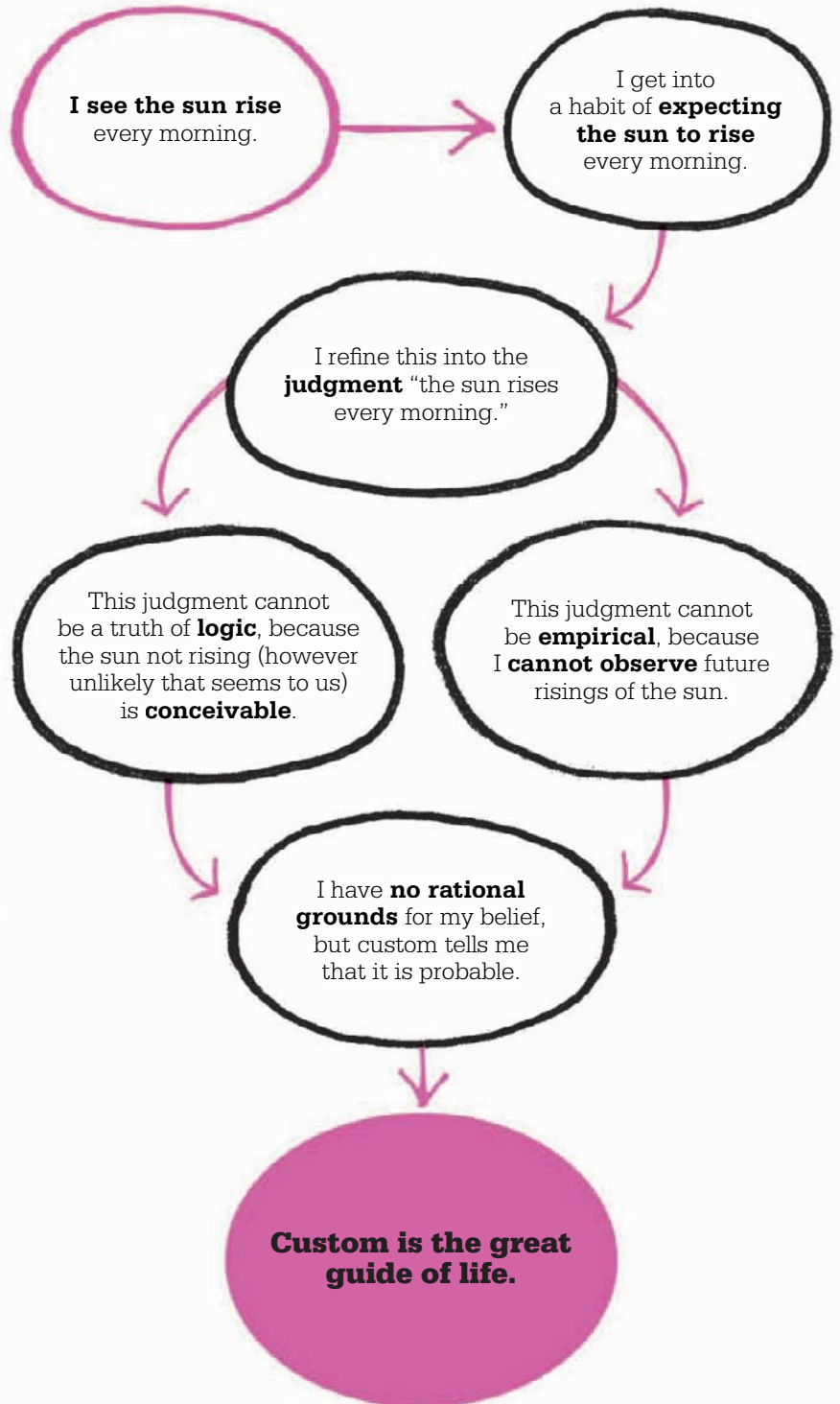
beliefs, not only about logic and science, but about the nature of the world around us.

The problem, for Hume, is that very often we have ideas that cannot be supported by our impressions, and Hume concerns himself with finding the extent to which this is the case. To understand what he means, we need to note that for Hume there are only two kinds of statement—namely “demonstrative” and “probable” statements—and he claims that in everyday experience we somehow confuse the two types of knowledge that these express.

A demonstrative statement is one whose truth or falsity is self-evident. Take, for example, the statement $2 + 2 = 4$. Denying this statement involves a logical contradiction—in other words, to claim that $2 + 2$ does not equal 4 is to fail to grasp the meanings of the terms “2” or “4” (or “+” or “=”). Demonstrative statements in logic, mathematics, and deductive reasoning are known to be true or false *a priori*, meaning “prior to experience.” The truth of a »



Mathematics and logic yield what Hume calls “demonstrative” truths, which cannot be denied without contradiction. These are the only certainties in Hume’s philosophy.



probable statement, however, is not self-evident, for it is concerned with matters of empirical fact. For example, any statement about the world such as “Jim is upstairs”, is a probable statement because it requires empirical evidence for it to be known to be true or false. In other words, its truth or falsity can only be known through some kind of experiment—such as by going upstairs to see if Jim is there.

In light of this, we can ask of any statement whether it is probable or demonstrative. If it is neither of these, then we cannot know it to be true or false, and so, for Hume, it is a meaningless statement. This division of all statements into two

possible kinds, as if forming the horns of a dilemma, is often referred to as “Hume’s fork.”

Inductive reasoning

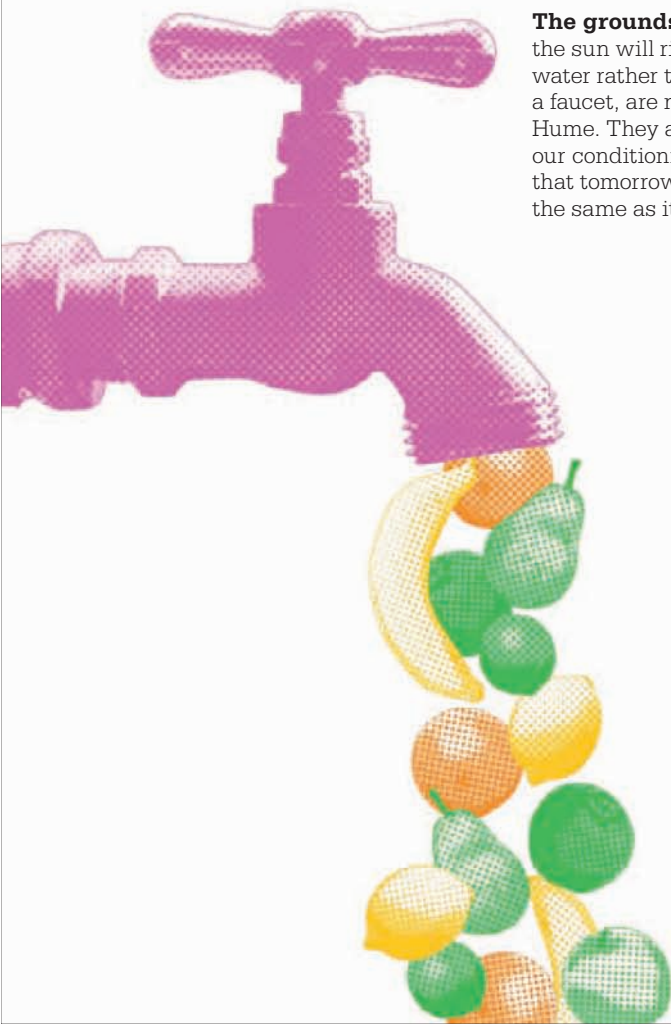
There are no surprises in Hume’s reasoning so far, but things take a strange turn when he applies this line of argument to inductive inference—our ability to infer things from past evidence. We observe an unchanging pattern, and infer that it will continue in the future, tacitly assuming that nature will continue to behave in a uniform way. For example, we see the sun rise every morning, and infer that it will rise again tomorrow. But is our claim that nature follows this uniform

pattern really justifiable? Claiming that the sun will rise tomorrow is not a demonstrative statement, as claiming the opposite involves no logical contradiction. Nor is it a probable statement, as we cannot experience the sun’s future risings.

The same problem occurs if we apply Hume’s fork to the evidence for causality. The statement “event A causes event B” seems on the face of it to be one that we can verify, but again, this does not stand up to scrutiny. There is no logical contradiction involved in denying that A causes B (as there would be in denying that $2 + 2 = 4$), so it cannot be a demonstrative statement. Nor can it be proved empirically, since we cannot observe every event A to see if it is followed by B, so it is not a probable statement either. The fact that, in our limited experience, B invariably follows A is no rational ground for believing that A will always be followed by B, or that A causes B.

If there is never any rational basis for inferring cause and effect, then what justification do we have for making that connection? Hume explains this simply as “human nature”—a mental habit that reads uniformity into regular repetition, and a causal connection into what

The grounds for our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow, or that water rather than fruit will flow from a faucet, are not logical, according to Hume. They are simply the result of our conditioning, which teaches us that tomorrow the world will be the same as it is today.



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Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity, has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel.

David Hume

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Science supplies us with ever more detailed information about the world. However, according to Hume, science deals with theories only, and can never yield a “law of nature.”

he calls the “constant conjunction” of events. Indeed, it is this kind of inductive reasoning that is the basis of science, and tempts us to interpret our inferences as “laws” of nature—but despite what we may think, this practice cannot be justified by rational argument.

In saying this, Hume makes his strongest case against rationalism, for he is saying that it is belief (which he defines as “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression”), guided by custom, that lies at the heart of our claims to knowledge rather than reason.

Custom as our guide

Hume goes on to acknowledge that although inductive inferences are not provable, this does not mean that they are not useful. After all, we still have a reasonable claim to expect something to happen, judging from past observation and experience. In the absence of a rational justification for inductive inference, custom is a good guide.

Hume adds, however, that this “mental habit” should be applied with caution. Before inferring cause and effect between two events, we should have evidence both that this succession of events has been invariable in the past, and that there is a necessary connection between them. We can reasonably predict that when we let go of an object it will fall to the ground, because this is what has always happened in the past, and there is an obvious connection between letting go of the object and its falling. On the other hand, two clocks set a few seconds apart will chime one after



another—but since there is no obvious connection between them, we should not infer that one clock’s chiming is the cause of the other’s.

Hume’s treatment of the “problem of induction”, as this became known, both undermines the claims of rationalism and elevates the role of belief and custom in our lives. As he says, the conclusions drawn by our beliefs are “as satisfactory to the mind... as the demonstrative kind.”

A revolutionary idea

The brilliantly argued and innovative ideas in the *Treatise of Human Nature* were virtually ignored when they were published in 1739, despite being the high-point of British empiricism. Hume was better known in his own country for being the author of a *History of Great Britain* than for his philosophy; in Germany, however, the significance of his epistemology had more impact. Immanuel Kant admitted to being woken from his “dogmatic slumbers” by reading Hume, who

remained a significant influence on German philosophers of the 19th century and the logical positivists of the 20th century, who believed that only meaningful statements could be verifiable. Hume’s account of the problem of induction remained unchallenged throughout this period, and resurfaced in the work of Karl Popper, who used it to back up his claim that a theory can only be deemed scientific if it is falsifiable. ■

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Hume was perfectly right in pointing out that induction cannot be logically justified.

Karl Popper

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