

Preface

Hume wrote his philosophy in a time of tumult. The millennia-old metaphysical tradition that placed humans and their cognitive abilities in an ontological framework collapsed and gave way to a new one that placed the autonomy of the individual in its centre. Subsequently, the world and life lost their deeper meaning, and nature was reduced to a collection of objects for reason and science to explain and master. It was the birth of modernity that Descartes inaugurated and Kant completed with his Copernican revolution. Modernity gave rise to a new kind of scepticism, involving doubt not just about the adequacy of our knowledge but about the very existence of a world independent of the self. Firmly placed within this philosophical framework, Hume faced this scepticism implying phenomenalism. His empiricism added yet another sceptical theme: how can one, on an empirical basis, rationally justify key concepts of human understanding, primarily the ideas of causation and distinct existence, produced instinctively by the human mind? Moreover, Hume was influenced by Pyrrhonian scepticism, much discussed by philosophers at the time. The Pyrrhonian legacy is especially noticeable in his acceptance of the weakness of reason and in his emphasis on the practical role of philosophy. Rather than serving as the foundation of science, in his hand philosophy became a guide to a joyful, happy life, to moderately critical observations of common life and to an active involvement in society. This way Hume's philosophy stood in strong opposition to the (early) modern mainstream.

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