

David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

A Short Reading Guide

Like Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume's *Enquiry* focuses on getting clear about how our understanding works as a way of solving, or diffusing, various philosophical problems. As you read, I encourage you to compare Hume's account with Locke's. Much will be familiar, but focus on how Hume is extending or modifying Locke's view (which he would have read).

Even more important than this comparison, though, will be your own efforts to answer the regular questions that Hume asks as he goes along. Hume provides an excellent text for testing your own empiricist-philosophical abilities, because he regularly asks hard questions and then offers his answers to them. If you passively read his questions and answers, you just take in his views, and you won't really learn how to be an empiricist (nor will you engage as much as you could with his answers). Instead, when Hume poses a problem or asks a question, think about how you would answer it first, and then compare Hume's answer to yours, and then assess your answer and Hume's. These sorts of problems arise constantly, but to keep yourself on guard, I would encourage you, before you begin reading, to mark the following pages in your book with the word "STOP":

- p. **542b** (end of first full sentence in this column);
- p. **545a**, middle of main paragraph after the italicized "What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience?";
- p. **549a**, end of first full paragraph (at "What that principle is may well be worth the pains of inquiry.");
- p. **551b**, first full paragraph (at "In what, therefore, consists the difference between such a fiction and belief?");
- p. **555b**, after first full paragraph;
- p. **557b**, at top of page (after "We shall, therefore, endeavor ...to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms.");
- p. **562b**, after first couple sentences of this section;
- p. **565b**, after the first full paragraph;
- p. **571a**, middle of first paragraph, right at "For what is meant by liberty when applied to voluntary actions?";
- p. **577a**, right at the title.

At each one of these places, you should stop reading. Ask yourself what the problem is that Hume aims to address. And then try to solve that problem. In most cases, the problem should be relatively obvious. The challenge is to think of how to *solve* that problem. And you should do your best to solve it as well as you can, both in terms of your own philosophical system and in terms of Hume's own. That is, try to say what the *real* answer to the question is, and also to guess how you think *Hume* will answer it. Practicing this exercise as you read will help you get a lot more out of the text.

In addition, you should keep by your side the following list of key terms and concepts in Hume's *Essay*. For each, write a concise explanation of Hume's understanding of the key term (and give a citation).

Idea _____

Impression _____

Principle of Association (list the 3 principles)

Matter of fact _____

Relation of Ideas _____

Reason/Reasoning/the Understanding (see e.g. pp. 543a, 545a) _____

Skepticism _____

Belief _____

Probability _____

Necessary _____

Connection/Power/Force _____

Necessity (of human actions) _____

Liberty (of human actions) _____

Miracle _____

Finally, as you read, highlight Hume's key claims and lay out the arguments for and implications of these key claims. Be sure that you get clear on his arguments for at least his two key claims, one on p. 539b ("all our ideas...") and the other developed throughout sections four-seven (his "negative answer," p. 545a).