INTRODUCTION

Magee The philosopher widely regarded as the greatest who has ever written in the English language is David Hume – not an Englishman but a Scot, born in Edinburgh in 1711. He did some of his best work very young. At about eighteen he experienced some sort of intellectual revelation, and over the next eight years he produced a large and revolutionary book called *A Treatise of Human Nature*. It met with little attention and even less understanding: in his own phrase it fell 'dead-born from the Press'. So in his thirties he tried to rewrite it in what he hoped would be a more popular form. This resulted in two smaller volumes: one called *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the other *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. These were scarcely any better received; and he seemed to give the impression then of turning away from philosophy. In his forties he wrote a history of Great Britain, which for a hundred years was the standard work – which is why he is still sometimes listed in books of reference as 'David Hume: Historian'. In his own lifetime he even made a name as an economist: in fact his monetarist theories have been reattracting attention recently. And in a modest way he was a man of affairs. In the War of the Austrian Succession he served as a staff officer on two military expeditions; and for a couple of years, in his early fifties, he was Secretary to the British Embassy in Paris – and then, after that, Under Secretary of State in London.

In all the many different circles in which he moved he was popular for his good nature as much as for his genius. So rare was his gift for friendship that he almost brought off the impossible task of befriending his French contemporary, Rousseau, who at one time proposed making his home in Britain because Hume was there. In France, Hume was known as 'le bon David'; and in his native Edinburgh the street he lived in was, and remains, named after him, St David's Street. In view of the latter fact it is perhaps ironical that in secret he had been writing his final philosophical masterpiece, a profound and damaging critique of natural religion which did not come to light until after his death. He died in 1776, and it was in 1779 that his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was published. Some people consider it his best work.

Hume is an unusually attractive figure who should also be seen as part of that great flowering of intellectual life in Edinburgh in the eighteenth century which we now refer to as 'the Scottish Enlightenment'. In David Hume, Adam Smith and James Boswell the Scottish Enlightenment produced the English language's foremost philosopher, economist and biographer. And they all knew one another. Adam Smith was one of Hume's closest friends, and was greatly influenced by him. Boswell contemplated writing Hume's biography, but alas, never did.

There is now a substantial literature on Hume, and one of the best books in it, *Hume's Intentions*, was written by the person with me to discuss his work, Professor John Passmore of the Australian National University.

DISCUSSION

Magee Whenever Hume put forward a brief outline of his own philosophy, which he did on two or three occasions, he always placed the central emphasis on causality, the question of what it is for one state of affairs to bring about, or cause, another state of affairs. This is an altogether more important and interesting question than people unused to philosophy realise, because the cause and effect relation seems to be what binds the whole of our known world together. Clearly, Hume regarded what he had to say about this as the cornerstone of his philosophy, and indeed, it is what he is best known for to this day.

Can you explain what the nub of his argument about it was?

Passmore A concrete example might help. Imagine a baby boy, an exceptionally bright child, whose parents have always given him soft cotton toys to play with. He has often dropped these toys out of his cot; they have fallen to the ground with a soft thud. One day his uncle gives him a rubber ball. The baby scrutinises the rubber ball from every angle, smells it, tastes it, feels it, and then drops it. For all his careful investigation he has no possible way of knowing that it will bounce instead of, like all his other toys, thudding softly on the floor. That example will serve to illustrate Hume's first point. Just by examining a thing, he constantly tells us, we can never tell what effects it can produce. Only as a result of experience can we determine its consequences.

Now consider the boy's uncle standing by, watching to see how his nephew will play with his gift. When he sees the ball drop, he expects it to bounce. If you ask him what caused the ball to bounce, he will reply: 'My nephew dropped it.' Or, if he interprets our question more abstractly, he might say 'Rubber balls have the power of bouncing' or, perhaps, 'There is a necessary connection between a ball's being dropped and its bouncing'. I am putting Hume's language into the uncle's mouth, but it is easy to translate it into a more everyday idiom. The uncle might say that his nephew *made* the ball bounce by dropping it, that one *characteristic* of rubber balls is that they bounce when they drop, that if they drop, they *must* bounce. But the change in idiom would not affect Hume's argument.

Hume then asks a deep question. What experience has the uncle had that the child lacks? The uncle makes use of such general concepts as 'cause', 'power', 'necessary connection'. If these are not just empty words, they must somehow refer back to experience. Well then, what, in the present case, is this experience? How does the uncle's experience differ from his nephew's experience?

The difference consists, Hume argues, in one single fact. Unlike his

nephew, the uncle has been able to observe, in a very large number of cases, first of all a rubber ball's dropping and then its bouncing. Indeed, there never has been in his experience a case where a rubber ball has been dropped on to a hard surface without bouncing, or where a rubber ball has begun to bounce without having first fallen or been thrown. To use Hume's own language, there has been a 'constant conjunction' between the ball's falling and its bouncing.

So far, so good. We seem to have found a difference between the experience of the uncle and the experience of the baby nephew. But Hume then goes on to ask another question. Exactly how does this difference in experience generate such concepts as 'cause', 'power', 'necessary connection'? Admittedly, the uncle has seen a dropped rubber ball bounce on very many occasions, whereas the nephew has seen this happen only once. Nevertheless the uncle has not seen anything his nephew has not seen, he has only had the same sequence of experiences more often. They both observe a ball drop and then bounce – nothing more. Yet the uncle believes that there is a necessary connection between the ball's dropping and its bouncing. This is certainly not something he finds in his experience; his experience, except that it has been often repeated, is exactly the same as his nephew's. Then where does the idea of a necessary connection, of a causal link, come from, if it is never directly observed?

Hume's answer is that although experiencing the same sequence of events on innumerable occasions does not reveal something we did not notice on the first occasion – a causal link – it does affect the workings of our mind in a special kind of way. It *forms the habit in us* of expecting a rubber ball to bounce when it drops. To believe that A causes B, or that there is a necessary connection between A and B, or that A *makes* B happen, amounts, then, to nothing more than this: our minds are so constituted that when, having in our experience found A and B to be constantly conjoined, we meet with an A we expect it to be followed by a B; and when we meet with a B we presume it to have been preceded by an A. Our experience generates in us a habit of expecting; our consciousness of this habit is our idea of necessary connection. However, we mistakenly project it into the world around us, wrongly supposing that we perceive necessary connection there rather than simply feel impelled to make particular inferences.

Magee This is a matter of such fundamental significance that I would like to dwell on it for a moment. It seems to be impossible for us to form any conception of an ordered world at all without the idea of there being causal connections between events. But when we pursue this idea seriously we find that causal connection is not anything we ever actually observe, nor ever *can* observe. We may say that Event A *causes* Event B,

but when we examine the situation we find that what we actually observe is Event A *followed by* Event B. There is not some third entity between them, a causal link, which we also observe. It does not save the situation to say: 'We know that Event A is the cause of Event B because B always and invariably follows A.' Day always and invariably follows night, and night always and invariably follows day, but neither is the cause of the other. Invariant conjunction, though it is all we observe, is not the same thing as causal connection. It could be the case, by sheer coincidence, that every time I cough you sneeze, but my coughs would not then be the cause of your sneezes. So we have this indispensable notion of cause at the very heart of our conception of the world, and of our understanding of our own experience, which we find ourselves quite unable to validate by observation or experience. There is no way in which it could be validated by logic either, since it is an empirical and not a logical concept. It actually purports to tell us how specific material events are related to each other in the real world, yet it is not derived from, nor can it be validated by, observation of that world. This is deeply mysterious. And by making us aware of it, Hume put his finger on a problem to which there is still no generally agreed solution. Is that an accurate recapitulation of what you said?

Passmore Yes. Quite a few philosophers, of course, have tried to reply to Hume, often using arguments which Hume had already considered and rejected in the *Treatise*. Some have argued, to take a case, that once we have seen a rubber ball fall and then bounce or, at the very least, when we have seen this happen on a number of occasions, we know that dropping the ball will always make it bounce. This is because nature is uniform. But what does it mean to say that nature is uniform? No more than that the same causes always give rise to the same effects. And that we know this to be the case is precisely what Hume has questioned. To say that the same causes must always have the same effects because nature is uniform is just to say, or so Hume argues, that they must have the same effects because they must have the same effects. That gets us absolutely nowhere.

Magee In other words, to explain causal connection in terms of the uniformity of nature is a disguised way of assuming the point to be proved.

Passmore That's right. His critics do not improve matters, Hume would add, if they put forward a rather weaker thesis, arguing that our past experience at least *makes it very likely* that in the future, as in the past, rubber balls will go on bouncing. For judgments of probability, he tells us, are always founded on our belief in uniformities. Suppose we say of someone who is suffering from a serious disease that he will probably die