David Hume: Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact

David Hume was a philosopher that lived during the 1700’s. He was an empiricist and believed that impressions and ideas were what made up the total content of the human mind. Impressions, he believed, were original thoughts. And ideas were what he thought to be poor copies of impressions. This theory can best be compared with Plato’s theory of the forms.

Hume believed that there are three principals of association: 1) resemblance, 2) contiguity in time or place, and 3) cause and effect.

Resemblance is when something leads our thoughts back to the original experience. For example, looking through pictures of a family vacation. Certain pictures are most likely to remind you of an experience that you had forgotten you had – perhaps having drinks at a small bar, or the cute guy that helped you with your bags, etc.

Contiguity of time and place can best be described as bordering the original thought… or something that is causing an association in the mind. For instance, if you are in your friend’s living room that looks strikingly similar to your own, and all of a sudden her cat jumps on your lap and you remember that you didn’t feed your cat. Had these events occurred somewhere else or not at all, you probably would have not remembered that you needed to feed your cat.

Cause and effect, according to Hume, is when you gain knowledge through experiences. Like when you get a paper cut on your finger and you have a few moments to realize that your injury is about to get painful. You know that it is going to hurt because it has happened before and you have come to expect the same outcome every time. This is why Hume believed this principal of cause and effect to be the foundation of knowledge. Because if everything were arbitrary, one could never really claim that they have knowledge.

In order to believe that cause and effect is the foundation of knowledge, one must agree that cause and effect is true. Hume recognized that he could not prove this conclusively, but he did believe that there were certain things that we should accept through two basis of ideas: 1) relations of ideas, and 2) matters of fact. Each have 6 main characteristics, which directly contradict each other.

Statements such as “Bush is president” and “Today is Wednesday” are both examples of matters of fact. The six main characteristics of this basis are: 1) analytic, 2) knowable a priori, 3) they are tautologies, 4) known conclusively, 5) they do not describe the world, and 6) they are usually uncontroversial.

To have analytic ideas means to have ideas that express a definition- for example, gold is an element. Knowable a priori is knowledge that is gained through reason rather than sense perception. Tautology ideas are ideas that are true no matter when they are said or who is saying them- for example, all bachelors are unmarried. Conclusive ideas are best described in the example of 2+2=4., because 2+2 will never equal 5... therefore the evidence is conclusive. Ideas that do not describe the world would be ideas such as the Pythagorean theorem, because the Pythagorean theorem only exists in the mind and not in the outside world. Lastly, ideas that fall in the basis of relations of ideas are usually uncontroversial, because they can be proved conclusively (listed in the 4th trait).

Statements such as “Gold is an element” and “All bachelors are unmarried” are both examples of matters of fact. The six characteristics of maters of fact are: 1) being synthetic, 2) knowable a posteriori, 3) not tautologies, 4) known only with probability, 5) they describe the world, and they are usually controversial.

Synthetic ideas are ideas that do not express a definition- for example; Becky is wearing a brown sweater. Ideas with knowable a posteriori means to have ideas based on sense perception. You only know that Becky is wearing a brown sweater because you perceived it. Ideas that are not tautologies are ideas that are not always true… they depend on who is saying them and when, for example- Becky may not always have a brown sweater, and today may not always be Wednesday. Ideas only known with probability are ones that cannot be proven conclusively, and Ideas that describe the world are ones that exist outside of the mind- like the brown sweater (as opposed to the Pythagorean theorem). Finally, the last characteristic of matters of fact is that they are controversial. For example, a person who is colorblind could argue that Becky’s sweater is not brown.

All matters of fact seem to be based off the principal of causality. This is primarily because the characteristics are all based on sense perception, and this most likely because Hume was an empiricist. For example, the characteristic of knowable posteriori is probably the most obvious because it directly states that you only know it is true after you perceive it. Other obvious characteristics that reflect the principal of causality would be that they describe the world and that they are usually controversial... because although one could state that Becky has a brown sweater, a blind man would argue his sense perception because he sees the sweater as being a shade of grey instead.