

# **E-CONTENT PREPARED BY**

**Dr. Bhumika Kanjilal**

**Assistant Professor**

**Department of Philosophy**

**Durgapur Government College, Durgapur, West Bengal**

***(Affiliated to Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal)***

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**E-Content prepared for students of**

**B.A. Honours (Semester-VI) in Philosophy**

**Name of Course: David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human  
Understanding**

**Topic of the E-Content**

***The Distinction between Easy and Abstruse Philosophy:  
Hume's criticism of Abstruse Philosophy***

## E-Content

### Quadrant 1: Text

#### Distinction between Abstract and Abstruse Philosophy

It seems that Hume's fundamental target in 'Enquiry' is to lay bare the 'mental geography' with a view to reject false metaphysics and if possible to pave the way for true metaphysics. Keeping this purpose in mind Hume opens his account by drawing a line between two extremes of 'accurate and abstruse Philosophy' on the one hand and 'easy and obvious Philosophy' on the other.

The opening lines of Section-I of 'Enquiry' proposes; "Moral Philosophy or the science of human nature, may be treated after two different manners; each of which has its peculiar merit and may contribute to the entertainment, instruction and reformation of mankind". Hume gives the name 'easy' to the one which considers man chiefly born for action. He calls that abstruse which considers man in the light of a reasonable rather than active being. From his account we may point out the differences between these two tendencies.

**In the First place;** the easy and obvious philosophy treats man mostly as born for action. It is concerned with the activities of man and therefore a Philosopher's task would be to exhibit the beauty of virtue with a view to stimulate men to virtuous conduct. The accurate and abstruse Philosophy on the other hand takes man as a reasonable being and tries to form his understanding more than cultivate his manner. Man is regarded as subject to speculation; therefore a narrow scrutiny is made to find out the regulative principles of his behavior.

**In the Second place;** the easy and obvious philosophy appeals to our heart and deals with our sentiments. It borrows all help from poetry and eloquence to eulogize virtue and to please the imagination. The accurate and abstruse philosophy tries to discover the hidden truth by rational arguments. In order to do this it passes from fact to general laws and aspire to move to the highest generality and original principles to satisfy human curiosity.

**In the Third place;** the easy and obvious philosophy is preferred by the generality of mankind because of its agreeableness and usefulness. It has its base on common life since it moulds the heart and affections. It touches those principles which actuate men reform their conduct and brings them nearer to perfection. The abstruse philosophy on the other hand is founded on a turn of mind which cannot enter into business and action. It vanishes when the philosophers leaves the shade and comes into the open day. Hume writes, "The feeling of our heart , the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affection, dissipates all its conclusions, and reduce the profound philosopher to a mere plebian."

**In the Fourth place;** the easy and obvious philosophy has an universal, durable and justest fame, while abstract reasoners seem hitherto to have enjoyed only a momentary reputation from the ignorance of their age.

We may have remarks on this since it is perhaps the case that the intellectual history of England has belied Hume's prediction.

### **Hume's criticism of Abstruse Philosophy**

In 'Enquiry' Hume is all out to criticize abstruse philosophy. We may mention below some of his remarkable charges against abstraction.

1. It is easy for a profound philosopher to commit a mistake in his judgment. One mistake is the necessary parent of another. Since he does not take into account the popular opinion and does not stop at an universal appearance of this conclusion he cannot correct himself. By contrast Hume shows that a common sense philosopher can avoid the erroneous steps, if there be any because he appeals to the natural sentiment of mind.
2. The mere philosopher is the character which is very little acceptable in the world. Since it contributes nothing either to the advantage or to the pleasure of society. Such a Philosopher lives remote from communication with mankind and is wrapped up in principles and notions equally remote from their comprehension.
3. According to Hume nature prohibits abstruse thought and profound researches. It punishes it severely by introducing melancholy and uncertainty.
4. According to Hume, the just and most plausible objection against abstruse philosophy is that, it is the inevitable source of uncertainty and error. Hume refuses to call a considerable part of Metaphysics (false metaphysics) as science proper. It arises either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity to penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding or from the popular superstition and prejudices.
5. In Section VIII of Enquiry, Hume declares; "The chief objection against all abstract reasoning is derived from the ideas of space and time....." The idea of infinite divisibility of space may be unacceptable to the clearest principles of human reasoning. The infinite number of real parts of time passing in succession and exhaustible one after another appears so evident a contradiction that no man would be able to admit it.

It must also be mentioned that Hume was not totally blind to the good aspects of abstruse thinking. The advantages which Hume points out are as follows:-

1. It is the case that without the aid of abstruse philosophy; easy and obvious philosophy can never attain a certain degree of exactness. Hume says; Accuracy and just reasoning has always been advantageous. We would be wrong to epitomize the one while depreciating the other.
2. Hume holds that accuracy once earned always renders one to be helpful to his society and brings him close to perfection. The task of bringing light from obscurity may be hard but it is always rejoicing.  
Hume therefore takes from Abstruse Philosophy its perfection and tenacity and blends it with the novelty of common life. This is how Hume fights back abstruse Philosophy and cultivates true Metaphysics.

References:

1. David Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, with an introduction by J. N. Mohanty, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 1999
2. F. Copleston: *A History of Philosophy* [Vols. I, IV, V, & VII], Continuum Publishers, London(1946- 1974)