

E-CONTENT PREPARED BY

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E-Content prepared for students of

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

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

Topic of the E-Content

Association of Ideas

E-Content

Quadrant 1: Text

In the Third Section of the 'Enquiry' Hume propagates his theory of Association of Ideas. He wrote; ".....if anything can entitle an author to show glorious a name as that of an inventor it is the use he makes of the principle of Association of Ideas, which enters into most of his Philosophy"

Hume opens his discussion by claiming an evident fact, namely there is a principle of connection between the different thoughts or ideas in the mind. Though initially Hume talks of 'principle'; subsequently he describes three such principles without trying to reduce them to one. His aim is three fold here:

- a) To give an alternative account of rationalism which seeks to explain the order of our thoughts with the help of some fixed set of apriori concepts.
- b) Hume is not a complete determinist in relation to the association of Ideas; for association does not completely determine which idea would recall which one, but only act as a 'gentle force'(Treatise) which can prevail only if there is no stronger counteracting force.
- c) Hume seems to be alternating between explanatory and descriptive formulation, with a leaning towards the latter.

Hume introduces three principles of association, namely Resemblance, Contiguity in time and space and Cause and effect. He offers the following proofs:

1. Hume appeals to the fact verifiable in common observation, that any idea which intrudes the train of thought or conversation without any connection with the preceding theme is liable to be rejected. This evidently shows that our train of thoughts is guided some principle.
2. Even in dream and reveries the imagination has connected ideas which succeed each other. Hume does not mean here any inner bond; when he talks of connection; he only seeks to convey what can be delivered under the scope of the principle of association.
3. Hume appeals to the phenomenon which transcends the bonds of any particular linguistic or cultural group. It is a certain proof that, simple ideas comprehended in compound ones were bound together by some universal principle which has an equal influence on all mankind.

Hume sites the following example of the three principles of association thus:

- a) Resemblance- A picture naturally leads our thought to the original
- b) Contiguity- The mention of one apartment of a building naturally introduces an enquiry concerning the others.
- c) Cause and effect- If we think of a wound, we start reflecting on the pain which follows it.

According to Hume the principles of association may be accounted for either; a) by assuming that it lies in the nature of ideas themselves or b) by supposing that they are rooted a priori in the nature of the human mind or c) by supposing that they are universally detectable by the contingent feature of all our experience. The critics of associationism like Husserl and Merleau Ponty generally choose the first alternative or the second (as Kant did) while Hume takes the last one. Hume admits that he cannot conclude whether this is the complete list of the laws of association or not. All that is needed is a continuous search. For example Contrast and Contrariety are also connection between ideas; but it may be perhaps being considered as a mixture of causation and resemblance. Where two objects are contrary one destroys the other, namely the cause of one's annihilation implies the idea of the other's former existence.

Hume considers some of the effects of this connection (association of ideas) upon the following to be conspicuous thus:-

On Passion and imagination- Hume considers that a composition or a production without a design would indicate to the unorganized pattern of a mad man than the sober creation of a genius. So in a narrative the composition must be related to each other as an expression of the unity in imagination. This would then project the whole matter as something under one plan. Moreover this connecting principle may differ due to content. Hume talks of an analyst or a historian that he might be influenced by the connection in contiguity in time and Place. But the most usual species of connection amongst the different events is that of cause and effect. The historian sees that the knowledge of cause is not only the most satisfactory but also the most instructive. It is by this knowledge alone we are able to control events and govern futurity.

On Epics and Tragic- Hume talks of a unity which is required in Epics and Tragic. Such a unity is also required in the writings of a Biographer for example of Achilles. The life events of a man from the cradle to the grave are interconnected. The unity of action which is needed in a biography or in history differs from that of epic and poetry not in kind but in degree. In poetry the connection is more close and sensible than in history or biography. In this connection Hume has made two observations thus:-**A)** Hume says that an elaborate discussion of the characters of epic poems shows the deep unity of actions present there. On the other hand; a biographer and a historian confine themselves to strict truth and reality, hence they would have to go through all the periods and events minutely and without exclusion. **B)** The strong connection of events as it facilitates the passage of thought or imagination from one to another also facilitates the transfusion of the passion and preserves the affections still in the same channel and direction. In both Epic and dramatic poetry the common element is that the action must be one and simple in order to preserve the concern for the entire play. The Epic has an element which is not necessary in a dramatic poetry. The writer's of an Epic must form some plan or design before he starts his narration. He must comprehend his subject in some general aspect or the united view which must be the constant object of his attention. But as the author is completely lost in his composition; reason perhaps has fails to mark a place in dramatic poetry.

In this connection we may point out some views of critics on Hume's Laws of Association:

1. Hume has no explanation as to why; when a given idea occurs, some other idea is related to it by cause and effect and not by contiguity or resemblance. The reason may be that the association of Ideas are not logically necessary but are the result of custom and habit. In this connection we may think that Hume's primitive unexplained term 'association' corresponds to Newton's primitive unexplained term 'gravity'.
2. N.K.Smith points out that Hume uses the terms 'relation', 'association', 'connection' as interchangeable. A relation is perfect in which each of the two associated objects carries the mind to the other. Hence Hume should have limited his use of 'relation' to 'natural relation' and 'association' to contiguity; thus making contiguity as the only principle of association.
3. According to Hume association is possible even amongst the wildest picture of imagination. Hence resemblance could have possibly dropped away from the class of natural relations, again since causality is reducible to contiguity the latter may be treated as relation per excellence.

Nevertheless we must admit that the Association of Ideas occupies a special status in Hume's Philosophy. Any explanation of Hume's explanation of cause and causal relation actually must begin with the initial remarks of Association of Ideas. The Philosophical super structure of Hume thus definitely is well knit; Association of Ideas being the prime building block.

References:

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