UNIT 8: HUME: IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1. Learning Objectives
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8.3. David Hume's theory of empiricism and empirical self
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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- to know about the fundamental points of David Hume's philosophy
- to know about the concepts of empiricism and empirical self in Humean philosophy
- to acquire knowledge about the concepts of impressions and ideas in David Hume's philosophy
- to check whether Hume was a sceptic or not

8.2. FUNDAMENTALS OF HUMEAN PHILOSOPHY:

David Hume's philosophy is entirely based on this principle that experience causes our ideas. Hence Hume is an empiricist. Hume makes distinction between impressions or the immediate result of the experience and ideas, or the result of impressions. Locke and Berkeley employed the psychological method in philosophy and Hume quietly inherits it. This consists in the careful analysis of the contents of experience in order to discover the original elements of knowledge. Hume clarified Locke and pointed out that there are two kinds of contents of the mind, namely, impressions and their ideas. These are only perceptions which compose the human mind.

David Hume accepted the empirical theory of the origin of knowledge and the Berkeleyan view that esse est percipi and draws what seem to him the logical conclusions. If all we can know are our own impressions, we have no right to assert the reality either of material or of spiritual substances. We find no impressions that justify the assumption of any kind of substance. We discover nothing in our experience that justifies our notion of necessary connection or causation; cause and effect can mean nothing more than a regular succession of ideas. Hume agrees with Descartes, Hobbes and Locke in requiring that genuine knowledge must be self-evident; but he finds no such knowledge anywhere except in mathematics which merely analyses its own concepts.

Impressions and ideas are divided into simple and complex. All ideas or impressions are those which admit of no separation or distinction. Complex ideas or impressions are those which are composed of simple parts. Again, impressions may be divided into sensation and reflection. Sensations seem to arise from unknown causes but the reflection of passions, desires, emotions and the felt inclination of the mind are 'derived in a great measure from our ideas.' Thus reflection is secondary and sensation is primary. But reflection though secondary is not the copy of the sensation because like all other true elements the impressions of reflection are original facts and realities, complete in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions and actions.

8.3. DAVID HUME'S THEORY OF EMPIRICISM AND EMPIRICAL SELF:

The chief problems that occupy Hume are those of the origin and nature of knowledge. What is the source of our knowledge; what degree of certainty does it possess; what are its extent and limitations? What are the meaning and value of the categories of knowledge, such as substance and causality? Of all these questions the basic one for Hume is the question of the origin of knowledge. All the materials of our thinking are derived from outward

and inward impressions. By impressions we mean our more lively perceptions when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will; i.e., all our sensations, passions, and emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul. All our thoughts or ideas are copies of such impressions; they are the less lively perceptions, the faint or feeble perceptions of which we are conscious when we recall or reflect on any of the sensations or any other impressions just mentioned. Outward impressions or sensations arise in the soul from unknown causes, while the inward impressions are frequently occasioned by our ideas. Knowledge results from compounding, transposing, argumenting, or diminishing the materials furnished us by the senses and experience. The mixture and composition of the impressions alone belongs to the mind and will. Analysis shows that every idea which we examine is copied from similar impressions. Again, where there are no impressions, there can be no ideas.

Our thoughts and ideas introduce one another with a certain degree of method and regularity, there is a bond of union between them, and one calls up another. Thoughts tend to call up thoughts of like things of things contiguous in time and place, and of things related as cause and effect.

The 'empirical self' means the series of mental states-the collection of sensations, feelings and desires-without any principle of unity among them. Mind is but a series of impressions and ideas without any connecting bond. The self, according to David Hume, is nothing more than a series of mental processes. It is a series of thoughts, feelings and volitions. It is not a substance which has these mental processes. The mental processes are combined with one another by the laws of association. Their combination does not require the synthetic activity of the self.

Hume believes in Berkeley's dictum esse est percipi- the existence of an entity consists in being perceived. He applies this dictum to the so-called mind, self, or spirit, which is regarded as a permanent spiritual substance which thinks, perceives, feels, and wills and which abides in the midst of changes in mental states. Hume denies perception of any such

permanent spiritual substance distinct from ideas or mental processes. According to Hume, we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self, that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence, and so are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. When 'I' enter most intimately into what I call 'myself', I always stumble on some particular perception or others. The mind is a kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different times. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind.

"What we call a 'mind' is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and supposed, though falsely, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity. The identity which we ascribe to the mind of man is only a fictitious one. Thus, according to Hume, there is no permanent and abiding spiritual substance apart from a series of feelings and ideas, we can never perceive the so-called permanent self or spirit, whenever we try to perceive it we perceive only a series of feelings, sensations, or ideas, we perceive nothing beyond them. The so-called spirit or self is a figment of the imagination. Thus, the self, according to Hume, is nothing but a series of mental processes. It is not anything that has the states; it is the states themselves. Hume says, "Men are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perceptual flux and movement."

The empirical account of the self has been given by different thinkers in different ways. J.S. Mill says, "Mind is nothing but the series of sensations and internal feelings as they actually occur, with the addition of possibilities of feelings." "It is a series of mental states, and aware of itself as a series." William James regards the mind as a stream of consciousness. This implies that consciousness instead of being a series of distinct states is a continuum,

and flows on without interruption, without breaking up into discreet units as implied in the Humean conception of the self. Hume regards impressions and ideas as discreet and unconnected with one another, which are connected with one another by the laws of association. James regards them as flowing into one another and forming a stream of consciousness. He regards the self as the preceding judging thought which appropriates the succeeding thought.

However, the concept of empirical self is criticized on the ground that it involves the fallacy of hypostatizing abstractions; it cannot account for the facts of self-consciousness, memory and expectation, personal identity and continuity, and it makes knowledge impossible since it cannot account for assimilation, discrimination and apperception which are involved in knowledge.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Question 1: Fill up the blanks:

(a) David Hume was an ……

(b) According to Hume impressions and ideas are divided into …….. and ……...

(c) Hume maintained that impressions are more lively …… when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will.

(d) The self, according to David Hume, is nothing more than a series of ……

(e) The spirit or self, in view of Hume, is a figment of the ……

8.4. DAVID HUME'S VIEW ON IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS:

David Hume (1711-1776) develops Locke's empiricism into sensationism in his Treatise of Human Nature. All knowledge comes from impressions and ideas. Ideas are faint copies of impressions, which are called images

in modern psychology. Impressions are lively perceptions. There are impressions of sensation or external perception and impressions of reflection or internal perception. These are the original materials of knowledge. Ideas or images are faint and indistinct copies of impressions, they are feebler than impressions. Hume says, "All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, impressions and ideas". The difference between these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind. Those perceptions which enter with most force and violence we may name impressions and under this name, I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning. All our simple ideas in their in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent. Impressions and ideas which constitute matter of knowledge are disconnected from one another. They are connected with one another by the laws of association. The law of similarity, the law of contiguity in time or space, and the law of causality connect the discreet impressions and ideas with one another. The like ideas suggest one another; a picture suggests the object it represents owing to the law of similarity. The laws of association are purely subjective. Discreet impressions and ideas are automatically combined with one another according to these laws. They do not require any innate ideas or a priori forms of reason to connect them with one another. Hume advocates through-going empiricism. Impressions or sensations are the first units of knowledge, ideas or images are their faint copies. They are combined with one another according to the laws of association to form complex ideas. Knowledge is composed of sensations and ideas combined by the laws of association.

Sensations are not produced by matter; there is no production or effectuation. There is no causal force or power which produces an effect, as it is never perceived. A cause is an invariable antecedent, and an effect is an invariable consequent. There is no necessary connection between cause and effect. There is only an inner bond of association between two

ideas which owes to their constant conjunction in our experience. We always perceived a fire along with burning. An association has been established in the mind between the idea of a fire and the idea of burning, so that when we perceive a fire, we expect that it will burn. There is no necessity in the idea of causation. Hence we cannot infer that matter is the cause of sensations.

We have no impression of matter. So matter is non-existent. The so-called matter is a series of actual and possible sensations. Different objects are groups of different sensations. Hume denies the existence of matter, like Berkeley. There is mind, soul, or self. The so-called mind is a series of ideas, feeling and volitions. There is not permanent self, as we have no impression of any permanent soul. Whenever we try to catch the so-called soul, we stumble upon some perception of heat or cold, or an idea of pleasure or pain. We always perceive some particular fleeting ideas. So there is no permanent mind or self.

There is no God. There is no valid proof for the existence of God. We have no impression of God. We do not perceive Him, nor can we infer His existence. We wish to believe in God to fulfill our aspirations. So we believe in God. The idea of God is man-made. Hume rejects the existence of matter, soul and God. He rejects all metaphysical entities. He rejects universal and necessary truths. He admits only particular and contingent truths which are given by experience. We can never step beyond sensations to reality outside them. We are within the charmed circle of sensations. We can never transcend them. Thus Hume is landed in sensationism and skepticism. There is no absolute certainty in knowledge. Probability is the guide in life. Hume is an acute thinker. All modern empiricists draw their inspiration from him. Hume's sensationism is the logical outcome of Locke's empiricism.

8.5. WAS HUME A SCEPTIC?

Hume analysed the furniture of the mind in terms of fleeting impressions. Anything called knowledge not derived from impressions, according to him,

could not be based on reason. Taking impression as his touchstone he called in question the validity of the concepts of substance, causality etc. which make up knowledge proper. He after a careful analysis of the main categories of thought came to the conclusion that there is no substance, neither matter nor self. We are left with passing impressions only. Is there any necessary connection between the impressions so that we could pass with certainty from the one to the other? His most careful search into causation showed that there could be no necessary connection between the impressions. Nothing remains-the vast structure of philosophy crumbles or dust. In Hume philosophy finds itself in the midst of ruins of its own making. The result of Humean inquiry appears to us skeptical. Yet lived in an age in which men entertained the highest hope in the possibility of knowledge. It may sound paradoxical but it is quite true that Hume's too much faith in the science of psychology, the science of his own making, was the main cause of his skepticism.

However, it may be held that Hume could not be regarded as a sceptic for he allowed the possibility of mathematical knowledge. Hume rejected the demonstrations of geometry as they are based on the absurd principle of infinite divisibility of extension. But the algebraic and arithmetical demonstration, according to him, maintains 'a perfect exactness and certainty.' Unfortunately he does not tell us, 'how are these ideas of algebra and arithmetic derived?' Like other ideas an enquiry into them will reveal that they are not derived from any impressions. Any way he maintains that the rules of the demonstrative sciences are certain and infallible but due to our frail faculties our application of them is notoriously fallible. So even here knowledge is only probable. Hume was a total sceptic. But the total skepticism is self-contradictory. The doubting of everything leads also to the doubt of that theory which doubts everything. However in recent years a careful analysis of the writings of Hume will show us that Hume was a moderate sceptic and not a total sceptic. His skepticism is not the logical outcome of empiricism. It is not empiricism, but reason which fails to dispel the dark clouds of skepticism.

Hume was a moderate sceptic in the sense that he maintained that reason apart from imagination cannot solve our doubts but then according to him there could be a partly advanced system of thought based on our natural propensities. His display of the skeptical arguments purports to show that truth lies in the custom or habit of imagination and not in reason. True thinking, according to him, is really sensitive and not cognitive in nature. We are constrained to maintain that Hume was not a total sceptic but then he used skepticism as a powerful weapon of attack against rationalism. The skeptical arguments are by no means his original property. According to Hume, empiricism based on naturalistic psychology is not the cause of skepticism but really is a way of escape out of the difficulties in which reason falls. Thus Hume had a constructive empirical philosophy. Thus Hume had a constructive empirical philosophy but due to the following reasons he has been interpreted as a sceptic.

1. First, Hume makes a full display of the skeptical arguments. Thus, critical and negative element is so widespread throughout the discussion that one gets the impression that he is merely negative and destructive.

2. Hume makes skepticism the background of his own philosophy. It provides him with a convenient weapon of attack against rationalism and dogmatism.

3. From the rationalistic point of view his philosophy is really skeptical for he maintains that reason is not capable of making our knowledge intelligible. He gives us almost a counsel of despair, "Carelessness and in attention alone can afford us any remedy." He maintains that reason is really sensitive and no rationalist can ever accept this thesis.

4. Lastly, his own constructive philosophy is weak and powerless to deal adequately with the doubts which he himself had raised.

Hume's philosophy is skeptical with regard to dogmatism and rationalism but not so in relation to skepticism itself. The reply which he supplied to skeptical doubts was unsatisfactory but then it shows that he could not

remain in skepticism. He really hoped to encourage philosophers to think better and never wanted to induce them to remain in despair. Apart from the constructive empirical philosophy he accepted the validity of mathematics and the experimental truths concerning matters of fact. In view of his limitation of knowledge to that which is capable of exact measurement and to that which is present in experience, coupled with his rejection of the suprasensible entities like God or soul, may justly entitle him to be called a positivist rather than a sceptic? Again, in view of his arguments against the capacity of reason to solve our problems, he may be justly styled a pragmatist, an anti-intellectual rather than a sceptic.

If we emphasize Hume's views with regard to his philosophical empiricism, then Hume's acceptance of impressions as the indubitable touchstone of knowledge, coupled with his denial of permanent substance, self and God, then we would place him among the positivists. If, however, we emphasize his doctrine of naturalism, imagination based on associative inference, then Hume would be regarded as a pragmatist. In the history of philosophy, Hume has become famous for his positivism with its negative conclusions and that is how he is viewed even now.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Question 2: Write short notes on:

(a) Basics of Humean philosophy

(b) Hume's views on impressions and ideas

Question 3: State whether true or false:

(a) David Hume (1711-1776) develops Locke's empiricism into sensationism in his Treatise of Human Nature.

(b) Impressions and ideas get connected with one another by the laws of association.

(c) The self, according to Hume, is nothing but a series of mental processes.

(d) Hume's sensationism is the logical outcome of Locke's empiricism.

(e) Hume applies the dictum "esse est percipi" to the so-called mind, self, or spirit, which is regarded as a permanent spiritual substance which thinks, perceives, feels, and wills and which abides in the midst of changes in mental states.



8.6.LET US SUM UP:

- David Hume's philosophy is entirely based on this principle that experience causes our ideas: hence Hume is a empiricist. Hume differentiates between impressions or the immediate result of the experience and ideas, or the result of impressions.

- According to Hume if all we can know are our own impressions, we have no right to assert the reality either of material or of spiritual substances.

- Impressions and ideas are divided into simple and complex. All ideas or impressions are those which admit of no separation or distinction.

- The self, according to David Hume, is nothing more than a series of mental processes. It is a series of thoughts, feelings and volitions. It is not a substance which has these mental processes.

- Hume believes in Berkeley's dictum esse est percipi- the existence of an entity consists in being perceived. He applies this dictum to the so-called mind, self, or spirit, which is regarded as a permanent spiritual substance which thinks, perceives, feels, and wills and which abides in the midst of changes in mental states.

- According to Hume, we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self, that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence, and so are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity.

- Hume could not be regarded as a sceptic for he allowed the possibility of mathematical knowledge. Hume rejected the demonstrations of geometry as they are based on the absurd principle of infinite divisibility of extension. But the algebraic and arithmetical demonstration, according to him, maintains 'a perfect exactness and certainty.'

- According to Hume, empiricism based on naturalistic psychology is not the cause of skepticism but really is a way of escape out of the difficulties in which reason falls. Thus Hume had a constructive empirical philosophy.

- Apart from the constructive empirical philosophy he accepted the validity of mathematics and the experimental truths concerning matters of fact. In view of his limitation of knowledge to that which is capable of exact measurement and to that which is present in experience, coupled with his rejection of the suprasensible entities like God or soul, may justly entitle him to be called a positivist rather than a sceptic?

- If we emphasize Hume's views with regard to his philosophical empiricism, then Hume's acceptance of impressions as the indubitable touchstone of knowledge, coupled with his denial of permanent substance, self and God, then we would place him among the positivists.

- In the history of philosophy, Hume has become famous for his positivism with its negative conclusions and that is how he is viewed even now.

8.7. FURTHER READING:

1. Thilly, Frank, A History of Philosophy, Central Publishing House, Allahabad.

2. Masih, Y., A Critical History of Western Philosophy (Greek, Medieval, Modern), Motilal Banarsidass Publishers private limited, Delhi.

3. Wright, M.R., Introducing Greek Philosophy, Routledge.

4. Stace. W.T. A Critical History of Greek Philosophy, MacMillan and Co. limited, London.

8.8. ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

1.(a) ans: empiricist

(b) ans: simple, complex

(c) ans: perceptions

(d) ans: mental processes

(e) ans: imagination

(2) (a) ans. David Hume's philosophy is entirely based on this principle that experience causes our ideas: hence Hume is an empiricist. Hume differentiates between impressions or the immediate result of the experience and ideas, or the result of impressions. Locke and Berkeley employed the psychological method in philosophy and Hume quietly inherits it. Hume clarified Locke and pointed out that there are two kinds of contents of the mind, namely, impressions and their ideas. These are only perceptions which compose the human mind.

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(b)ans: David Hume (1711-1776) develops Locke's empiricism into sensationism in his Treatise of Human Nature. All knowledge comes from impressions and ideas. Ideas are faint copies of impressions, which are called images in modern psychology. Impressions are lively perceptions. There are impressions of sensation or external perception and impressions of reflection or internal perception. These are the original materials of knowledge. Ideas or images are faint and indistinct copies of impressions, they are feebler than impressions. The perceptions which enter with most force and violence we may name impressions and under this name, I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning. All our simple ideas in their in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent. Impressions and ideas which constitute matter of knowledge are disconnected from one another. They are connected with one another by the laws of association.

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soul and God. He rejects all metaphysical entities. He rejects universal and necessary truths. He admits only particular and contingent truths which are given by experience. We can never step beyond sensations to reality outside them. We are within the charmed circle of sensations. We can never transcend them. Thus Hume is landed in sensationism and skepticism. There is no absolute certainty in knowledge. Probability is the guide in life. Hume is an acute thinker. All modern empiricists draw their inspiration from him. Hume's sensationism is the logical outcome of Locke's empiricism.

3.(a)ans: true

(b)ans: true

(c)ans: true

(d)ans: true

(e)ans: true

8.9. MODEL QUESTIONS:

A. Very short questions:-

1. On what principle Hume's philosophy was based?
2. Which theory of origin of knowledge was accepted by Hume?
3. Define impressions?
4. What is empirical self according to Hume?
5. Where did Hume develop Locke's empiricism?

B. Short questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

1. Distinction between impressions and ideas in Hume's philosophy
2. Fundamentals of Hume's philosophy

3. Hume's empiricism

C. Short notes (Answer each question in about 150 words)

1. Hume's concept of impressions and ideas

2. Hume's concept of empirical self

3. Hume's scepticism

D. Long questions: (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

1. Give a detailed account about David Hume's formulation of impressions and ideas.

2. Give a critical exposition of David Hume's theory of empiricism and his concept of empirical self.

3. Was Hume a sceptic? Discuss.

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