

Lock and Key Report



Hume opens §20 by drawing the distinction between *Relations of Ideas* and *Matters of Fact*, and cites this distinction again in §30. But in the footnote to §36, he appears to reject this distinction in the strongest terms:

“Nothing is more useful than for writers [...] to distinguish between *reason* and *experience* [...] I shall not scruple to pronounce, that [this distinction] is, at bottom, erroneous, at least, superficial [...] an unexperienced reasoner could be no reasoner at all”

So, Hume did *not believe in this distinction*. This is ‘key’ to understanding why Hume takes such a radically different approach to Descartes, as described by Lipton¹. Descartes confronts underdetermination by attempting to put scientific knowledge on the firm foundation of *a priori* truths. Hume does not do this - he cannot do this - because he does not believe *a priori* truths even exist, as evidenced in the above passage. And this makes sense - Hume was a “concept empiricist” - *all* ideas correspond to sensory impressions². In the absence of experience, there are no ideas, let alone relations between them! I think thus Hume would not have disagreed with Goodman’s doubt that “there are any necessary connections at all”³

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¹Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (1991), Chapter 1, p. 8, <https://drive.vjbe.net/2026-09-11-lipton-inference-fullbook.pdf>.

²David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Section 2.

³Nelson Goodman, *The New Riddle of Induction*, 4th ed. (Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 63, <https://drive.vjbe.net/2026-09-10-printjob/The%20New%20Riddle%20of%20Induction%20by%20Nelson%20Goodman.pdf>.



Hume writes, in §40:

“I believe that it will not be difficult, upon these suppositions, to find other operations of the mind analogous to it, and to trace up these phenomena to principles *still more general*” (emphasis mine). The principles in question are 1) belief as “more intense conception” than fiction 2) the memory and the senses and 3) customary conjunction. Now Hume claims he can find *still more general* principles. Referencing the relations of *Resemblance, Contiguity, and Causation*, which according to Hume give an exhaustive typology of human mental operations - he writes, in §41: “Does it happen, in all these relations, that when one of the objects is presented to the senses or memory, the mind is not only carried to the conception of the correlative, but reaches a steadier and stronger conception of it than what otherwise it would have been able to attain? [...] And if the case be the same with the other relations or principles of associations, *this may be established as a general law, which takes place in all the operations of the mind*” (emphasis mine)

I think he has shown that his principles apply *more generally* (i.e to other operations) to the human mind, but he has not found principles *still more general*, as he claims at the outset.

Have any “still more general” principles been found, or has he found that his existing principles are more general than shown in the initial discussion of causation?

244 words

Bibliography

Goodman, Nelson. *The New Riddle of Induction*. 4th ed. Harvard University Press, 1955. <https://drive.vjbe.net/2026-09-10-printjob/The%20New%20Riddle%20of%20Induction%20by%20Nelson%20Goodman.pdf>.

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