

Hume's Animal and Situated Human Reason

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In comparing humans and animals, we may use humans as the standard to measure animals, or conversely, animals as the standard to measure humans. While most philosophers have adopted the former approach, David Hume is among those few who use the comparison with animals as means to throw light on human nature. I focus on Hume's treatment of human and animal reason. The cognitive processes and states that Hume holds to be common to humans and animals may be called *situated*, that is, embedded in the process of guiding actions that is actually going on and consequently relative to the agent's current position in space-time. Hume's treatment of causal reasoning underlines the centrality of situated cognition in the workings of human, as well as animal minds. Taking situated reasoning and beliefs as the paradigm of human cognition enables us to look from an alternative point of view, at the features supposedly unique to human cognition, like the use of general words and concepts. Thus we can find a confirmation of the practical import of general words and concepts in Hume's account of the obligation of promises, where words play an essential role in extending our control over objects and actions beyond what is present and particular into what is absent or not yet actualized. This is also a confirmation of how deeply our cognitive abilities in general are rooted in our practical needs.