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Summary: Mark Collier, assistant professor of philosophy, examines the status of philosopher David Hume’s science of human nature for his book project, *Hume’s Experimental Philosophy*.

(September 10, 2009)-What does it mean to be human? Mark Collier, assistant professor of philosophy, is extremely curious about why we think and feel and act as we do. David Hume, in the 18th century, was the first philosopher to investigate the principles of human nature using experimental methods. Nearly three hundred years later, Collier is examining the status of Hume’s science of human nature for a book project, titled *Hume’s Experimental Philosophy*.

Collier utilizes 21st century tools to evaluate Hume’s claims on a variety of topics, including causality, emotions, morality, economics, and religion. For example, one chapter considers Hume’s theory on justice, which claims that human beings manage to cooperate with one another because (most of us) have emotional aversions towards cheating. Collier argues that this proposal receives support from the emerging field of neuroeconomics, where magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) techniques are used to scan the brains of those engaged in games of trust and fair play. He recently presented this research to the New York University Department of Economics.

“In the 1700s, there was no such thing as controlled psychological experiments,” shares Collier. “No computer modeling. No brain imaging. Yet, it is amazing how much Hume was on the right track. He was an incredible genius who had profound insights into human nature.”

The interdisciplinary nature of Collier’s research agenda reflects and replenishes his curiosity about human beings. He is encouraged by the number of cross-disciplinary programs at the Morris campus and hopes that students and faculty from across campus will continue to join forces in tackling the challenges that we face today. “Some of these problems are simply too difficult,” he states, “for each discipline to go at it alone.”

Collier received a doctorate in philosophy and cognitive science from the University of California, San Diego. During this past year, he presented his work in Iceland, Canada, and Australia. His research is supported by an Imagine Fund Award. These awards, funded in part by a grant from the McKnight Foundation, are unique to the University of Minnesota system and are designed to support the arts, music and humanities.

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