

Chapter 9

Hume

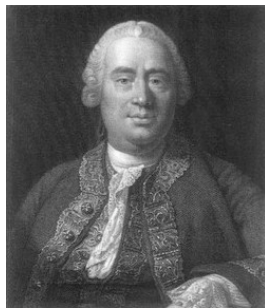


Figure 9.1: Hume

9.1 Introduction

9.1.1 Life and works

- 1711-1776
- Calvinist family
- Goes to the university at 12
- Refuses to pursue career in Law: wants to be a scholar and philosopher
- Studies philosophy: he thinks it is his duty to open “a New Scene of Thought” in philosophy (*My Own Life* – autobiographical essay)

- First work written while in France : *Treatise of Human Nature*, from which he “castrated” the essay on miracles, in order to please Bishop Butler – this had not been enough: Hume acquire a reputation of atheist which will never leave him: HE WILL NEVER OBTAIN ANY ACADEMIC POSITION
- Military expedition with his cousin St. Clair : Quebec and Brittany
- Librarian at the Cambridge University – works on a *History of England* – has to resign due to complains against his choices (“offending volumes”)
- Diplomat in Paris
- Back to England: *Enquiries* and other works
- last years: works on the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, for which he arranged a posthumous publication

9.1.2 Hume’s philosophy in a nutshell

- Empiricism vs. metaphysical systems
- Method: Hume and Newton – naturalism
- Empiricism and Scepticism
- Hume and Religion

9.2 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, selections from sections 1-5, 12
- Study Questions:
 1. What is the distinction between impressions and ideas according to Hume? Explain both terms and explain the difference with an example.

2. What are the two arguments which Hume provides in support of his claim that “all our ideas [...] are copies of our impressions”?
3. Explain the thought experiment about the person who has never seen a particular shade of blue. What difficulties does this thought experiment raise for Hume’s theory of ideas? How does he answer the objection? Do you find his answer satisfactory?
4. In the last paragraph of Section II, Hume proposes a method to discard the philosophical terms which are meaningless. What is the method that he proposes? What do you think of it? According to Hume, why would applying such a method be beneficial for philosophy?
5. What are the three principles of connexions between ideas according to Hume? Provide an example for each.
6. What is the difference between matters of facts and relations of ideas according to Hume? Give examples of each. What principle does Hume take to be the base of all our reasonings concerning matter of facts?
7. Explain Hume’s argument that our expectation that the sun will rise tomorrow cannot be justified on any reasoning, either a priori, or a posteriori. If true, what are the consequences for our knowledge of the laws of nature?
8. If not by reasoning, by which process do we come to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow according to Hume?
9. According to Hume, by which process do we come to believe in matters of facts?
10. Sections 4 and 5 contain the word ”skeptical” in their titles. Why do you think Hume calls himself a skeptic? What are the different forms of skepticism that Hume distinguishes in Section 12? How does he characterize his own form of skepticism? How does it compare with the other ones?

- Text analysis:

TEXT: Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 7, part II, from “But there still remains one method”, p.520, col. 1, bottom paragraph to ”but beyond these, we have no idea of it”, p.521,

col.2, top paragraph. I highly recommend reading Section 7 in its entirety.

9.3 Epistemology

9.3.1 Human Understanding

From Impressions to Ideas

- Hume's view:
 1. All the materials of our thinking consists in either Impressions or Ideas.
 - perceptions, emotions, etc. : IMPRESSIONS
 - memories or reflections of perceptions: IDEAS OR THOUGHTS
 Ideas and thoughts are always faint in comparison to impressions.
 2. All ideas derive from our inner (reflection) or outer sentiment (sensations).

- Hume's arguments:
 1. Argument 1.

All ideas are resolved into simple ideas copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment.

This is the **COPY PRINCIPLE**: Hume presents this principle as an empirical principle (based on experience), the first law of human understanding.
 2. Argument 2.

Defects in organs lead to defects in ideas. A blind man has no sense of color.
 3. Objection and Answer: The missing shade of blue:

The exception is perhaps a shade of color which has not been perceived before, but can be imagined. That is perhaps the sole exception.

As it stands, Hume's answer is unsatisfactory. Two questions:

1. Is there a way to construct the idea of the missing shade of blue?

2. Could metaphysical ideas be constructed in the same way?

If Hume's philosophy can stand, we must find a way to answer yes to 1. and no to 2. Otherwise, Hume seems to be in trouble.

– Is there a way to construct the idea of the missing shade of blue?

Yes: Mixing mental paints

Note that even if it has been constructed, the idea of the shade of blue is still simple

– Could metaphysical ideas be constructed in the same way?

This seems not plausible: would you think that you can construct the idea of monad for example in the way described above? Metaphysical ideas are far too complex.

Association of ideas

- Hume is the first to elaborate the notion of ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS
 - he says himself that he is the “inventor” of the principles of association of ideas (in the *Abstract* of the *Treatise*)
- Three principles for the connection between ideas:
 - resemblance
 - contiguity
 - cause and effect
- It is one of Hume's merits to have established rules for the construction of ideas *which do not suppose a rational mind with specific abilities*. These rules are *natural* and *empirical*:
 - natural as opposed to due to mere thinking – they are specific to humans;
 - empirical as opposed to a priori – our justification for taking them as rules is experience.

Hume has an account of how ideas are constructed, an account which does not appeal to any a priori principle or specific abilities of human reason.

- Note however that this means that these rules do not necessarily conduct to truth: natural tendencies are no legitimate ground for truth. Natural rules explain but do not justify our beliefs.

So: whatever are the effects of the association of our ideas has to be assessed. In particular cause and effect!

The copy principle and the meaning of philosophical concepts

Hume gives a method for philosophical inquiry.

- Many philosophical dispute rely on problems of definitions, that is, on the obscurity of ideas.
- Definitions from terms to terms are unsatisfactory – circle of obscurity – we need another way to define the meanings of our words.
- The copy principle, or, more precisely *the converse of the copy principle* give a criterion of meaning: From what impressions were the ideas derived?

Any ideas which cannot be traced back to a set of simple ideas/copies of simple impressions is meaningless!!

- Many philosophical ideas are thus rejected as meaningless, or beyond our understanding.
- Note the difference with Descartes: “all ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure” !

Conclusion

Hume’s epistemology:

- (1) Impressions
- (2) Ideas – coming either from sensation or from reflection – by association

The pillar of Hume’s view is that all our ideas decompose into simple ideas, and that all our simple ideas are copies of simple impressions. This implies that:

- (1) all our knowledge, if we have any, comes from experience – empiricism
- (2) any idea which is not derived from simple ideas, copies of simple impressions is deprived of meaning !

—→ *Hume is committed to giving an account of human understanding from an empiricist and naturalist point of view. His view seems very similar to Locke. The difference is, Hume is going to take the problem of representationalism seriously and advocate that there is strict limits to our understanding of the world.*

9.3.2 The Principles of Knowledge

Relations of ideas and matters of facts

There are two kinds of things of which we can have some knowledge: relations of ideas and matters of facts

- **Relations of ideas** are proved a priori, their truth can be certain and discovered by thought alone, their contrary implies contradiction. Their truth is independent of what is existent in the world.

ex: ‘the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right in Euclidian Geometry’.

ex: ‘a circle cannot be square’: the notion of square circle implies contradiction: we cannot even conceive it clearly

NOTE: An a priori proof against a proposition can only be that it leads to contradiction

- **Matters of fact** are proved a posteriori (by experience), their truth is never provable a priori: their contrary is always possible because it never implies contradiction.

ex: ‘the sun will rise tomorrow’ – that the sun will not rise tomorrow is perfectly intelligible.

The principle of reasoning for matters of facts

If not a priori reasoning, what can establish a matter of fact?

1. Observation and memory are obvious candidate.
2. But what about matters of facts of which we do perceive actually or that we do not remember? – e.g. ‘the sun will rise tomorrow’

Hume: **all our reasonings concerning matters of facts are founded on the relation of cause and effect**

Hume claims that only the relation of cause and effect allows us to go beyond the evidence given by our senses and our memory. Hence, all our reasoning about matters of facts which are not founded on direct observation or memory are based on a reasoning in terms of causes and effects.

Ex: classic example of irrational belief: the dorms will close next year.

The question arises: what are the grounds of our knowledge of cause and effect? How do we know that something is the cause of something else?

Conclusion

According to Hume, there are two kinds of knowledge: knowledge about the relations of ideas, and knowledge about matters of facts. While our knowledge about the relations of ideas is reached a priori, our knowledge about matters of facts relies on one of the three following: direct actual experience, memory, or reasoning in terms of causes and effects.

→ *Just as when accounting for human understanding, Hume gives a naturalistic and empiricist account of human knowledge. That said, here again, Hume does not say anything about these mechanisms of knowledge being reliable or not. And indeed, he is going to spend quite a bit of time showing that our main kind of reasoning – in terms of causes and effects – is unwarranted.*

9.4 The problem of induction

9.4.1 Inductive inference: the negative phase

The following is a direct quote from Morris, William Edward, "David Hume", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/hume/>

Text in bold font is my addition.

Hume proceeds first negatively, to show that our causal inferences are not due to reason, or any operation of the understanding. Reasoning concerns either relations of ideas or matters of fact.

Causal Relations are not provable a priori: Hume quickly establishes that, whatever assures us that a causal relation obtains, it is not reasoning concerning relations between ideas. Effects are distinct events from their causes: we can always conceive of one such event occurring and the other not. So causal reasoning cannot be a priori reasoning.

Causal Relations are discovered by experience : Causes and effects are discovered, not by reason but through experience, when we find that particular objects are constantly conjoined with one another. We tend to overlook this because most ordinary causal judgments are so familiar; we have made them so many times that our judgment seems immediate. But when we consider the matter, we realize that an (absolutely) unexperienced reasoner could be no reasoner at all. Even in applied mathematics, where we use abstract reasoning and geometrical methods to apply principles we regard as laws to particular cases in order to derive further principles as consequences of these laws, the discovery of the original law itself was due to experience and observation, not to a priori reasoning.

The so-called laws of nature are discovered by experience, not a priori. But, if all our knowledge of matters of facts are based on experience, how do we extend our reasoning to future cases?

The problem of inductive reasoning Even after we have experience of causal connections, our conclusions from those experiences are not

based on any reasoning or on any other process of the understanding. They are based on our past experiences of similar cases, without which we could draw no conclusions at all.

But this leaves us without any link between the past and the future. How can we justify extending our conclusions from past observation and experience to the future? The connection between a proposition that summarizes past experience and one that predicts what will occur at some future time is surely not an intuitive connection; it needs to be established by reasoning or argument. The reasoning involved must either be demonstrative, concerning relations of ideas, or probable, concerning matters of fact and existence.

Induction is not justifiable by any a priori deductive argument: There is no room for demonstrative reasoning here. We can always conceive of a change in the course of nature. However unlikely it may seem, such a supposition is intelligible and can be distinctly conceived. It therefore implies no contradiction, so it cannot be proven false by a priori demonstrative reasoning.

Induction is not provable by any a posteriori probable argument Probable reasoning cannot establish the connection, either, since it is based on the relation of cause and effect. What we understand of that relation is based on experience and any inference from experience is based on the supposition that nature is uniform that the future will be like the past.

Assuming the uniformity of nature is question begging: The connection could be established by adding a premise stating that nature is uniform. But how could we justify such a claim? Appeal to experience will either be circular or question-begging. For any such appeal must be founded on some version of the uniformity principle itself the very principle we need to justify.

Conclusion: our reasonings concerning matters of facts beyond the evidence of our senses and our memory are not well grounded

This argument exhausts the ways reason might establish a connection between cause and effect, and so completes the negative phase of Hume's project. The explanatory model of human nature which makes

reason prominent and dominant in thought and action is indefensible. Scepticism about it is well-founded: the model must go.

Hume insists that he offers his sceptical doubts about the operations of the understanding, not as discouragement, but rather an incitement to attempt something more full and satisfactory. Having cleared a space for his own account, Hume is now ready to do just that.

9.4.2 Inductive inference: the positive phase

I am still quoting Morris. "T" stands for Treatise.

What the principle of our causal reasoning can be Hume's negative argument showed that our causal expectations are not formed on the basis of reason. But we do form them, and if the mind be not engaged by argument it must be induced by some other principle of equal weight and authority (EHU, [not in our selection]).

This principle can't be some intricate or profound metaphysical argument Hume overlooked. For all of us—ordinary people, infants, even animals—improve by experience, forming causal expectations and refining them in the light of experience. Hume's sceptical solution limits our inquiries to common life, where no sophisticated metaphysical arguments are available and none are required.

Causal relations are grounded on the custom of constant conjunctions:

When we examine experience to see how expectations are actually produced, we discover that they arise after we have experienced the constant conjunction of two objects; only then do we expect the one from the appearance of the other. But when repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation we always say, that this propensity is the effect of Custom (EHU, 43).

So the process that produces our causal expectations is itself causal. Custom or habit determines the mind to suppose the future conformable to the past. But if this background of experienced constant conjunctions was all that was involved, then our reasonings would be merely hypothetical. Expecting that fire will warm, however, isn't just conceiving of its warming, it is believing that it will warm.

What makes us believe Belief requires that there also be some fact present to the senses or memory, which gives strength and solidity to the related idea. In these circumstances, belief is as unavoidable as is the feeling of a passion; it is a species of natural instinct, the necessary result of placing the mind in this situation.

Belief is a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit that results from the manner in which ideas are conceived, and in their feeling to the mind. It is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain. Belief is thus more an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures, so that all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation.

This should not be surprising, given that belief is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures. It is more conformable to the ordinary wisdom of nature to secure so necessary an act of the mind, by some instinct or mechanical tendency than to trust it to the fallacious deductions of our reason. Hume's sceptical solution thus gives a descriptive alternative, appropriately independent of all the laboured deductions of the understanding, to philosophers' attempts to account for our causal reasonings by appeal to reason and argument. For the other notions in the definitional circle, either we have no idea of force or energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can mean nothing but that determination of the thought, acquired by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect.

End of quote

Conclusion and Discussion - "Custom is the great guide of human life": Hume considers that custom is one of the main principles, or law of human nature. Custom is the *natural* way in which humans go beyond immediate experience and memory. It is a natural and empirical law: it describes a natural process (by contrast to innate ideas or innate principles of logic) and it is derived from observation.

It is a sufficient explanation in the sense that no other cause can be given that would improve the explanation. Hume is following Newton here: we cannot go any further without framing hypotheses that go beyond experience, and hence, are not verifiable.

In particular, Hume will not postulate “mental powers” to explain the mechanism of custom, just Newton did not postulate any “gravity power” in the material bodies. This would be going beyond experience and hence would not have any further explanatory value.

The law of custom is:

1. a good explanation
2. supported by experience
3. the best we have – no alternative does a better job

By inference to the best explanation, we can accept it.

9.5 The Notion of Necessary Connection – What is a cause?

TEXT ANALYSIS.

9.6 Hume on Scepticism

9.6.1 Scepticism concerning the evidence of the senses and the existence of the external world

Scepticism 1 – Descartes

- Descartes:
 - scepticism as a *precaution* – before inquiry
 - *universal* scepticism, including faculties
 - base veracity of faculties on 1 original principle + reasoning
- Objection:
 - EITHER there is no principle more evident and convincing than what is coming from our faculties
 - OR if there were one, our only way to grasp it would be by these very faculties that we do not trust

SO: The Cartesian Doubt, were it possible (which Hume denies), would be incurable
- Note: What does Hume mean by “were it possible to be attained by any human creature”? He is implying that, in fact, it is NOT possible to doubt everything in the way that Descartes tells us to do.
- Qualification: Hume advocates a weakened version of Descartes’ method for philosophy:
 - be suspicious about prejudices and opinions
 - base knowledge on clear and evident principles
 - proceed by cautious deductive reasoning
 - check on the conclusions
 - examine all the consequences
- Important Note: of course, what counts as clear and evident for Hume is NOT what counts as clear and evident for Descartes !! For Descartes, a clear and distinct idea is grasped through the mind only, whereas for Hume, a clear and distinct idea is a direct copy of a sensation.

Scepticism 2 – Montaigne

- Montaigne (for example)
 - scepticism as a *result* of inquiry
 - scepticism concerning:
 1. mental faculties
 2. Senses
 3. Maxims of common life
 4. Metaphysics and Theology

- Non convincing arguments for scepticism about the evidence of the senses: the unreliability of senses

Hume's answer: use reason to correct the senses

Is this a satisfactory answer? Why? Why not?

- Convincing argument: the problem of representation
 1. Natural instinct: the external world is objective and exists as it appears to us

The Representation Thesis:

(A) our sensations are the result of the influence of external bodies on our sense organ

(B) this influence is such that our sensations are "similar" to the external bodies
 2. Philosophy contradicts our natural instinct:
 - our sensations are only images, perceptions in the mind, representations of external bodies
 - we have no way to prove that these perceptions correspond and resemble external bodies
 3. Arguments undermining the representation thesis:
 - (A) dreams etc.: sensations without external objects
 - (B) causal influence of bodies on mind is incomprehensible

4. Attempts to save the representation thesis defeated:

- proof by experience: impossible
- proof by veracity of God (Descartes is the target): contradiction (why do the senses deceive us?) or circle (how to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver)

- Assessment: this kind of scepticism is convincing. We find ourselves in a *dilemma*:
 - EITHER we accept the teachings of nature and then take *all there is are our sensations* (Berkeley)
 - OR we postulate that our perceptions are representations of external bodies but *we cannot prove it either by experience or reasoning*
- Hume is, of course, going to defend the second alternative: we should follow our natural instinct and adopt the representation thesis, but accept also that we cannot prove, either a priori or a posteriori, that this thesis is true.

This view is, according to Hume, both reasonable and beneficial (see part III on the mitigated scepticism)

Scepticism 3 – Berkeley

- Berkeley:
 - everyone agrees that secondary qualities are in the mind only
 - the arguments for which we all accept that secondary qualities are in the mind only also apply to primary qualities
- Appeal to an “abstract” notion of extension?
 - such notion is unintelligible: unknown, indeterminate, inexplicable something
 - HUME ON ABSTRACT IDEAS: they don’t exist – we only have ideas about particulars – see also note 33
- SUMMARY of the convincing objections against the evidence of the senses and the existence of the external world:

1. DILEMMA for the representation thesis:
 - If we rely only on our natural instinct (take our sensations as true), then we must accept a world of sensation à la Berkeley, and reject the teachings of our reason (reject that the information that we get from our senses should be corrected by reason)
 - If we rely on our reason, then we must reject our natural instinct, and we have nothing to replace it as a basis for secured knowledge
2. All sensible qualities, both primary and secondary, are in the mind only
 - All arguments that apply to secondary qualities apply to primary qualities
 - Appeal to abstraction is no good for the sceptic

9.6.2 Against Excessive Scepticism

Excessive scepticism concerning rational knowledge

- From the outset, Hume formulates the classical objection against scepticism:

It is impossible, because self-contradictory, to prove that reasoning is fallible through reasoning

- Hume then examines some of the most well known arguments that are supposed to support scepticism concerning reasonings:
 - infinite divisibility of space – paradoxes of the infinite
 - infinite divisibility of time

Reference of interest: Zeno's paradoxes (you can find a short and clear presentation in Salmon, *Space, Time and Motion*)

In both cases, "absurd opinions" are supported by clear and valid reasonings. This makes us suspicious about the deductions of reason.

Excessive concerning empirical knowledge

- Popular excessive scepticism – no empirical knowledge is attainable for the senses are unreliable – is tenable only in the Schools, that is to say, not in everyday practice

- Philosophical scepticism – no empirical knowledge is attainable for empirical knowledge relies on causal reasoning which we cannot justify – is tenable
- Popular excessive scepticism is neither useful nor beneficial
 - does not produce any conviction (Copernic vs. Ptolemee)
 - does not involve any ethical behavior (Stoics vs. Epicureans)

9.6.3 Hume's Mitigated scepticism

Four characteristics of Hume's mitigated scepticism

1. Hume's scepticism is a means to fight dogmatism and reveal instead:

the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.

We humans are prompt to make our mind, to defend our ideas against everybody else and to despise or hate the ones who disagree with us.

Hume's view teaches some kind of modesty

2. Philosophy: restricted to the domain of experience

philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.

Theology and Cosmogony are taken out of the domain of philosophy

3. Abstract sciences: restricted to the domain of quantities and numbers

Any abstract discussion of objects that are neither quantities nor numbers are vain verbal disputes (disputes that are based on disagreement regarding definitions of the words, not their meaning)

4. Empirical science: no demonstration is possible – only probable reasonings.

Through a priori reasonings, we can entertain about any system of coherent propositions. None of such systems can be proved to be false, since they are not contradictory. All such systems are equally plausible. They are all equally implausible as well!

5. burning worthless books ?