

Chapter 13

Empiricism

13.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Hume, *Dialogues*, parts 2 and 3
- Study questions: Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of your readings:
 1. Both Demea and Philo argue that
 - 1- we should distinguish the issues of the being of God and of the nature of God
 - 2- while the being of god is unquestionable, the nature of God is unknowableThat said, they provide arguments of two clearly different style. What is the difference between their argumentations?
 2. Give the structure of the design argument p.15. What is the main premise? What is the rule of inference that is used? What is(are) the exact conclusion(s)?
 3. What are the criteria for an argument by analogy to be a good argument? Can you think of an analogy that obviously fails?
 4. What are the critics of Philo against Cleanthes' use of analogy between the humanly designed object and the universe?
 5. What are Cleanthes' two illustrations of his thesis in part III? Do you think they fall out of the objections that Philo formulated?

13.2 Demea vs. Philo

Both Demea and Philo argue that

1- we should distinguish the issues of the being of God and of the nature of God

2- while the being of God is unquestionable, the nature of God is unknowable – in particular anthropomorphism should be avoided (that is, we should not think that God has anything like we have).

That said, they provide arguments of two clearly different style (See also the different ways in which they respectively react to Cleanthes' design argument).

- Demea: **rationalism** tainted by some dogmatism
 - "priest" style: vocabulary, even Bible style
 - value judgment instead of analysis
 - metaphors instead of arguments
 - when he actually appeals to philosophy, it is to use an argument from authority, that is, no more than quoting a great philosopher (see again the irony in Philo's answer)
 - He will call for a priori reasoning in his answer to Cleanthes (15)
- Philo defends similar views, but with an argument from **empiricism**

The syllogism:

 - (1) our ideas reach no further than our experience
 - (2) we have no experience of the divine
 - (3) CC: God is incomprehensible

Reminder: Difference between *valid* and *sound* argument:

A sound argument is a valid argument with true premises.

Application:

- Is the syllogism valid? Yes
- Is-it sound? It depends on what you think of (1) and (2)
- (2) is rather uncontroversial. What about (1)?

13.3 Empiricism and Rationalism

- **Empiricism**

Claim: All knowledge is based on experience and observation.

- Contrast with **Rationalism**:

Claim: We have a priori knowledge – innate propositions, innate concepts

If radical, a rationalist can say that all "true" knowledge is a priori.

- **Some main arguments in favor of rationalism:**

- Senses are deceptive.

- Logical and mathematical reasonings are innate.

- A priori knowledge is a condition of possibility of any judgment on what we perceive.

- **Main problems for rationalism:**

- You have to posit a form of being for the ideas, or the propositions that we know a priori

- You have to account for the relationship between these beings and the material objects, including our brain or minds:

- 1- how do the sensible objects relate to these beings?

- 2- how do we know them?

So, on the one hand, it is not clear that the number of problems that the postulation of a priori knowledge solves is higher than the number of problems that it raises. On the other hand, it is not clear that any consistent view can be defended that denies a priori knowledge.

- **Rejection of a priori reasoning (17):**

1. cannot determine from one's ideas alone what the entire universe is

2. there is no conceivable state of the universe that implies a contradiction

3. nor can reason alone show one the cause of anything, much less the universe. The only thing that a priori reasoning ("fancy"! not reason

here) can do is to formulate consistent hypotheses, none of which can be confirmed but by experience.

- Example: Philo claims that the two systems that put the cause of the universe respectively in matter and in a supreme mind possess the exact possibility of being true.
- Contrast this with:
 - Descartes' rationalism as typically simplified: Clear and distinct ideas perceived by intuition and then pure deduction of the entire physics and morals. The tree of knowledge.
- Thus, behind this is the battle between great rationalist philosophical systems. Coherent, but far from any applications according to Hume.

13.4 Empiricism and reasoning

Now, to what are the empiricists exactly committed concerning our reasonings and the limitations of our knowledge?

- **Reminder Hume:** connection of ideas through *association*. Great invention of Hume to avoid any appeal to rational principles. The principles of association are natural operations of the mind.
- **Three principles:** resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect
- **Causation** is a particularly important topic. Hume shows that causation cannot be proved by any a priori reasoning. Rather, it is discovered by experience:
 - on the side of the external impressions, as the repetition of the **conjunction** of two objects
 - on the side of the internal reflections, as a **feeling of determination**
 Both are indispensable to define causation.
- Importance of the **constant conjunction of events and of custom**.
 See p.18: "That all inferences...similar causes"
 See also definition of an "argument by experience" p.20-21

- a. from our experience of two kinds of objects always occurring together
- b. whenever we see an object of one kind we infer the presence of the other

13.5 Further Thinking: Infamous problem of induction

- **Induction vs. Deduction**

- deductive argument: application of a general law to particular cases. Logically valid. Truth of the conclusion guaranteed by truth of the premises

- inductive argument: generalization from particular cases.

All swans are white

All ravens are black

- **THE problem of induction:**

- Original formulation: Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section IV, Part 1

- Reformulated by Russell, *Problems in Philosophy* with a striking example:

The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken. (chapter "On Induction")

- The problem is thus: How do we justify inferences about the future when we only have access to patterns in present and past experience?

- New problem of induction: Goodman, but this is another story

- **Why is induction not well supported?**

- Can the justification be deductive? No, because

1. There is no deductively valid inferences from the present and past facts to future facts.

2. There is no valid inference from a finite series of conjunction to an universal statement. Induction is thus not logically supported.

- Can the justification be inductive? Obviously question begging.

- Invoking a principle of uniformity of nature or anything like that amounts to circularity.

• **Can we say that every observed instance confirm the inductive rule?**

- A clear problem for the idea that instances confirm an hypothesis:

All ravens are black / All not black things are non ravens

Hence, every time you see a green leaf, you confirm the hypothesis that all ravens are black. This seems really wrong...

- In a similar way: irrelevant conjunctions and irrelevant disjunction

The anomalous perihelion of Mercury confirms the general theory of relativity

Hence:

1. the anomalous perihelion of Mercury confirms the theory including the general theory of relativity and that there is life on Mars

2. the anomalous perihelion of Mercury or that Edgar came to class today confirms the general theory of relativity

• **Hume's view:**

We use inferences by induction all the time. That said, it is not logically supported. It cannot be proved by experience either. Any reasoning by induction hinges on the principle of causality which cannot be proved, either a priori or a posteriori. What we usually take as necessary causality is nothing more natural expectation of our mind, stemming from the custom of constant conjunctions.

This means that there is no real physical causation, if by real physical causation you understand necessary physical connection between kinds of events.

Since all our reasonings hinge on the principle of association from cause to effect, and since such principle can be supported neither logically nor empirically, **this means that our entire knowledge is conjectural.** This is not a small pill to swallow for the true empiricist...

• **Another way out: the pragmatic vindication of induction**

- Hans Reichenbach
- Pascal’s wager: compare the costs and benefits in the hypothesis that : you believe in God and go to church or not / God exists or not – going to church seems a winner

	God exists	God does not exist
Believe	Everlasting happiness	negligible
Disbelieve	Eternal damnation	negligible

- In the same manner, according to Reichenbach: we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by using induction, whether or not Nature is uniform.

	Nature is uniform	Nature is not uniform
Use induction	Succeeds	Fails
Use some other method	Succeeds or fails	fails

