

Chapter 8

Skepticism and Empiricism

8.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Hume, *Dialogues*, p.1-2, part 1
- Study questions: Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of your reading:
 1. Try to reformulate in your own words the debate between Philo and Cleanthes on p. 5-11? Philo defends a kind of scepticism: what are the criticisms that Cleanthes raises against Philo's position? What are Philo's answers?

8.2 Suitability of dialogue form

Hume begins his book with an advocacy the dialogue form for his topic.

8.2.1 Suitability of dialogue form: Pamphilus' argument

Against dialogue

Although ancients (viz. Plato) used it, it has fallen into disuse

1. philosophers today are expected to get **right to the point** and prove it

- dialogues waste a lot of time laying out background, making transitions, etc.
- brevity, precision, systematic order are sacrificed
- 2. although the dialogue form may help avoid the appearance of author and reader, it tends to run into the image of **teacher and pupil**
 - discussion: why are these problems?

Two requirements for suitability

Nevertheless, there are some situations to which the dialogue form is appropriately suited (p. 1, q.v.)

1. where the **point of doctrine is so obvious** as not to admit of dispute yet so important as to bear repeating
2. questions of philosophy that are **so obscure and uncertain** that no positive conclusions can be reached

Hume argues that **natural theology meets both requirements** at the same time(2)

- Isn't it paradoxical? He solves the paradox in distinguishing between two questions:

1. the **existence** of God is both an obvious and important truth (q.v.)
2. his **nature**, on the other hand, is obscure and uncertain

8.2.2 Pamphilus's paradox

Does this distinction solve the paradox?

A paradox

Can we be so certain of the existence of something when we don't even know what it is?

1. For instance, can you be certain whether weak neutral bosons exist before you know what they're supposed to be?
2. If you think the comparison with science is not fair, remember that Hume's first major work purported to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects

Thus, the leading question of the book is: What would the correct philosophical method, that is, empiricism, can lead us to believe about the existence and the nature of god?

Pamphilus ignorant of the paradox

I don't think we are supposed to think that Pamphilus sees the paradox

1. for Pamphilus, belief in God is important as a **basis for morality and our "hopes"** (p. 2), which Hume would disavow as "superstition"

2. also paradoxical that the being of God can serve as the basis of morality even in the absence of knowledge of his nature

- compare Demea's quotation on p. 3 from the stoic philosopher Chrysippus: he turns to natural theology after ethics

- hence the nature of God could not be the foundation of morality

Why would Hume start with such a silly introduction to the subject?

8.2.3 Advantages of dialogue form for Hume

A clear advantage is that Hume **does not talk in his own name**: he can expose various doctrines without taking any clear stance over the issues discussed. That said, what we noted above leads to more:

Irony

In having Pamphilus not see the paradox of his statements, Hume is using irony

1. that is, **Hume's intended meaning, which will become more clear by the end of the *Dialogues*, is just the opposite of what Pamphilus says**

2. there is more irony in Pamphilus's statements about God's existence on p. 2

- "most ignorant ages:" even, or only?

- note that the "refined geniuses . . . ambitiously" seek proofs and arguments; he does not say that they acknowledge, as he does for the "most ignorant"

Hume is already making fun of any attempts to ground religion on reason: the most ignorant ages did, it seems, a better job than the most refined theologians.

Implicit setting

The use of irony is an advantage of the dialogue form Hume does not mention explicitly

1. Hume can suggest things about certain ideas by what he implies about the character who expresses these ideas: a way to convey the message that Hume disagree with a given claim is to have a character known for his stupidity hold this claim.

2. In this case, Hume is letting us know that Pamphilus is not all that bright and that we should take what he says with a large grain of salt

In a dialogue, the author is also able to suggest his own position concerning his characters' ideas through their relationships to one another

1. for instance, we learn in Part I that Pamphilus is the son of a friend of Cleanthes, to whom he has been entrusted for his education (3)

2. this fact is clearly relevant to Pamphilus' statements here and at the end of the work about Cleanthes' beliefs and arguments

This will be even clearer in the way Hume have Philo and Demea interact on the subject of education.

8.2.4 Watch out for Philo: Demea on education and Philo's skepticism

Demea on education

Pamphilus' education provides the occasion for the discussion. Demea comments that a student should study the nature of God – esp. natural theology – last (3)

1. subject requires mature judgment, a knowledge of other sciences

2. in response to Philo's question, clarifies his meaning:

- only theology as a science is postponed – he “seasons their minds” with piety (3)

- in the other sciences, one shows the students the uncertainties, the “ridiculous conclusions” of some of the “greatest geniuses,” so that by the time they get to theology they have lost the “arrogance of philosophy” that may lead them to reject religion (3-4)

Philo's skepticism

Philo (4, q.v.):

1. at first pretends to agree with Demea

- says he admires the way Demea draws advantage from what tends to lead to irreligion

- contrasts the ignorant, who have contempt for philosophy but believe what they are told, with those who have a little bit of learning, think nothing too difficult for human reason, and are skeptical (4, q.v.)

2. but then he pretends to “improve” on what Demea has said – a nice piece of irony – **What Philo really does is to expose skeptic views:**

- says that we ought to have a thorough understanding of the weakness and limits of the human intellect, even in affairs of common life

- show the contradictions in basic concepts of matter, cause and effect, space and time, even quantity (4, q.v. – consider Zeno’s paradoxes)

- that we do not understand even what holds a stone together

- once this is understood, he argues, then how can we decide questions concerning the origin of the world? (5, q.v.)

The result of this: Pamphilus cuts in once more to comment that Demea and Cleanthes are **both smiling**

1. Demea, because he agrees

2. Cleanthes, because he thinks Philo is either joking or lying

a. not only does this show us that Pamphilus finds Cleanthes smarter than Demea

b. but Hume is alerting the reader to watch out for Philo: he is tricky and uses irony.

The remainder of Part I is then a discussion between Cleanthes and Philo only

8.3 Skepticism

The first exposition of skepticism by Philo was rather radical: cast doubts over the most common beliefs.

8.3.1 Philosophy and Practice

Cleanthes(5) objects:

- concludes that Philo would establish religious faith on skepticism
- but then doubts that Philo is serious in his skepticism – here Cleanthes may be speaking for Hume
 - a. wants to see whether Philo goes out by the door or the window

b. that is, does Philo really doubt gravity? Does he keep up his skepticism in practical life?

- **Dilemma for skeptics: if they are serious, will soon be rid of them; and if not, we can ignore them**
- compares skeptics (Pyrrhonians p. 10 n. 5) with Stoics: neither can keep up their philosophical attitude, their “enthusiasm,” as the external world presses in on

them (5-6)

8.3.2 A refined skepticism

Philo’s answer to Cleanthes’ critic: the paradox of skepticism

- Philo (6), again, starts with “agreeing” with his interlocutor: allows for Cleanthes’s comparison. But immediately turns the comparison against Cleanthes’ thesis that everyday life and practice does not match philosophical principles.
 - In the case of the Stoics, even when they relax their philosophy, the effects of it will appear in their ordinary lives – indeed great example: Epictetus was a slave...
 - In the case of the skeptics, the effects similarly appear in their ordinary lives.
 - **The only difference is that the effect of skepticism on ordinary life is not extreme virtue, but rather that skeptics act like everybody else**
- **This is obviously a paradox.** Philo, and Hume with him, play again.
 - Philo has refuted Cleanthes’s accusation that his pretended skepticism would be refuted by his actions
 - but at the same time, we do not know how being a skeptic makes one act like everyone else

Refined Skepticism

Philo then gives the explanation; for the paradox:

- everyone reasons like a “philosopher” on moral and natural subjects (7)

Definition (A): Philosophy: forming more general principles as we gain more experience

- Thus: philosophy is just the reasoning of ordinary life made more regular and methodical
 - Indeed: base everything on evidence and observation

Claim (B): skepticism shows that we cannot account completely for our “vulgar methods of reasoning” and acknowledge that we are “entirely guided by a kind of instinct or necessity”

- However, when we carry our speculations beyond ordinary life to questions concerning “the two eternities,” etc., we do not have even that, the vulgar method of reasoning. We are at a loss and should not expect to know anything in these matters. Here skepticism tells you that rational arguments will not get you anywhere.

SO: What we have here is an exposition of **Hume’s refined skepticism:**

1. Acknowledgment of the limitations of our reason and capacities of understanding:
 - all knowledge is based on experience
 - *Comment* All this is assuming **empiricism**.
 - Definition (A) is clearly not the definition of a good method of reasoning for many philosophers. Take Descartes for example, who wants to base all knowledge on intuition and deduction.
 - Claim (B): the principles of reasoning are: the principles of association: resemblance, continuity and most of all cause and effect – none of them can be rationally explained.
2. That said, with experience only, you cannot go very far, and indeed you cannot go anywhere concerning the origin of the world and God.

3. Thus, **the refined skeptic**:

- **reason like everybody in ordinary matters, but is different from everybody in that he knows that common sense is not well founded** (typically, the belief in the principle of causality: useful but not provable)

- **rejects the high philosophical arguments**, these which use reason beyond the realm of experience, as ill founded.

8.4 Hume's Empiricism

Whereas in his times Hume was known for his reputation as an atheist and skeptic, he is now recognized among the philosopher as one of the major contributors to empiricism.

The main point of empiricism is that **all knowledge is founded on experience and observation**.

Empiricism is directed against all kinds of highly sophisticated rational systems, that go beyond the experience. **Rationalists** had constructed metaphysical systems of philosophy: Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza. According to the empiricist, these philosophies are far from any applications and ill founded.

On the other hand, Hume recognized the insufficiency of the **accounts of morality** that are only based on sentiment (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson). These philosophies lack a clear account on just reasoning. To this aim, some metaphysics is needed.

Hume's method is then to produce a true metaphysics, well founded on the observations and experience. From there, a true account of morals, politics and religion could follow in the same manner.

Main points of Hume's empiricism:

- All the materials of thinking are **perceptions**
- Perceptions are derived either from sensation (inward sentiment) or reflection (outward sentiment)
- Perceptions are divided into **impressions**, vivid and lively, and **ideas**

- **Crucial Copy Principle:** ideas, complex or simple, are nothing beyond experience. Simple ideas are feeble copies of impressions. Complex ideas are composed of simple ideas.
- The Copy Principle can be used for discarding (philosophical) notions without any cognitive content. The test is the following: **if it is impossible to assign any idea to the term, then we have good reason to be suspicious about its cognitive content.**
- **Connection of ideas through association.** Great invention of Hume to avoid any appeal to any rational principle. The principles of association are **natural operations of the mind.**
- Three principles of association at work when we connect ideas: resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect
- Causation is a particularly important topic. **One of Hume's most important achievement is to show that causation cannot be proved by any reasoning.** Rather, it is discovered by experience, but remains *unjustified*:
 - 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.

Applying his empiricism to other philosophical issues, Hume goes on proving that these philosophies that are founded on a priori reasoning are ill founded. Knowledge is founded on experience. This is recognizing our limits as human beings, the limits of human understanding.

Thus, Hume is **not** a skeptic in the sense that he denies the possibility of any knowledge. Instead, he advocates that we **acknowledge our epistemological limits as human beings**, and that we try to build a limited but well founded philosophy.

8.5 Cleanthes (8): a challenge to the empiricist

- Cleanthes argues against the idea that to follow and adhere to evidence can be the base of the rejection of philosophical arguments. He draws an analogy with scientific theories. Evidence leads to great scientific theories. If the skeptic accepts the great scientific theories, then they should accept natural theology as well.
 - a. the skeptics, in both theoretical and practical subjects, let themselves be guided by the evidence
 - b. they don't raise skeptical principles against such results in science as:
 - 1.) Newton's theory of light and colors
 - 2.) Galileo and Copernicus's defense of heliocentrism
- Cleanthes compares "vulgar" with "refined" skeptics
 - vulgar skeptics
 - 1.) is fatal to knowledge, not religion
 - 2.) these are the sort of people who would doubt Euclid but believe in superstitions like witchcraft
 - refined skeptics, on the other hand, are guilty of the opposite inconsistency (8-9)
 - 1.) they give their assent to the most abstruse theories in science, such as those mentioned above (9)
 - 2.) yet admit ignorance of how food nourishes or what holds the parts of matter together

Hence, the refined skeptics consider the evidence for each thing separately, and decide in each case on the basis of the available evidence

 - 1.) that is, they are not blanket skeptics
 - 2.) so why not consider the evidence for theology? why do they adopt a blanket skepticism here?
- Cleanthes concludes

- a. that skeptics are refuted by practice
- b. not liars, but jokers
- c. cannot make a distinction between science and ordinary life, or between one science and another
 - 1.) that is, between theology and some other science
 - 2.) if there is any difference, he asserts, it is in favor of theology (10)

What is at stake here the following: how the empiricist cannot buy into the design argument?

- The Design argument contrasts with the other rational argument in that it is based on “evidence and observation”
- Comparison with scientific method and scientific theories
- The challenge for Hume is thus to show that the design argument is not acceptable *even if from the empiricist point of view*.

To refute that line of argument, the empiricist-skeptic has to:

1. Show how evidence can indeed support the physical theories;
 2. Show how little evidence we have in theological matters;
- and thus distinguish between the two domains.

That is what is going to be done in the next parts.

8.6 Theology and the Church

- **Cleanthes then turns to address Demea:**

1. finds it very peculiar that, at least since the early days of Christianity, theologians have adopted skeptical arguments
2. Protestants (“Reformers”) have adopted the same modes of reasoning as Catholics (“the Romish communion”)
3. Locke was the first Christian to say that faith is a kind of reason, that religion is a branch of philosophy, and that arguments could be used in theology (10-11)
4. now “pretenders to reasoning and philosophy” take skepticism and atheism to be synonymous (11)

- **Philo’s reference to Bacon:**

1. Cleanthes takes him to be referring to where Bacon says that a little philosophy leads to atheism, a lot to religion – which accords with his philosophy
2. but Philo is referring to a passage where Bacon says that people who say they are atheists are not very prudent, and hence not to be taken seriously
3. so, although Cleanthes would "rank [Philo] in this class of fools," he would never admit to being an atheist, even if he were

- **Theologians's inconsistency:**

Then Philo, commenting on Cleanthes's capsule history, accuses theologians of "priestcraft" (11 q.v.)

1. in ignorant ages, people would use their reason to question religion, and theologians taught them to doubt their reason. "Education" had greater influence then
2. now that "education" has less influence and people are skeptical due to greater contact with different cultures, different religions, theologians appeal to our reason to lead us to religion

- **Cleanthes (12)**

1. does not see the problem
2. in fact, he gives a very bad argument, saying that principles will be true if lead to true religion
 - a. not only affirms the consequent
 - b. but how can opposite sets of principles both be true?

Thus what Pamphilus says about the "accurate philosophical turn" of Cleanthes (2) is undermined: Hume exposes him as guilty of a rather elementary fallacy

1. in part I, Cleanthes is very dogmatical and unphilosophical
2. through the course of these dialogues, Philo mitigates Cleanthes's dogmatism, to the point where Cleanthes himself questions Demea's arguments in part IX, even though they lead to conclusions he can accept.