

7.7 Hume on Scepticism

7.7.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Hume, *Enquiries*, section 12
- Study Questions:
 1. What are Hume's arguments against Cartesian doubt? Do you agree with him?
 2. To what extent does Hume doubt the existence of the external world? On what grounds? To what extent does he accept the existence of the external world? On what grounds?
 3. What are Hume's arguments against excessive scepticism?
 4. What is Hume's "mitigated scepticism"?

7.7.2 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

7.7.3 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. Ptolemy)
 - does not involve any ethical behavior (Stoics vs. Epicureans)

7.7.4 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 ?