

Handout 26: Hume's Skepticism II: The External World

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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I THE "UNIVERSAL AND PRIMARY OPINION OF MEN"

The "natural" or "common" view about the external world and our knowledge of it consists of two parts. First, that the external world exists independently from us; second, that we are directly aware of this world in sensory experience.

Both quotes from the *Enquiry*, Section XII, Part 1:

"It seems evident that men are carried by a natural instinct or prepossession to repose faith in their senses, and that without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe which does not depend on our perception, but would exist though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated."

1. It is "natural" to believe that there is a world outside of ourselves; i.e., that:
 - (a) The world doesn't depend on my perceiving it in order to exist.
 - (b) The world would exist even if I didn't.
 - (c) The world would exist even if all "sensible creatures" ceased existing.

(Interesting question for Hume: if these beliefs are the result of "natural instinct", are they innate? In his earlier book *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume gave a very detailed empiricist account of where they came from (in Section 1.4.2); short version: they come from the imagination. Now, they simply result from "natural instinct or prepossession".)

"It seems also evident that when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature they always suppose the very images presented by the senses to be the external objects and never entertain any suspicion that the one are nothing but representations of the other. This very table which we see white and which we feel hard is believed to exist independent of our perception and to be something external to our mind which perceives it."

2. It is also "natural" to take our sensory impressions to be the external objects themselves. (In the second sentence, Hume is using the phrase "this very table" to refer to our sensory impression of the table—which we naturally take to be the table itself.)

2 “DESTROYED BY THE SLIGHTEST PHILOSOPHY”

“But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy which teaches us that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object. The table which we see seems to diminish as we remove further from it. But the real table which exists independent of us suffers no alteration. It was, therefore, nothing but its image which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictate of reason and no man who reflects ever doubted that the existences which we consider when we say *this house* and *that tree* are nothing but perceptions in the mind and fleeting copies or representations of other existences which remain uniform and independent.”

1. The big claim here is that philosophical reflections leads to *representationalism*; the view that:
 - (a) The objects of sensory awareness are “in the mind”.
 - (b) Those objects represent external (“real”, “independent”) things.
2. Why should we believe that the objects of sensory awareness are in the mind, and not external things?
 - (a) Hume gives the Argument from Perceptual Variability
 - i. The “table” present to my mind gets smaller when I move away from it.
 - ii. The real table doesn’t get smaller when I move away from it.
 - iii. So, the “table” present to my mind \neq the real table. (By Leibniz’s Law)
 - (b) More famous: the Argument from Illusion
 - i. Consider the Rotating Snake illusion of Akiyoshi Kataoka.
 - ii. The object I am aware of is moving.
 - iii. The external thing (in this case, the colored shapes on the page / screen) is not moving.
 - iv. So, the object I am aware of \neq the external thing. (By Leibniz’s Law)
 - v. The object I’m aware of in that illusion is of the same kind of thing as the objects I’m aware of in veridical perception.
 - vi. So, the objects I’m aware of are not external things.
3. Okay, if we are never aware of external things, then why should we believe that the objects of sensory experience represent external things?
 - (a) Basically, Hume agrees with Berkeley: there’s no good reason to. He essentially endorses Berkeley’s epistemological argument against materialism (from sections 18-20 of Berkeley’s *Treatise*).
 - (b) He also dismisses the Cartesian attempt to prove the existence of the external world by demonstrating that God is not a deceiver: “To have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being in order to prove the veracity of our senses is surely making a very unexpected circuit.”

3 HUME'S RESPONSE

"This is a topic, therefore, in which the profounder and more philosophical skeptics will always triumph."

1. Hume agrees with Berkeley that philosophy can't give us a good reason to believe in external things.
2. But he also thinks we can't give up this belief. He says that Berkeley's arguments that we should stop believing in external things "admit of no answer and produce no conviction."
3. So he doesn't really offer a solution. On the one hand, we have no reason to believe in the external world. On the other hand, we can't help but believe in it.

"When [the skeptic] awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself and to confess that all his objections are mere amusement and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe, though they are not able, by their most diligent inquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations or to remove the objections which may be raised against them."

4 THREE ALTERNATIVES TO HUME'S "SOLUTION"

1. **BERKELEYAN IDEALISM.** How incompatible is Berkeleyan idealism with the natural / common sense view? Berkeley thought it was *entirely* compatible with it; he saw himself as defending common sense. The key for the Berkeleyan is to accommodate the first part of what Hume describes as the natural view; i.e., the belief that the world exists independently of my perceptions of it. It's surprisingly difficult to state exactly what aspect of this belief the Berkeleyan would have to deny. (E.g., the Berkeleyan might say that it's true, on her view, that the table would exist even if I didn't exist, because others would still have the corresponding perceptions.)
2. **DIRECT REALISM.** Deny the first part of the representationalist theory of perception, and say that the objects of sensory awareness are external things themselves. If the objects of our sensory awareness are things outside of the mind, then the philosophical problem of giving a reason for our belief in such things disappears (or, at least one version of the problem disappears). What reason is there for believing in a world of real, mind-independent tables? Well, I am (directly!) aware of them in perception! I can see them, touch them, feel them, and so on! This view was famously defended by Thomas Reid, another Scottish philosopher of the eighteenth century. The primary challenge for this view is to answer the Arguments from Illusion, Perceptual Variability, and Hallucination (we didn't discuss this last one).
3. **KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM AND EMPIRICAL REALISM.** Sounds fancy, doesn't it? I'll (attempt to) explain this approach on the last day of the semester.