

Hume's Skeptical Lessons

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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In section XII of the *Enquiry*, Hume considers some powerful skeptical arguments against perception, and then against reason itself. He counsels against taking such “excessive skepticism” too seriously, and recommends a more “mitigated skepticism” instead.

I SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE SENSES

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 via sensory perception:

“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” (104)

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” (104)

- 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.)

But philosophical reflection reveals that the immediate objects of sensory perception cannot be external things:

“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.”

- The immediate objects of sensory perception are “in the mind”:
 - Hume’s argument (from perceptual variability):
 - The “table” present to my mind gets smaller when I move away from it.
 - The real table doesn’t get smaller when I move away from it.
 - So, the “table” present to my mind ≠ the real table. (By Leibniz’s Law)
 - Another, more famous argument, from illusion

Consider a perceptual illusion, such as the Rotating Snake Illusion by Akiyoshi Kitaoka
<http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/~akitaoka/index-e.html>

 - The object I am aware of is moving.
 - The external thing (in this case, the colored shapes on the page / screen) is not moving.
 - So, the object I am aware of ≠ the external thing. (By Leibniz’s Law)
 - The object I’m aware of in that illusion is of the same kind of thing as the objects I’m aware of in ordinary sensory perception.
 - So, the objects I’m aware of in ordinary sensory perception are not external things.

With this background, Hume presents two skeptical arguments:

- First, he argues that because we are never immediately aware of external things, we have no reason to believe that there are any which resemble our sensory perceptions:
 - Our perceptions *could* have arisen from “the energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestions of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us” (105). So our perceptions do not *entail* the existence of external objects. It is, rather “a question of fact” that must be settled by experience.

- (b) But experience “must be entirely silent” because we *have* no experience of external objects. Moreover, we have no understanding of “the manner, in which body should so operate upon mind as ever to convey an image of itself to a substance.”
 - (c) This argument closely parallels one given by George Berkeley in sections 18–20 of his *Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge* to the effect that we can never know that material objects exist.
 - (d) Hume also dismisses Descartes’s 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.”
2. Second, Hume presents a skeptical argument that we *do* have reason to believe that there *are* no objects that resemble our sensory perceptions. He credits the argument to George Berkeley, though says that while they “admit of no answer,” they also “produce no conviction” (107, footnote 64).
- (a) Recall the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. It is “universally allowed by modern enquirers” that secondary qualities resemble nothing in external objects (recall Locke’s discussion of this distinction). But, Hume says, if this is true of secondary qualities, it must be true of primary qualities as well.
 - (b) Why? Because the reason secondary qualities are said not to resemble objects is that they are “sensible qualities of objects” – and this is no less true of extension itself, which is “entirely acquired from the senses of sight and feeling” (107).
 - (c) We could only avoid the conclusion by saying that the idea of extension is reached via abstraction, but this, Hume says, would be absurd: extension that’s neither visible nor tangible is inconceivable.
 - (d) If the idea of extension resembles nothing in external objects, then we have reason to believe that there are no objects that resemble the ideas of objects we form from our sensory impressions.
3. Given these arguments, the most we can say about the external world is that it is a “certain unknown, inexplicable *something* … a notion so imperfect, that no skeptic will think it worth while to contend against it” (108).

2 INTERLUDE: TWO ALTERNATIVE THEORIES ABOUT PERCEPTION

1. BERKELEYAN IDEALISM. Berkeley held that there were no mind-independent objects; he thought that tables, trees, rocks, and so on were nothing more than collections of ideas. He thought this view was entirely compatible with common sense; indeed, he saw himself as defending common sense against skeptical philosophers. 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 Berkeley would deny. (E.g., he says that the table would exist even if I didn’t exist, because others would have the corresponding perceptions.)
2. DIRECT REALISM. Direct realists argue that external things *are* the immediate objects of sensory perception. If so, then the philosophical problem of giving a reason for our belief

in such things 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.

3 SKEPTICISM ABOUT REASON ITSELF

1. From clear and obvious premises about the properties of circles and triangles, we can derive the existence of infinitesimals; i.e., "a real quantity, infinitely less than any finite quantity, containing quantities infinitely less than itself, and so on *in infinitum*." Hume says that "no priestly dogmas" ever shocked common sense more than this one, "which seem[s] full of absurdity and contradiction" (107).
2. Considered with respect to time, the "absurdity" of the doctrine of infinitesimals becomes "still more palpable" (108).
3. But how can reason lead from ideas that are themselves clear and distinct to absurd conclusions, unless those ideas themselves "contain contradictions"? Either the initial ideas are contradictory, or reason itself is unreliable; neither conclusion is even conceivable. Hence "nothing can be more skeptical, or more full of doubt and hesitation, than this skepticism itself, which arises from some of the paradoxical conclusions of geometry or the science of quantity" (108–109).

4 HUME'S RESPONSE TO "EXCESSIVE" SKEPTICISM

1. When it comes to skeptical arguments about the senses, Hume thinks that "the profounder and more philosophical skeptics will always triumph" (105). He seems to think the same about skepticism about reason itself (though see the footnote on p. 109 for a suggestion about how the "absurdities and contradictions" might possibly be avoided).
2. But, Hume thinks, "no durable good can ever result" from such skepticism. On the contrary, "all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail" (110). Indeed:

"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" (III).

3. Hume's *pragmatic* response to "excessive skepticism" is that while it cannot be refuted, it should not be taken seriously, because to do so would have bad practical consequences.

5 A “MITIGATED” SKEPTICISM

1. Still, the arguments of excessive skepticism can do some good, provided they are “corrected by common sense and reflection” (III).
2. First, they can encourage people to be more modest in their opinions by showing even the learned “that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature” (III).
3. Second, they can encourage us to limit our enquiries to those subjects it’s in our nature to be able to comprehend. The inescapability of skeptical arguments shows the limits of human reason. Instead of wasting our philosophical energy on questions about “the origins of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity” we should confine ourselves to questions concerning “common life” (III).
4. Hume thinks that the only proper object of abstract reasoning are “quantity and number;” everything else we can only know about through experimental reasoning and reasoning about causes and effects, or what we would now call the scientific method. Among the latter:
 - (a) *Sciences of particular facts.* History, chronology, geography, and astronomy.
 - (b) *Sciences of general facts.* Politics, natural philosophy (this would include what we now call biology), physics, chemistry.

“Morals and criticism” concern taste and sentiment, and are not a proper object of the understanding, except insofar as they concern general facts about what people prefer and feel.

Finally, Hume closes with his famous line about metaphysics:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.