

Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

G. J. Matthey

Winter, 2006 / Philosophy 1

British Empiricism

- David Hume (1711-1776) was the third major “British empiricist.”
- The British empiricists differed from the “continental rationalists” (including Descartes) by claiming that most human knowledge arises from sense-perception.
- In this respect, they were closer to the scholastic philosophers than was Descartes.
- Other major British empiricists were:
 - John Locke (1632-1704),
 - George Berkeley (1695-1753),
 - John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).
- Due to the limitations of sense-perception, empiricists tend to be skeptical, and Hume was more so than his fellow empiricism.

Metaphysics

- Metaphysicians have undertaken to discover the nature of reality.
- Their investigations are difficult to comprehend, being very detailed and abstract.
- Because of its difficulty, metaphysical investigation is easily tainted with superstition, which has no place in accurate philosophical investigation.
- A main goal of Hume's *Enquiry* is to set down the limits of human knowledge of reality.
- It will be argued that most of traditional metaphysics ignores those limits and hence is to be rejected.

Investigating the Human Mind

- The primary goal of the *Enquiry* is to give an account of the way in which the human mind operates.
- Carrying out the project involves several tasks:
 - Providing a “geography” of the mind, by showing what its powers are and how they are related to one another.
 - Searching for the fundamental sources of the powers of the mind,
 - Showing the extent to which the exercise of these powers is capable of generating human knowledge.

The Objects of the Human Mind

- Descartes had called the objects of the human mind “ideas.”
- Locke had wholeheartedly embraced what he call the “new way of ideas.”
 - “[*Idea* is] that term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatever is the *object* of the understanding when a man thinks” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Introduction, Section 8).
 - “I presume it will be easily granted me, that there are such *ideas* in men’s minds: every one is conscious of them in himself” (ibid.).
- Hume begins his investigation of the mind in the same way as does Locke, by looking for objects of the human understanding of which everyone is conscious.

Impressions and Ideas

- Hume uses the generic term “perceptions” in place of the Descartes/Locke term “ideas.”
- Perceptions are of two kinds:
 - Impressions, which are original perceptions,
 - Ideas, which are copies of impressions.
- For example, I might first have an impression of the sun and later have an idea of the sun in my memory.
- We can distinguish between the two by noting the degree of “liveliness” or “vivacity” of the perception.
 - The most lively idea is less lively than the least lively impression.
- Hume claims that we can understand the meaning of an idea only by tracing it back to an original impression and understanding *its* meaning.

The Association of Ideas

- Ideas occur in the mind in a somewhat orderly fashion.
- We can detect three patterns in the occurrence of ideas.
- These patterns suggest general principles governing the occurrence of ideas in our minds.
- Suppose idea B which represents Y occurs after a perception (idea or impression) A which represents X.
 - B resembles A,
 - * When I have an impression of a picture of a person, I recall an image of him.
 - Y is close to (spatially or temporally) X,
 - * When I have an impression of my house, I recall an image of the crackling fireplace inside.
 - Y is thought to be caused by X or thought to cause X.
 - * When I have an impression of thunder, I recall an image of lightning.
- If careful reflection on specific cases always discovers the operations of one or more of these principles, then the list is complete.

The Objects of Inquiry

- Human reason naturally inquires into the truth of propositions about the world.
- From the standpoint of inquiry, there are two kinds of propositions, those expressing:
 - Relations of ideas,
 - Matters of fact.
- True propositions about relations of ideas are true independently of any existing thing.
- They are known with certainty and are the subject of mathematical inquiry.
- The truth of propositions about matters of fact depend on the way the world is.
- They are not known with certainty, because it is always possible that things are otherwise.
 - There is no contradiction in the proposition that the sun will not rise tomorrow.

Evidence for Matters of Fact

- If propositions about matters of fact cannot be demonstrated to be true, how are we to ascertain their truth?
- There are two straightforward kinds of evidence for the truth of propositions about matters of fact:
 - The present testimony of our senses,
 - The record of our memory.
- The nature of our evidence for matters of fact beyond what is revealed by the senses and memory is “a subject worthy of curiosity.”
- This topic has not been given much attention by either ancient or modern philosophers, and so there may be errors in the present investigation of it.
- These errors might be useful in keeping us from becoming over-confident about our results, which is detrimental to inquiry.

Cause and Effect

- Hume claims that any belief we have about real existents lying beyond present sense-perception and memory is based on the relation of cause and effect.
- He cites several examples of inferences we would make, all of which are ultimately causal:
 - I believe my friend is in France because I have a letter from him,
 - I believe that humans have inhabited this island because I have found a watch here.
- If Hume’s claim is right, then if we have indirect knowledge of matters of fact, we must have knowledge of a causal connection between that fact and what we know directly.
- So the key question becomes: what is the basis of our beliefs in specific causal connections that stand behind our inferences concerning matters of fact?

Our Knowledge of Causal Connections

- Hume maintains that no causal connections are known to hold *a priori*, or independently of experience.
- If we do know *a priori* of a causal connection, then we are able to predict what the effect will be given knowledge of the cause.
- But we cannot do so.

- To see this, we can do thought-experiments or even remember our own ignorance.
 - Adam, possessed of perfect rational faculties, could not have inferred rationally from what he observes of water (that it is fluid and transparent) that it could drown him.
 - If billiard ball B is struck by billiard ball A, it is consistent to suppose that neither moves, that A moves back while B stays still, etc.
- We might think that we could have made the inference rationally when the connection is a familiar one, but this is only because we are accustomed to expect it.

Our Ignorance of Ultimate Causes

- Because we cannot detect causes *a priori*, we are left only with “analogy, experience, and observation.”
- Using these tools, we can establish general principles which explain the particular events in nature:
 - Elasticity,
 - Gravity,
 - Cohesion of parts,
 - Communication of motion by impulse.
- Mathematics aids in the discovery of these principles, but none can be discovered by use of mathematics alone.
- Hume predicts that these are probably the ultimate explanatory principles, and he counsels us to be satisfied with them.
- What we fail to know is the “ultimate causes” or the “powers” that produce observed effects.

A Skeptical Thesis

- The task at this point is to discover how it is that we use experience to establish causal principles.
- Hume’s main thesis will be that “conclusions from that experience are *not* founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding.”
- For example, we believe from experience that bread nourishes, but why do we believe this?
- We cannot discover a power of nourishing from the sensible qualities of the bread.

- And so, we cannot reason from the nature of the bread to its effects.
- We do have the information that particular pieces of bread have nourished in the past.
- But to conclude that it will nourish at any other time requires an additional step: one which Hume will claim is not rational.

The Missing Link

- What is needed to explain our causal inferences is a link between the following two propositions:
 - “I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect,”
 - “I foresee, that other objects, which are, in appearance similar, will be attended with similar effects.”
- The connection is not intuitive.
- Those who think the connection is based on reason and argument are then obliged to produce the premise that links the two propositions.

Hume’s Fork

- It seems that there are only two kinds of reasoning that could supply the link:
 - Demonstrative reasoning concerning relations of ideas,
 - Moral reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence.
- We have seen that there are no demonstrative argument for the link, as it is possible for the first proposition to be true and the second false.
- So the reasoning must be moral and, because non-demonstrative, only probable.
- But it has already been shown that all probable reasoning is based on the supposition of a relation of cause and effect.
- So one must suppose a cause/effect relation in order to reason that there is a causal relation, which is circular reasoning.

The Uniformity of Nature

- We expect causes which appear similar to have similar effects.
- This expectation is not based on reason, because there are many cases where similar causes appear, yet we do not know in advance what their effects may be.
- So, the expectations are based on experience.

- Experience is useless in this regard without the supposition that nature is uniform, since if the course of nature were to change, previous similarities would be irrelevant.
- The premise that nature is uniform is not known by demonstration, so it, too, is based on experience.
- But in that case, our reasoning would have to suppose the uniformity of nature, so it would beg the question (assume what is to be proved).

Empirical Confirmation of the Skeptical Thesis

- Everyone admits that small children, and even non-human animals, learn from experience.
- If they use reasoning, what is the reasoning that they use?
- No one has an answer to that question.
- If one were to say that the reasoning cannot be described because it is too difficult, it can be asked how children can engage in it.
- If one were to hesitate in giving an answer, this in itself shows that the person giving that answer is not using the reasoning in the way an infant might.
- If Hume is wrong in his thesis that there is no argument, he must be “a very backward scholar” because he cannot produce an argument that he has been using since his infancy.

Custom and Habit

- In our causal reasoning about experience, a non-rational step must be taken.
- When we have experienced a number of similar events, we believe without reasoning that the similarity will be preserved in our future experience.
- Apparently, the only explanation for this belief in uniformity is *custom* or *habit*.
 - When we are accustomed to experiencing the similarity, we form the belief in the existence of the effect when the cause is experienced.
 - We form no such belief upon the first experience of the occurrence of an event.
- Custom alone is what expands our knowledge beyond what is immediately present to the senses and memory, and allows us to engage the world effectively.

Probability

- Having argued that reasoning about matters of fact is based on custom, Hume explores the implications of that claim for our understanding of probability.
- There are two kinds of probability to be explained:
 - The probability of chances,
 - The probability of causes.
- When we have no experience of the preponderance of one kind of event over that of another, we deem them equally probable.
 - That any given side of a die will come up is equiprobable.
- When we aggregate our views of possible outcomes, there is a preponderance of probability.
 - The probability of a die coming up even is three times as great as that it will come up one.
- When experiences of one outcome outnumber those of another, we deem the former proportionally more probable than the latter.

Necessary Connection

- Moral philosophy, which considers matters of fact, operates with very obscure and uncertain ideas:
 - Power,
 - Force,
 - Necessary connection.
- To understand their meaning, we must understand the impressions from which they are derived.
- We cannot find power, etc. in the impression of any of the qualities of objects.
- Nor can we find it in the impression of any operation of the will.
- In general, all that we find is that events are conjoined, but not that they are connected.
- What we can find is a customary transition from one perception to the other, which is something that we feel.
- This feeling is the impression that is the source of our idea of a necessary connection.

The Definition of Cause

- It is commonly supposed that a cause is that which necessarily brings about some effect.
- But the idea of a necessary connection is based on a feeling of a customary transition from one perception to another.
- The idea of a cause must be appropriately modified.
 - A cause is an object x, followed by another y, where all objects similar to x are followed by objects similar to y.
 - A cause is an object x, followed by another y, whose appearance always conveys the thought of x to the thought of y.
- For example, we say that the vibration of a string causes a sound.
 - This vibration is followed by this sound, and all similar vibrations have been followed by similar sounds.
 - The appearance of this vibration is always followed by an idea of the sound.

The Liberty-Necessity Debate

- Philosophers have struggled with the problem of whether some human actions are performed “at liberty.”
 - It is “the most contentious question, of metaphysics, the most contentious science.”
- Liberty seems incompatible with the principle that every event has an antecedent cause that makes its occurrence necessary.
- Hume advocates a compatibilist position, which depends on his account of “necessary connection.”
- He maintains that it can be seen that the dispute between the libertarians and necessitarians is merely a verbal one.
- Once the two sides agree about what they mean by their terms, they will find that they agree that human actions are both at liberty and necessitated.

Humean Compatibilism

- There is no notion of necessity beyond that of constant conjunction of similar objects and an inference from one to another that follows.
- Everyone acknowledges that there is constant conjunction between circumstances and human actions, and everyone then infers the actions from the circumstances.

- The same motives have been followed by the same actions throughout history.
- We are suspicious of reports of human actions whose motives we find to be unbelievable.
- The benefit of experience is that it makes us accustomed to the regularities in human behavior.
- Exceptions to these regularities are attributed to exceptional circumstances.
- Liberty, the power to act or not according to the determination of the will, is perfectly compatible with uniform human behavior.

Miracles

- Hume argues that there is never sufficient evidence to believe, on the basis of testimony, that a miracle (violation of the uniformity of nature) has occurred.
- Our belief in the uniformity of nature is based on uniformity of experience.
- In weighing a report of a miracle, we must ask which is more credible:
 - The testimony of the reporter,
 - That nature has continued in its uniform course.
- The answer will be that the violation of the uniform course of nature is less believable than the falsehood of the testimony.
 - The evidence for the truth of the testimony would have to be as strong as that of natural uniformity.
 - But nearly all the evidence points to natural uniformity, while there are many circumstances in which false testimony is given.

Philosophy and Religion

- Hume argues that religious people have nothing to fear from the conclusions drawn from philosophers.
- The views of the philosophers are harmless and have little influence; the greater harm lies in promoting a more general persecution of people with diverse points of view.
- Philosophers, in turn, should not allow religious considerations to influence their conclusions.
- Any conclusion based on causal reasoning about the organization of the world implies only what is needed to explain that organization.
 - So no conclusion can be drawn about the guidance of events in the world, or about reward and punishment of people in the world.

- We have no experience of events similar to the creation of the world, and so no basis for causal reasoning about it.
- In fact, virtue is generally more advantageous than vice in the conduct of human affairs.

Antecedent Skepticism

- Hume criticizes the method of doubt that was advocated by Descartes.
- He characterizes it as recommending, before “all study and philosophy,” a “universal doubt,” which must extend to the veracity of our faculties.
- The doubt about our faculties could be overcome by:
 - An “original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful.”
- But there is no such self-evident original principle.
- And even if there were, we could only draw conclusions from it by employing our reasoning faculty, whose veracity is in doubt.
- Hume concludes that not only is Cartesian antecedent doubt impossible to attain, but it is by its very nature incurable.
- It does have value if understood moderately as promoting strict standards of investigation.

Consequent Skepticism

- There is a consequent form of skepticism, which is based on the actual deficiencies of our faculties.
 - Philosophical skepticism about the external world is actually triumphant, and is countered only by our natural compulsion to believe in external objects.
 - Skepticism about mathematical reasoning is supported by paradoxes of the infinite.
 - It has been shown by Hume himself that causal reasoning is based only on “an instinct of our nature,” which may be fallacious.
- Yet Hume cautions against excessive (“Pyrrhonian”) skepticism, on the grounds that it cannot be sustained in practical life and nothing useful comes from it.
- He advocates instead a more moderate (“Academic”) skepticism, in which we restrain our reasoning to relations of ideas and to matters of fact that are supported by experience.