

Chapter 19

David Hume: From Empiricism to Skepticism

Key Words:

Imagination, constancy, coherence, ideas, impressions, perceptions, skepticism, causality, induction, matters of fact, relations of ideas, rational cosmology, rational psychology, rational theology.

Introduction

Ever since Berkeley introduced subjective idealism that advocated “to be is to be perceived”, the empiricist school, has problematised the belief in the continuing existence of bodies independent of the knowing mind. David Hume too begins with the problem of the independent existence of the world, but takes us to very different conclusions, which made him one of the greatest thinkers of all times. Hume’s criticism was even more radical than Berkeley’s as he questions even the existence of the mind which Berkeley contended would exist as the perceiver of ideas. This is not very different from assuming that the mind exists as a thinking substance, as Descartes did.

Hume wonders what is the basis of this belief. He argues that, if every knowledge is derived from ideas and impressions, which are subjective, can we assume the existence of an external world? According to him, we cannot say that objects of the external world cause our impressions or perceptions, since perceptions or impressions, which we have, are different from objects of external world. There is no way we can know whether these perceptions are caused by anything in the external world, as experience only suggests the existence of perceptions. All our ideas are derived from impressions, the causes of which are unknown to us.

Like Berkeley, Hume too opposes the primary qualities—secondary qualities distinction and argues that we have no experience of such original qualities that cause impressions. Consequently, we cannot say anything about the external world and its objects. Whether they exist or not is unknown to us, as there is no evidence that the impressions are caused by external objects, or by an unknown substance, or by ourselves or by God. Hume thus argues that, the right approach in philosophy is to limit ourselves to our impressions and ideas and observe their relations. We can never know anything about the origin of our impressions. What lies behind the impressions are never known to us.

Hume thus does not deny the existence of material objects independently of our perceptions, but only says that we are unable to prove that they exist. He asks what is the cause, which induces us to believe in the continued existence of bodies distinct from our minds and perceptions. He explores the source of the idea that things continue to exist and says that our senses do not give us this knowledge. Senses reveal to us bodies which are not distinct from our perceptions and to reveal things which are distinct from perceptions, the senses have to operate when they have ceased to operate, which is a contradiction.

There are certain factors that prompt us to believe in the existence of an external World. We ascribe a distinct and continuous existence to some impressions and to some we do not. For example, we do not attribute distinct and continuous existence to impressions of pains and pleasures. On the other hand to certain other impressions like figure, bulk, motion and solidity, we attribute distinct and continuous existence, independently of perception. This is the basis of the belief in objects and subsequently of a belief in external world. But Hume attacks this conviction and asks what enables us to make these distinctions. He says that the senses do not induce us to believe in them and all impressions we get from senses are on the same footing. Even reason does not induce us to believe in them, as we cannot rationally justify them, as we cannot infer the existence of objects from perceptions.

Human imagination plays a crucial role in the belief in the continuous existence of an external world. The mind has a propensity to imagine that it exists. Constancy and coherence prompt the mind to believe in the continued existence of the world. Certain impressions that work upon the imagination induce us to believe in it. The aspect of constancy refers to the supposition of the distinct existence of bodies. In our experience we find that things appear in the same order and similar impressions constantly recur. This induces us to suppose that objects exist continuously. Bodies exhibit coherence even when they change their positions and qualities and the mind observes uniformity or coherence among impressions. Our memory helps us maintaining this continuity in imagination. The mind has the ability to forego the interruptions in the appearance of similar perceptions and form the image of the object in imagination.

Like his predecessor Berkeley, Hume too refers to the distinction between vulgar opinions, which are unreflective from more rational philosophical views, which distinguish between interrupted and mind-dependent perceptions and

continuous and independent objects. Again, like Berkeley, he too argues that perceptions are the only objects as there are no mind-independent material objects. The belief in mind-independent objects and their continued existence have generated several crucial philosophical issues, as we have seen in the philosophies of Locke and Berkeley. Locke conceived both material and mental substances are real and established this dualism of substances with his distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley rejected the mind-independent existence of material substances and also opposed the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, but failed to extend his criticism to the supposition of the existence of the psychic substance or mind. As demonstrated above, Hume has opposed all suppositions and postulations of existence that the elementary materials of experience, i.e., the impressions and ideas, do not suggest. There is nothing but only impressions.

With such a radical criticism of traditional metaphysical assumptions, Hume demonstrates the impossibility of a rational cosmology which deals with the origin and nature of the universe and rational psychology, which opposes the science of the immaterial, imperishable soul. Since we have to limit ourselves to our impressions and ideas, we cannot entertain metaphysical assumptions or beliefs. The famous statement “no matter, never mind” is articulated in this context.

While agreeing with Berkeley in criticizing the idea of material substance, Hume insists that it should be extended to the criticism of the so called psychic or thinking substance as well. Hume contends that it is pointless to enquire whether perceptions inhere in a material or an immaterial substance. Neither material nor immaterial substances are known to us. We do not have any impressions that produce the idea of such substances in us.

Oposing the possibility of a science of the soul or rational psychology, Hume affirms that no impression suggest the existence of such an entity. There is no evidence for the immateriality, indivisibility and the imperishability of the soul. It is never been perceived and we do not even know whether it exists or not. Hume suggests employing experimental methods in studying the spiritual substance. He says that, when he examines himself, he stumbles on some particular perception or other like heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure etc. He says that he comes across a bundle of different perceptions which succeed one another rapidly. He then describes the mind as a theatre where several perceptions make their appearance. Hume thus concludes that, there is no way to confirm that the mind is simple and

there is no clue about personal identity or the continued existence of the one and the same self in its various moments.

The concept of personal identity is based on the idea of a self that remains in a permanent state of self-identity. But Hume argues that self or person is not any one impression, as there is no impression which is constant and invariable. No impressions we have suggest the existence of such a constant and invariable soul. The idea of personal identity is therefore an imagined construct to which our several impressions and ideas refer.

Hume says that each perception is unique. Each is distinct, different and separable and there is no unity or real bond between these different impressions. The passing, re-passing and fading away impressions do not suggest the existence of a simple, indivisible soul. These fleeting impressions we have suggest neither any self-identity nor any continued existence. According to Hume the so-called self-identity is a quality we attribute to the perceptions because of the union of ideas in imagination. He says that our memory is the source of the idea of personal identity. It produces a relation of resemblance among our perceptions with the help of images of past perceptions. As mentioned above, imagination plays the lead role here. The chain of different perceptions is linked by association with each other due to resemblance and memory and this ultimately results in the appearance of a continued and persistent object. The interruptions occur in the succession of related perceptions are foregone by the mind and it sees identity instead of individual unrelated perceptions.

Hume's Rejection of the Self

Hume's celebrated refutation of the thinking substance (no matter, never mind) is based on the above mentioned argument. But Hume's rejection of the self does not amount to be saying that the self does not exist; it only argues that we cannot know whether there is a self or not. Hence Humean nihilism is not a metaphysical nihilism. As Russell observes, this conclusion is important in metaphysics, as getting rid of the last surviving use of "substance." It is important in theology, as abolishing all supposed knowledge of the "soul." It is important in the analysis of knowledge, since it shows that the category of subject and object is not fundamental, In this matter of the ego Hume made an important advance on Berkeley. (*A History of Western Philosophy*)

Hume's skepticism is the result of pursuing the empiricist program with rigorous consistency, which insists that absolutely certain knowledge is possible only in pure mathematics as it employs relations of ideas and do not refer to the world. With regard to matters of fact, there is only probability, as there we rely on experimental observations that reveal only discrete, distinct impressions. Hume thus outlines the limitations of human knowledge. He says that it is our natural propensity to consider perceptions or images as the external objects themselves. But since we have access only to our impressions, such a conclusion is unwarranted. The same reason is cited for rejecting the validity of causal relationship as well as inductive reasoning.

By questioning the validity of the belief in a mind-independent world of objects, along with the validity of the belief in a self-identical mind, in the principles of causality and induction, Hume challenges the fundamental assumptions of all natural sciences that consider these principles as important. The denial of induction in particular has more crucial implications. Hume points out that the principle of induction is justified on the basis of the law of uniformity of nature. But this law itself presupposes the validity of induction, as it is formulated on the basis of observing several incidents appearing with order and regularity. Hence the supposition of the principle of induction on the basis of the law of uniformity of nature involves circularity. For example, we assume that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow, because it has risen in the east in the past.

Hume argues that the belief in external world is a fundamentally problematic notion. There are prominently two theories of external perception that deal with this belief; one affirming it and the other rejecting it. While the first theory deals with our propensity to believe that objects exist as we see them the second one is the philosophical view, which states that we see only mental images. There is no way to prove that one of them is a better view than the other, as our natural reasoning process leads us to both of them from different directions. This points to the limitation of reason. Hume thus concludes that reason has certain limitations and it is the mind that has created the ideas of causality and necessity. Hume asserts that, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office to serve and obey them." (Hume: *A Treatise on Human Reason*)

The Impact of Skepticism

Hume's skepticism had impacted many domains of human knowledge, more significantly it is bound to affect the course of development of natural sciences, theology and ethics. It called into question the very process of logical reasoning employed in natural sciences by questioning the validity of the principles of induction, causality and certainty. In theology, it criticized the cosmological argument, ontological argument and the argument from motion, which were advanced by theologians to prove the existence of God. Again, by separating the domain of value from the domain of facts, Hume questioned some basic assumptions of morality. He contends that, while reason deals with "what is the case", it is a concern of our sentiment to decide "what *ought to be* the case". Hume argues that morality is grounded in sentiment—in feelings, emotions etc.,—and not in reason, as it addresses the issue of "what *ought to be* the case". Hume adds that in morality the role of reason is secondary to sentiment, as virtues with which morality predominantly deals with, are traits which we find agreeable, which would warrant our approval or disapproval. Hence they are not issues with which reason would be dealing. It would be appropriate to quote Russell while concluding our discussions on Hume's philosophy and particularly his skepticism. Russell observes:

Hume's philosophy, whether true or false, represents the bankruptcy of eighteenth-century reasonableness...he arrives at the disastrous conclusion they from experience and observation nothing is to be learned. There is no such thing as rational belief: "If we believe that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise. We cannot help believing, but no belief can be grounded in reason. Nor can one line of action be more rational than another, since all alike are based upon irrational convictions. [*A History of Western Philosophy*]

Quiz

1. Who opposes the primary qualities—secondary qualities distinction?
(a) Berkeley (b) Hume (c) Berkeley and Hume (d) Locke, Berkeley and Hume.
2. What according to Hume is the source of the idea that things continue to exist?
(a) Senses (b) Constancy and coherence of ideas (c) Reason (d) Induction.
3. Rational cosmology deals with?
(a) The origin and nature of the universe (b) The origin and nature of the soul
(c) The impossibility of natural sciences (d) The totality of existence.
4. The self dealt by rational psychology is not?
5. (a) Indivisible (b) Material (c) Imperishable (d) Simple.

6. To which of the following statements would Hume subscribe to?
- (i) Certain knowledge is possible only in relations of ideas.
 - (ii) Matters of fact provide certainty only when the right method is applied.
 - (iii) Matters of fact is always probable.
 - (iv) Relations of ideas is also occasionally uncertain.
- (a) (iii) alone (b) (i) and (ii) (c) (i) and (iii) (d) (iii) and (iv)

Answer key

- 1. [c]
- 2. [b]
- 3. [a]
- 4. [b]
- 5. [c]

Assignment

- 1. Describe how does Hume explain our belief in the continued existence of objects.
- 2. How does Hume reject the impossibility of rational cosmology, rational psychology and rational theology?

References

Books

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Web Resources

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