

Remote Learning Module for 20 April 2020

Lecture Notes: Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Sections I – VII

Last time we followed the course of Hume's life from his early years in Edinburgh, to his stunningly fertile days in Anjou, where he composed his masterwork, the *Treatise of Human Nature*, his disappointments and successes as a literary figure, his forays in diplomacy, and his last years, back in Edinburgh. Today we'll examine the first seven sections of the *Enquiry*, wherein he outlines the warrants for, and primary consequences of, his skeptical epistemology.

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Section I: The Species of Philosophy.

Hume divides philosophical thinking into two broad categories: *natural philosophy* (which amounts to the disciplines we now collect under the heading "natural science"), and *moral philosophy* (which includes metaphysics and epistemology as well as ethics and social philosophy). He further divides moral philosophy into two categories: (a) investigations concerned with actions and value (which he considers "soft" and "easy"); and (b) the hard, difficult investigations into the sources and limits of human knowledge. He takes the purpose of the soft, easy reflections to be that of cultivating manners, while the purpose of the hard, difficult inquiries to be that of forming one's understanding.

Why bother with metaphysics?

- (i) The soft varieties of moral philosophy comprise a series of pictures of our sentiments and values as they appear to us; they do not appear clear, so we need the hard varieties in order successfully to describe the inner workings of our sentiments and values.
- (ii) The spirit of accuracy in the hard stuff carries us towards better social systems and political theories.
- (iii) Metaphysics is pleasing in itself.
- (iv) Exact attention to epistemology will free us from the tyranny of false metaphysics (read: rationalism, and organized religion).
- (v) An exact epistemology is essential for natural philosophy (science) because failure to understand the operations of the mind lead to error.

Section II: Of the Origin of Ideas – The Postulate.

(1) Locke and Berkeley failed to distinguish between *impressions* and *ideas* adequately. Moreover, there are two sorts of impressions: outward and inward (outward impressions are those we associate with our external senses, while inward impressions are those we associate

with our emotions and feelings; note that here Hume is recapitulating a distinction derived from the ancient Epicureans).

(2) *Impressions* are the originals of all our ideas. This is Hume's postulate—what we might call today a “working hypothesis.” Impressions are vivid and forced on us (what Descartes called adventitious ideas); they are the lively perceptions we experience when we see, feel, love, hate, desire, and will. *Ideas* are copies of our impressions; they are less vivid, and occur in moments of reflection. Our thinking, therefore, is bounded: we are limited to compounding, transposing, augmenting and diminishing the grist that sense experience (both inner and outer) provides us. All of our complex ideas, then, resolve to concatenations among simple impressions, which further implies that defects in the organs of sense must lead to conceptual deficiency.

(3) *The Missing Shade of Blue*. But wait. Perhaps some ideas *can* arise independently of corresponding original impressions; that *all* of our ideas copy impressions is, after all, only a General Maxim—a postulate to serve as our starting point; it is not an *apriori* principle (that is, not an axiom, whose denial is or implies a contradiction). If the Postulate fails to account for all of our ideas, then the burden of proof must fall on those who would adduce an exception to the general rule. Let us consider, Hume says, our ideas of color spectra: surely we think of the sequence of shades from midnight blue to light azure as a *continuous* spectrum; yet our impressions are *discrete* events. Well and good; since the missing shade of blue is rather trivial, we can proceed to apply the Postulate to analyze all manner of ideas without any appeal to *apriori* notions.

Section III: The Association of Ideas.

(1) This, Hume felt, was a major contribution to epistemology, and a new discovery of his own.

(2) The problem facing us, once we accept the Postulate, is to explain exactly how, from the loose congeries of sensations we continually experience in succession, we manage to develop the ordered regularity of cognition.

(3) Hume's solution is to find that inner sense is *structured* by principles of association and connection. Note well that this solution will guide Kant once woken from his Leibnizian slumbers. There are, according to Hume, three Principles of Association:

- (i) *Resemblance* [a picture leads us to think of what it depicts];
- (ii) *Contiguity* [an classroom leads us to think of a building]; and
- (iii) *Causality* [a wound leads us to think of pain]

(4) *Explication*: Hume uses literary examples to show that ordered thought can always be reduced to one or more of these forms of the association of ideas. Note that when he talks of writers having a purpose, he doesn't mean a *telos* or final cause; he means a schema or design. Especially in the case of narrative, we find that our thinking is ordered by the principle of causality (regular succession, not necessitation); causality is what allows for prediction, and what constitutes most of our understanding. Moreover, the *only* difference between history, epic poetry, and drama lies in differences in degree as regards the tightness of fit between cause and effect connections.

(5) Notice what are *not* among the Principles of Association: identity, logical implication, and sufficient reason.

IV: Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operation of the Understanding.

(1) Here Hume introduces his celebrated epistemological distinction between necessary and contingent judgments (this too will come to guide Kant in the course of his critique of Leibniz). All human knowledge, reason, and inquiry, according to Hume, divide into two kinds:

Relations of ideas [from cognitive operations, so analytic; & independent of experience, so *apriori*,] and

Matters of fact [from experience, so synthetic (subjects are not contained in their predicates) & so too *aposteriori*].

(2) All synthetic *aposteriori* reasoning is founded on the relation of cause and effect. This alone, says Hume, is what allows us to go beyond the immediacy of our perceptions, without falling for Berkeley's immaterialism. Hume writes: I know my absent friend is in France because of a chain of causal reasoning arising from his letter to me. Similarly, I trust you who are reading these lecture notes are assured of my continued presence in the world, despite the restrictions of remote learning.

(3) There are, however, *no necessary connections among matters of fact*. The relation between causes and effects is always contingent; it can never be discovered by reason, but only by experience. Rationalists of Spinoza's stripe thought it possible to derive mechanics from geometry; they were wrong: geometry is analytic, while physics is synthetic. We can *prove* the Pythagorean Theorem, but we must learn how billiard balls behave mechanically only by way of actual experience; we cannot, in other words, derive the motion of billiard balls from the axioms and theorems of geometry; we have to play pool.

(4) Physics tells us that the most general causal phenomena in nature are elasticity, cohesion, gravitation, and the communication of motion. And that's an end on it: we have, in Wittgenstein's phrase, to turn our spade—hitting bedrock. There is no deeper explanation of these four causes than their general appearance in phenomena. You may notice that here in the 21st century we say that there are four fundamental forces in nature: weak, strong, gravitational, and electromagnetic.

(5) *The Riddle of Induction*. The foundation of empirical reasoning concerning the relation between causes and effects is experience. But what, then, is the foundation of experience? This question is the core of Hume's "skeptical doubt" concerning the operation of human understanding. For a given cause, C, to bring about a given effect, E (schematically: for $C \rightarrow E$), three conditions must obtain:

- (a) Contiguity of C and E in place;
- (b) C must appear temporally prior to E; and
- (c) There must be a constant conjunction of C with E in experience.

The problem facing us, however, is that constant conjunction is no more than regular prior experience; in order to form inductive generalizations, and therefore, reliable predictions, we must *assume* that the future will be like the past (that conjunctions observed constantly in the past will continue to be constant in the future). We cannot ever know this from relations among ideas, for relations among ideas are *independent* of experience (analytic *apriori*) and causal connections are matters of fact, and so, *dependent* on experience. Our only recourse then, is to

reason to the conclusion that the future will be like the past from the premise that in the past, the future has been like the past. But this reasoning is clearly circular: our conclusion is no more than a restatement of our premise. Only a skeptical doubt remains, since we simply cannot know that the future will resemble the past.

Section V: Skeptical Solutions.

(1) No rational argument can justify inductive inferences; but in practical affairs we must nevertheless form inductive judgments. We'll use Newton's laws of motion when playing pool, all right, even though we cannot in any way show that their denial is or implies a logical contradiction.

(2) Rather than being guided by reason, then, we are guided by habit, by custom. In the fifth paragraph of this section you may note Hume's psychological explanation for why we are guided by habit—an explanation that will come to be known as the Law of Effect: actions followed by reward are repeated (the fundamental axiom of Behaviorism).

(3) Facts, then, are state of affairs indexed by those statements to which we have become habituated. Facts are never what *must* be the case. A fact is a state of affairs we *say* is the case when our saying so is frequently rewarded.

(4) So too, it follows that all distinctions between beliefs and fictions are matters of degree: beliefs are more vivid, forcible, firm, and steady than fictions. Given our past experiences, it is harder to disabuse us of beliefs than fictions.

(5) Note that we can *assume* there to be a "pre-established harmony" between the order of our empirical ideas and the order of nature; but we cannot know the source or the extent of this harmony. All we can know is that if we lacked customs adequate to regulate our lives, we'd die out.

Section VI: Probability.

(1) When the repetition of an even yields a given result more frequently than any other, we have a more firm, vivid idea; so we say that the given result is more *probable*. Hume adopts a *subjectivist* interpretation of probability statements. A probability statement, in other words, refers to the *degree of confidence* a subject places on a bet; it has no objective reference at all. When our experience is such that in the past we have noticed no exceptions to a causal generalization (e.g., fire always burns paper in the atmosphere), our confidence is high; when there are only a few exceptions, we may have a relatively safe bet, and when there are many exceptions, our confidence being low, we have a poor bet, or an unlikely outcome.

(2) Weather prediction: when a meteorologist tells us that there is an 80% chance of rain today, the *content* of this probability statement is not about clouds leaning heavily towards dropping water on us (they will or they won't—period); the content is about the meteorologist's willingness to bet 80 cents on the dollar that we'll have rain.

Section VII: Of the Idea of Necessary Connection.

* Since this section is reserved for your Third Abstract, I will note here only its centerpiece: When we say of two phenomena, A & B, that “A causes B,” we can mean no more than that A regularly precedes B in experience.

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On Wednesday, we’ll complete our tour of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, wherein we’ll examine his reflections on the relation between liberty and necessity, and his critiques of miracles, predestination, and divine providence. Be well everyone, and, remember, barring a sudden providential miracle, social distancing will have to suffice, as we struggle to defeat the causes of pandemic in these unprecedented times.