

Remote Learning Module for 22 April 2020

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

Sections VIII – XII

Last time we examined the first seven sections of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, wherein he outlines the warrants for, and primary consequences of, his skeptical epistemology. Today, we'll complete our tour of the *Enquiry*, wherein we'll examine his reflections on the relation between liberty and necessity, and his critiques of miracles, predestination, and divine providence.

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Section VIII: Of Liberty and Necessity.

(1) The perennial debate over whether human actions are freely chosen or necessitated rests on a conceptual confusion, not a difference of theory or a failure to recognize facts. Hume offers to clarify the matter by returning to his analysis of the distinction between necessity and causality. Later philosophers and commentators will come to call his view "Compatibilism," and sometimes, "*Soft Determinism*."

(2) The concept of necessity belongs to *analytic a priori* judgments, that is, to relations among ideas; it is exemplified in the theorems of geometry and arithmetic. Human actions, however, being *matters of fact*, are judged synthetically; moreover, insofar as our actions are to be judged morally, we must ask after their causes. The concept of causality entails the global fact that we habitually infer that similar objects, constantly conjoined in experience are related as cause to effect. This applies, Hume declares, equally to material objects as to human agency.

(3) As regards human agency, moral significance involves the manner and extent to which our motives cause our actions. This is presupposed by history, literary criticism, and political science: we *explain* human affairs only by assuming that similar characters, prejudices, and opinions *cause* similar actions; so too in all of our practical affairs. For a grim example, consider: the cause of death from COVID-19 is attributed to the similar effects of the coronavirus on human cellular respiration among those of us with compromised immune response mechanisms.

(4) Why have people failed to acknowledge this relation between character and conduct? Hume's answer is that most people generally believe they have penetrated into the power of nature, wherein they perceive necessary connections that they (most people) do not perceive in moral choice.

(5) Liberty, according to Hume, is not a species of freedom from causality; rather, liberty is the absence of constraint, or that power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will, as manifest in our passions. Here we should note another of Hume's celebrated phrases from the *Treatise*: "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to observe and obey them."

(6) With the specter of his early religious training in Calvinist theology in mind, Hume considers the Problem of Predestination as regards human morality. He argues here that the assumption of divine predestination spawns an intractable paradox.

- (i) Suppose we assert that God is the Original Necessary connection between all events, including our volitions.
- (ii) In this case we are left with a dilemma: either (a) criminal acts are not criminal (evil is somehow, really good); or (b) God is the criminal (God is not good).
- (iii) Since our natural sentiments are to be morally outraged if we are victimized by crime, (a) cannot be correct, and since moral philosophy cannot penetrate into the mind of God, (b) must also be rejected. Thus, since both horns of the dilemma are unacceptable, we must reject the premise.

Section IX: Of the Reason of Animals.

(1) Hume adduces that nonhuman animals do not reason, but do acquire habits—that is, they are capable of learning from cause-effect relations. We must be careful here to note that, for Hume, reasoning is concerned with necessary connections among ideas, which is to say that the province of reasoning is entirely deductive.

(2) Induction, on the other hand, is a matter of acquiring customs and habits adequate to preserve our lives. In this regard, then, nonhuman animals are not at all different from ourselves: we are all guided by custom.

Section X: Of Miracles.

(1) Because attributions of miraculous events are attributions of matters of fact, we cannot say apodictically that miracles do not occur (since there are no necessary connections among matters of fact). However, given the riddle of induction, and, therefore, the *subjectivist* interpretation of probability, two distinct considerations militate against the existence of miracles.

(i) *The Argument from Reliability*: to accept an attribution of the miraculous to an historical event is accept the reliability of a witness to that event. When such attributions simply attest to the appearance of a marvel—an unusual and inexplicable event—we will weigh testimony with regards to the probability that the witness is reporting a matter of fact. This means that we will compare the probability that our witness is reliable against the probability, derived from habitual experience, that the witness has mistaken fiction for fact. So, as regards the marvelous, Hume contends that “the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual.”

(ii) *The Argument from Induction*: if there were an *adequate* proof (overwhelming probability) that a miracle occurred, the event in question would not be miraculous after all, but would be a law of nature, not a supernatural event. Why? Because in matters of fact, adequate proofs amount to *uniform experiences*. Thus, Hume concludes, “Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish. It is experience only,

which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion, either on one side or the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.”

XI: Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State.

(1) In this Section, Hume offers a dialogue (with arguments derived from the ancient Stoics, via Cicero). Hume’s friend takes the skeptical position, while Hume offers the view of the common man. They consider the Argument from Design for the existence of divine providence.

(2) Both the skeptic and the common man accept that there is order in nature. The skeptic treats the religious hypothesis as one method for accounting for this order.

(3) But this hypothesis goes beyond the evidence in supposing the author to be more perfect than is needed to account for facts of the matter. As we consider the facts, we are faced with a dilemma: either (a) there are marks of distributive justice in the world (in which case we do not need a god or gods to explain why there is justice); or (b) there are no marks of distributive justice in the world (in which case we have no inference to divine justice.

(4) Nor do we need the Argument from Design (divine benevolence) in order to explain *apparent* evil. In other words, we don’t need a god or gods to explain morality: virtue pays off; friendship is the chief joy of human life.

(5) We end skeptically: the influence of religious faith in practical affairs is good, even though we can generate no causal inferences for singular effects.

XII: Of the Academical or Skeptical Philosophy.

(1) The last section of the *Enquiry* presents a brief history of Academic Skepticism (“Academic” here refers to the philosophies of the later schools of thought associated with Plato’s Academy).

(2) Hume’s parting shot: “When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? 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.”

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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.