

Hume's Skepticism in A Treatise of Human Nature

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Abstract : *In this paper, I will examine Hume's skepticism regarding senses and reason. In A Treatise of Human Nature, Hume's skepticism starts with the hypothesis that all our reasoning concerning causes and effects are derived from nothing but custom and he says that without custom we would be unable to draw causal inferences. Furthermore without causal inference we have no knowledge beyond what was present to our senses and memory. Moreover he raises sceptical doubts concerning reason and senses. Hume's sceptical aim is to reduce knowledge to probability and then reduction of all probability to nothing. He argues that human mind falls into error in its reasoning. He offers a causal account of reasoning. It can however be argued that causal inferences have no rational foundation and they derive from a natural property of the mind to project past regularities into the future.*

The aim of this paper is to explain the method of doubt which ultimately involves the task of removing all uncertain beliefs and to presents a series of reasons to show why we should be doubtful of the conclusions that we come to because of our reasoning, sense experience and our attitude towards it. Furthermore, I will also examine why Hume's skepticism is neither refuted nor integrated in our natural belief? and why complete skepticism is impossible? Finally, I will argue that Hume's philosophical position of skepticism encourage us, to be careful in examining all consequences when we reaches at conclusion. Furthermore, we have good reasons to be skeptical about conclusions reached by the use of reason as well sense experience.

Keywords: *Belief. Sense and Reason. Simple Idea. Complex Idea. Method of doubt. Induction. Custom. Skepticism. Causal inference. Knowledge.*

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

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*Hume's Skepticism in A
Treatise of Human Nature*

RJPSS 2018, Vol. 43, No.1,
pp. 201-208, Article No.26

Received on 08/02/2018

Approved on 27/02/2018

Online available at:

[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=442](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=442)

Introduction

Hume's skepticism regarding senses and reason has been a significant contribution to the history of ideas lies in his skepticism, in his doubts concerning the property of certain inferences leading to the belief in necessary connection, and in the implications of those doubts. Hume says, this skeptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cured, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chase it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it. It is impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the skeptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always increases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them; and take it for granted, whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world.¹ The method of doubt ultimately involves the task of removing all uncertain beliefs, ensuring that only beliefs that are certainly true beliefs remain in one's philosophy. He presents a series of reasons to show why we should be doubtful of the conclusions that we come to because of our reasoning, and those that we come to because of our sense experience and our attitude towards it.

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume's skepticism starts with the hypothesis "that all our reasoning concerning causes and effects, are derived from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive than of the cognitive part of our natures".² He holds that without custom, we would be unable to draw causal inferences. And without causal inference, we have no knowledge of anything beyond what was present to our senses and memory. Custom is a natural instinct of the mind, a disposition we simply have in the face of experience of constant conjunction. But custom is not reason to believe that we haven't experienced will be like what we have. Hume doubts the existence of the external world. He believes that we are naturally disposed to believe in the external world, and at first we think that our impressions perfectly resemble the object but on reflection, we don't suppose a chair gets smaller as we move away. So we must accept that what is immediately available to the mind is only ideas, which don't resemble objects perfectly; yet we continue to think that the objects represented persist independently of our impressions. Our experience can't show that external world exists, because

all that experience is the impressions itself, not the connection between impressions and objects. So, the belief in the external world is groundless. But he also accepts that external world exists when he claims that we do have knowledge as a result of causal inference, and since knowledge of the external world is a prerequisite for this, we have knowledge of that, too. The external world is objective and exists as it appears to us.

In his book, *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume raises sceptical doubts concerning reason and senses. Hume's sceptical aim is to reduce knowledge to probability and then reduction of all probability to nothing. He argues that human mind falls into error in its reasoning. He offers a causal account of reasoning. "Hume argues that causal inferences have no rational foundation; instead they derive from a natural (or animal) propensity of the mind to project past regularities into the future."³ For Hume, the assurance of knowledge "is derived from the union of causes and effects, according to past experience and observation".⁴ On Hume's view, knowledge grows gradually. The gradual increase of assurance to know about something is the addition of continuous probabilities. And the assurance we gain from knowledge of matters of fact; by using observation and employing induction and reasoning about probability. Scepticism with regard to reason implies that even the most certain conclusions of reasoning are actually only probable and that their degree of probability diminishes the moment we examine them. Hume reduces knowledge to probability. According to Hume, "all knowledge degenerates into probability; and this probability is greater or less, according to our experience of the veracity or deceitfulness of our understanding, and according to the simplicity or intricacy of the question."⁵ He acknowledges that we may not go wrong on simple questions but there is still some probability that mistake has already been made.

Hume reduces probability to nothing. According to Hume, "all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence."⁶ Hume further argues that "In every judgment, which we can form concerning probability, as well as concerning knowledge, we ought to correct the first judgment, derived from the nature of first judgment, derived from the nature of object, by another judgment, derived from the nature of the understanding."⁷ But this can lead to infinite regress. "In order to decrease a quantity to nothing it must be shown that those diminutions does not approach zero as a limit. That is, we can imagine each diminution becoming progressively smaller such that the sum of the

diminution approaches a finite limit. The total diminution could even be small".⁸Since we all make mistakes, every time we reason there is a possibility that we may err. When we check our reasoning, it is still possible that we have erred in our checking, and that we will err in checking and so on. Each judgment that make about the merits of reasoning is merely probable, and the combined probability. Hence, in this checking process we are carried on indefinitely, we should begin to lose confidence even in our most certain reasoning in arithmetic or algebra.

With regard to our sense information, Hume starts out with the intention of being sensible and empirical, taking nothing to be true, but seeking whatever instructions is to be obtained from experience and observation. According to Hume, sense conveys three different kinds of impressions. The first impression "is those of the figure, bulk, motion, and solidity of bodies.

The second, those of colors, tastes, smells, sounds, heat and cold. The third are the pains and pleasures that arise from the application of objects to our bodies, as by the cutting of our flesh with steel and such like".⁹ Hume's view, philosophers and villager will discard first and second impressions respectively and about the third they will say that it is merely perceptions and consequently uninterrupted and dependent beings. But the difference between them is founded neither on perception nor reason, but on the imagination and "as far as senses are judges, all perceptions are the same in the manner of their existence".¹⁰Hume insists that we are naturally convinced that the objects we observe exist continuously and independently. But as soon as we begin to examine this belief we find that it is completely unjustified and that it conflicts with what we know about our impressions. For instance, before Copernicus made a remarkable statement that earth takes round of the sun, it was believed that sun takes round of the earth.

Hume offers a casual explanation of mental phenomena. On Hume's account, all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds which he calls impressions and ideas. On Hume's view, an idea is supposed to be a mental picture. An idea is a mere copy of actual impressions of the senses or of feeling. According to Hume, an idea can be analyzed in two stages. The first stage is to break the complex idea into its simple constituents. The second stage is to identify the simple impressions of which the simple ideas are copies. According to Hume, "It is impossible perfectly to understand any idea, without tracing it upto its origin and examining that primary impression from which it arises, The examination of the impression bestows clearness on the idea; and the examination of the idea

bestows a like clearness on all our reasoning”.¹¹ Neither sense information nor valid reasoning can supply any basis for concluding that there are independent and continuous objects. If our imagination through some propensities supply us with this belief, it is still contrary to experience. All that we perceive are impressions, which as far as we can feel, are definitely dependent on us. An alteration in our sense organs or in the state of health, changes what we perceive. In view of this, we should not think that our perceptions are things that exist independently from us; continuing to exist even when not perceived. But, Hume observes, no amount of argument on this subject makes us give up our natural belief in the existence of external world.

The characteristics of impressions are constancy and coherency whose existence depends on our perception. Hume observes “Those mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appeared to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration.”¹² The things that we see present themselves in the same manner uniform and it does not change if we have interruption in our seeing and perceiving them and produces the opinion of their continued existence depends on the coherence and constancy of certain impressions. “Hume’s scepticism rests entirely upon his rejection of the principle of induction”.¹³ Like any skeptic philosopher, he challenged philosophers to provide a rational justification for our confidence in induction. The principle of induction, when applied to causation, states that if ‘A’, for instance, is seen very often with ‘B’ and no instance is known of ‘A’ not being seen without ‘B’, then it is probable that when ‘A’ is observed, she will be accompanied by ‘B’.¹⁴ If we take the principle of induction to be adequate then a sufficient number of instances must make the probability not far short of certainty. If we take this principle of induction to be true then the causal inferences that Hume rejects are valid. On Hume’s view, if ‘A’ is often seen with ‘B’ then it does not mean that when we observe ‘A’ next time, ‘B’ will be accompanying her. We cannot be certain about their being together all the time.

Hume regards his skepticism as a permanently open possibility that can neither be neither refuted nor integrated with our natural beliefs. The discussion of the basis for skepticism indicates that for Hume even complete skepticism is impossible because of the force of natural belief. Nature forces us to accept certain views in spite of the evidence for against them. He does not seem to have been a skeptic by

original intention. He stands on the mitigated skepticism, the only form of skepticism that can be integrated with our natural beliefs. The mitigated skepticism adopted by Hume involves a theory about the limits of human perceptions and the way that those limits are transcended by the suppositions which we all naturally make. On Hume's view, these natural suppositions themselves provide the raw material for correct scientific judgment. It is impossible to find the effect in the cause. We cannot establish any binding between the cause and the effect because to do so we would have to be able to 'intuit' or 'demonstrate' a connection between the two. "No object ever discovers (i.e., discloses), by the qualities which appear to the senses, either the causes which produced it, or the effects which will arise from it; nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matter of fact".¹⁵ He maintains that our everyday experience of the world does not initially or directly disclose the underlying causal powers (i.e., the unobservable infrastructures, particles, forces, etc.) on which the manifest qualities and occurrences of the world depend. When we observe any ordinary object or scene before us, for example, we do not see the radiant energy that illuminates the visual aspects of the world.

To conclude the paper, I will argue that Hume's philosophical position of skepticism maintains that all knowledge is merely probable and never certain. He says that we have good reasons to be skeptical about all conclusions reached by the use of reason or on the basis of sense experience. Like any other skeptic, he attacks the possibility of knowledge, certainty, or justified belief only indirectly. His primary target is the process of reasoning which allegedly results in reliable conclusion. He contends that though there are basic difficulties with regard to both our reason and our senses we still have to believe many things because of our psychological structure. Unfortunately, what we believe is often either indefensible or contradictory. Hume advocates his skepticism by saying that be suspicious about prejudices and opinions. We should also base our knowledge on clear and evident principles. Furthermore, we must be careful in examining all the consequences when we check on the conclusions.

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¹⁴ The example is inspired from Bertrand Russell's chapter on Hume in above mentioned book.

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