

Handout 1

Scepticism: Hume

SCEPTICISM ABOUT REASON. Hume begins by arguing that no belief is certain. We always rely on some degree of confidence (‘probability’) in forming our beliefs. This is the case of empirical beliefs, as much as of mathematical/logical beliefs. ‘All knowledge resolves its into probability’: the source of this is the ‘uncertainty’ of the subject matter, the fact that our beliefs involve a causal process. But there is another source of doubt—namely, the possibility of recursive error, the recursive malfunctioning of our cognitive abilities. Suppose I believe that snow is white (belief B). By the earlier argument, I reason that my belief isn’t certain, but has a probability $n < 1$. But then my current meta-belief that $P(B) = n$ is also not certain, but has the probability m . Hume seems to hold, first, that $m < n$. He also seems to hold that, because we can continue this series of meta-beliefs indefinitely, eventually we’ll come to a number l that is exceedingly small. Finally, he seems to hold that, having thus arranged my beliefs in a series, I need to reconsider my original belief B . Its probability itself must be no higher than l . I think one way to make sense of this rather dubious argument is to say that I can only *assert* ‘Snow is white’ with the probability l . Hume himself concludes that no belief can survive this meta-theoretic unpacking (‘total extinction’).

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1.4.1.6

But it soon turns out that Hume is only toying with us. For we cannot abandon our beliefs, really. Or better still, we can’t believe that we have no beliefs. Yet we can’t, and don’t, believe that not because of reason, not because we have a rational argument, but rather because of our internal inclination planted in us by nature.

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THE PROBLEM OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD. After defending the legitimacy of doubt with regard to operations of reason, Hume turns to the question of our belief in the external world. Right at the beginning Hume announces that he is not after a proof of the existence of the external world. But this admission is somewhat misleading, as what Hume says in the course of his discussion has clear sceptical ramifications. Presumably Hume’s position is as follows: We have the belief in the existence of external objects, and the fact of this belief is non-negotiable. We cannot in all seriousness and honesty contemplate the possibility of there being no external objects whatsoever. What is left for us to examine is whether this belief is justifiable (in some sense of ‘justifiable’).

1.4.2.1

In any event, we are given a distinction between two beliefs: (1) that objects of the external world (or ‘body’, as Hume prefers to label it) exist even when not perceived by the mind, and (2) that they are distinct from the mind.

1.4.2.2

The first belief entails the second: if the objects exist unperceived, they should be distinct from perceptions. Hume then asks whether reason, senses, or imagination should be responsible for these beliefs. To anticipate, the answer is *imagination*.

THE VULGAR AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL. In order to get a better perspective on Hume’s reasoning, perhaps we should set off by distinguishing the vulgar and the philosophical ways of affirming the existence of the body. The distinction as drawn by Hume strangely intertwines Locke’s and Berkeley’s remarks in the context of the discussion of primary and secondary qualities. The vulgar, possibly on account of having no correct theory of mind and perception, believe that their perceptions continue uninterrupted. They thus conclude that perceptions constitute the ontology of the world. The philosophically inclined postulate a distinction between perceptions and objects, thus affirming the doctrine of ‘double existence’. Objects, but not perceptions, continue uninterrupted.

1.4.2.12

We can now read Hume as offering a sixfold argument to the effect that: senses are not the cause of either vulgar or philosophical belief in the external world, reason is not the cause of either vulgar or philosophical belief in the external world, imagination is a direct cause of the vulgar belief in the external world, imagination is an indirect cause of the philosophical belief in the external world.

SENSES. Evidently the senses cannot supply us with the idea of *continued* existence of the body. For that would amount to the possibility of perceiving something unperceived. Perhaps, on the other hand, they can provide us with the idea of distinct existence. But that could mean either that they provide us with impressions *as* representations, or that they provide us with impressions *as* distinct

1.4.2.3

from ourselves. The first possibility is quickly dismissed: we do not have the impression of double existence.

1.2.4.4

What of the second? Being a distinct existence involves two ingredients: externality and independence. The issue of externality is dealt with briefly, but instructively. To perceive something externally I should perceive it outside of myself. We have no good theory of self. Perhaps I should at least insist that my perceptions should be outside of my body. But to say that is already to assume the existence of the external world—that we are supposed to be explaining.

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The issue of independence gets a slightly more elaborate treatment, but here we only note one argument. The senses can only inform us of what is, but not of what could be. Since independence is a modal notion, it cannot be channeled through senses alone.

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THE MAP OF T 1.4.2. Since the discussion in this section is fairly complex in content and at crucial junctures non-linear in development, it is useful to delineate its structure:

1 The sceptical problem posed.

2 Continued and distinct existence distinguished; sense, reason, and imagination identified as only possible sources of our belief in the body (BB), i.e. the belief in the ‘external world’ as it is usually called.

3-4 Senses are not supplied with an impression of either continued or distinct existence.

5-7 If senses *were* to generate BB, then only through an illusion; but senses *cannot* represent our perceptions as either external or independent.

8-10 In any case, senses *do not* in fact represent our perceptions as external or independent.

12 Three kinds of impressions distinguished (1- and 2-qualities, passions); the Philosophical and the Vulgar views introduced: the Philosophers believe in the distinct and continued existence of 1-qualities, the Vulgar believe in the distinct and continued existence of both 1-qualities and 2-qualities. Neither believe in the distinct and continued existence of passions.

13 Senses cannot be responsible either for the Philosophical or the Vulgar view.

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