

Class Thirteen - Hume's *Enquiry*, Section V

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

February 14, 2023

1 Quick Recap

- **The Task of the *Enquiry*:** We're trying to develop a science of the human mind, understanding the basic principles by which human understanding functions.
- **Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact:** We articulating all objects of human knowledge into two kinds: *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact*. Any matter of fact that is not known immediately by perception is based on *inference* which is underwritten by an understanding of *cause and effect*.
- **Skeptical Doubts:** When we try to investigate the grounds for our idea that there is a causal relation between two kinds of things (for instance, fire and paper burning), we find that we have the idea in virtue of there being a constant conjunction between things—whenever we have fire and we put a piece of paper in it, it's burned. We don't have any grounds for inferring from the claim that, just because something has repeatedly happened in the past, it will continue to happen that way in the future. Any way of trying to justify this inference is going to be circular.
- **Remaining Question:** If the grounds for our making causal inferences (inferring, for instance, that putting the paper in the fire will cause it to burn) are not *rational* grounds, what *are* our grounds?

2 Habit as the Ground of Causal Inference

- **The Role of Habit or "Custom":** We find ourselves, when we've "observed similar objects or events to be constantly conjoined together" compelled upon the observation of an event of the first type to infer that there will be an event of the second type. We can recognize from the previous skeptical argument that our understanding "has no part in the operation," but, rather, that "there is some other principle, which determines [us] to form such a conclusion. The principle is *custom* or *habit*," (27-28).
 - **Note:** Hume's uses the term "custom" is a way that's rather different than the way we usually use it. When we use it, we're usually referring to *social customs* such as shaking hands when meeting someone new. Hume is not using it this way. "Habit" is a better word for the sort of "custom" he's speaking of, though he more often uses the latter word.
- **The Resulting Epistemological Picture:** Since all of our beliefs in matters of fact not based on immediate experience is derived from inference which is based on our understanding of causation, and our making causal inferences is simply a product of custom or habit, Hume concludes that "All belief in matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object," (30).
- **Belief is Not Undermined, Says Hume:** Hume claims that, even though we don't have *rational* grounds that underwrite the causal inferences that we make, this "should [n]ever undermine the reasons of common life [. . .] Nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever," (27).

- **Question:** Is this sort of account satisfying? *Doesn't* Hume's account "undermine the reasons of common life." Even though we are compelled to continue to reason as nature makes us, shouldn't we recognize that our natural reasoning is fundamentally flawed? Is this kind of skepticism sufficient to dismiss the account?

3 A Naturalistic Explanation

- **Instinct and Natural Compulsion:** Hume is clear that we *can't help but* form beliefs on the basis of causal inferences:

"This belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances," (30).

The operation of forming belief by way of habit in this way belongs to "a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought or understanding is able, either to produce or prevent," (30).

- **Hume's Naturalistic Explanation:** Hume provides the following explanation for why inference in accordance with causality *should be*, functionally speaking, a product of instinct rather than reason:

"I shall add, for a further confirmation of the foregoing theory, that, as this operation of the mind, by which we infer like effects from like causes, and vice versa, is so essential to the subsistence of all human creatures, it is not probable, that it could be trusted to the fallacious deductions of our reason, which is slow in its operations; appears not, in any degree, during the first years of infancy; and at best is, in every age and period of human life, extremely liable to error and mistake," (37).

- **A Kind of Proto-Darwinianism:** Hume himself was writing before Darwin, but we can see this sort of view as quite amenable to a Darwinian outlook on human beings. The idea would be that our cognitive faculties evolved such that we make causal inferences as a matter of natural instinct and our reasoning capacity did not evolve to be capable of grasping any general principle by which the inferences we naturally make are actually justified.
- **A Big Question:** Is Hume's account coherent? It seems like Hume's *explanation* of such things as our belief in inference-supporting causal connections as a result of the experience of common conjunction might deploy a notion of causation that should be unjustified, given Hume's account. For example, it seems that Hume is saying that it is *because* we are slow reasoners that nature made us such as to make causal inferences not from reason but from habit. Can we reconstruct this idea appealing only to a notion of causation that would be acceptable by Hume's lights?

4 A Similar Account of Belief in the External World

- **Question:** We saw how all of our beliefs about matters of facts that aren't based on immediate experience are—because underwritten by causal inferences—not rationally grounded. But what about our beliefs about external objects that we have on the basis of immediate experience?
- **Hume's Answer:** The same sort of account applies here, as well!
- **A Natural Instinct:** "It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct or prepossession, to repose faith in their senses; and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose [. . .] It also seems evident, that, when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by their senses to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other," (104)

- **The Justification Undercut By Abstract Philosophy:** “But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object,” (104)
- **A Skeptical Outlook:** “It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: how shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning,” (105).
- **A Quick Dismissal of the Cartesian Route:** “To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit. If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention, that, if the external world be once called in question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes,” (105).
- **Question:** Are we more optimistic than Hume about the prospect of adequately responding to Cartesian skepticism?