

# **Can Man Live Without Metaphysics?**

**An Analysis of David Hume's  
*An Enquiry Concerning  
Human Understanding***

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## Part I: Background

### Continental Rationalism

Modern philosophy has been characterized by a deep distrust of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Any knowledge claims that are metaphysical in nature have been severely questioned or considered meaningless. This philosophical trend has done much to shape our culture over the past two centuries. What has been the source of this anti-metaphysical bias that has reigned of late?

First of all, metaphysics is offensive to the modern mind because it requires belief in the non-observational, that is, in truths which go beyond what we can investigate with our senses and scientifically verify. In other words, metaphysics challenges pure empiricism. Because of the success of modern science and the popularity of empirical philosophies such as naturalism and positivism, metaphysics has been at best ignored and at worst ridiculed. The supratemporal realm and the makeup of reality as whole are considered unknowable or non-existent because they are beyond sensation. As Anthony Flew explains, "Not surprisingly, many critics of [of metaphysics] have argued that the achievement of some at least of these [metaphysical] aims is in principle impossible. Thus, it has been held that the human mind has no means of discovering facts outside the realm of sense experience...Another criticism is that since no conceivable experience could enable us to decide between, for example, the statements that reality consists of only one substance (monism) or of infinitely many (monadology), neither serves any purpose in the economy of our thought about the world, and they are alike neither true nor false but meaningless."<sup>2</sup>

However, many have pointed out that this hostility to metaphysical claims may be quite different than it initially appears. As W. H. Walsh has said, "It must be allowed that the reaction against [metaphysics] has been...so violent indeed as to suggest that the issues involved in the controversy must be must be something more than academic."<sup>3</sup> While this is not the place to enter into speculation as to non-intellectual reasons for the concerted attempt to overthrow metaphysics, it is worth noting at this point that philosophical issues are not always merely academic. Personalities and prejudices are involved as well.

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<sup>1</sup>"Metaphysics" may be defined in a number of different ways. Most simply, it is the study of the nature of reality or being. In other words, metaphysics asks, what is to exist? And, what sorts of things exist? Metaphysics analyzes ultimate causes and explanations, characterizing existence as a whole. While metaphysics is concerned with day-to-day matters of human experience, it more often focuses on transcendent matters, that is, things which go beyond the scope of everyday experience and underlie it. For the purposes of this paper, metaphysics may be thought of simply as the study of reality as a whole, with the goal of comprehensively analyzing its entire scheme and makeup.

<sup>2</sup>*A Dictionary of Philosophy*, revised second edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), pp. 229-230.

<sup>3</sup>*Metaphysics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), pp. 12, 13.

British. Men such as John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753), and David Hume (1711-1776) wanted to move away from the abstruse and speculative philosophy of the continent. Thus they turned to empiricism.

### **David Hume: Empiricism With A Vengeance**

The most consistent of the British empiricists was David Hume. Hume has become something of a hero to modern day philosophers of an empiricist bent, such as positivists, naturalists, pragmatists, and skeptics in general. Hume has few equals in philosophical analysis. His works reflect a keen insight into philosophical problems. He was also a clever and witty writer.

Hume's philosophical approach begins<sup>4</sup> by dividing the field of knowledge into two sectors: relations of ideas and matters of fact. This distinction, known as "Hume's fork" has been quite influential in philosophical discussion following Hume.

Relations of ideas are purely logical and geometric truths that are either demonstratively or intuitively certain. These kinds of propositions are "discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe."<sup>5</sup> Relations of ideas tell us nothing about the "real world" of our experience; they are purely formal and abstract. They hold true only in the thought world. there is no reason to assume they are applicable in the world of experience.

By contrast, matters of fact are learned from experience. Matters of fact are not logically necessary. Indeed, "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality."<sup>6</sup>

Hume labels all mental events as "perceptions." There are two types of perceptions -- impressions (which are immediate sense data) and thoughts or ideas (which are copies of our impressions, made possible by memory or imagination). The difference between impressions and ideas lies in the "force and vivacity" with which they come to us. "The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation."<sup>7</sup>

While man's thought may seem to be unlimited, this is not the case. All the mind can do is work with the "raw materials" of our impressions.

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<sup>4</sup>I realize that chronologically, Hume does not begin explicating his philosophy in the *Enquiry* with this distinction. However, logically, I think it is helpful to begin here in summarizing Hume's position.

<sup>5</sup>*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.

But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience...In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: the mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. Or, to express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Hume's empiricism allows the mind no more data to work with than experience will provide. That data may be rearranged or manipulated in various ways, but sensory input is a limiting factor in what the mind can conceive. Ultimately, the non-experienced is unthinkable.<sup>9</sup>

Hume sees several ways that ideas may be strung together:

It is evident that there is a principle of connection between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity...

Though it be too obvious to escape observation, that different ideas are connected together; I do not find that any philosopher has attempted to enumerate or class all the principles of association; a subject, however, that seems worthy of curiosity. To me, there appear to be only three principles of connection among ideas, namely, *resemblance*, *contiguity* in time or place, and *cause* or *effect*.<sup>10</sup>

The key question that is at the heart of Hume's *Enquiry* is raised in Section IV. Because no logical contradiction is involved in denying any given matter of fact, we must ask about the nature of our reasoning in this realm:

It may, therefore, be a subject worthy of curiosity, to inquire what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory.<sup>11</sup>

Hume now enters into a discussion of causation:

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Hume's assertion that all our thought content derives from experience should not be taken to conflict with his statements elsewhere that we may deny any matter of fact without engaging in a logical contradiction. When Hume says we may deny any matter of fact, it seems to be future phenomena that are in view, such as asserting that the sun will not rise tomorrow.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, p. 16.

All our reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *cause and effect*. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses...it is constantly supposed that there is a connection between the present fact and that which is inferred from it.<sup>12</sup>

Hume calls into question cause and effect as an *a priori*, necessary relationship. He is challenging our use of the inductive principle. Using Adam as an example, he shows that causes and effects are not known apart from experience. What could Adam have inferred about the properties of water and fire just by looking at them?

No object ever discovers, 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.

This proposition, *that causes and effects are discoverable, not by reason but by experience*, will readily be admitted with regard to such objects, as we remember to have once been altogether unknown to us; since we must be conscious of the utter inability, which we then lay under, of foretelling what would arise from them.<sup>13</sup>

Even after we have experienced a series of events quite repeatedly, we still have no basis for *reasoning* from cause to effect. Familiarity with certain events does not allow us to prove there is a necessary cause and effect relationship. What we call causes and what we call effects are quite distinct occurrences: "For the effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it."<sup>14</sup> We see one event *following* another with a great degree of regularity and so we *infer* that the first event actually *produced* the second. Obviously, this is quite arbitrary. Why shouldn't we think that a rooster causes the sun to rise?

This leaves us with quite a vexing difficulty. What rational justification can be given for expecting the future to be like the past? How can we make predictions in the world of sense experience? Bread may nourish us at breakfast, but how do we know it won't poison us at dinner? According to Hume, we have no rational grounds for assuming uniformity in the world of matters of fact. We have no warrant for trusting experience.

These two propositions are far from being the same, *I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect*, and *I foresee, that other objects, which are, in appearance, similar, will be attended with similar effects*. I shall allow, if you please, that the one proposition may justly be inferred from the

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, p. 18.

other; I know, in fact, that it always is inferred. But if you insist that the inference is made by a chain of reasoning, I desire you to produce that reasoning.<sup>15</sup>

In a Humean world, there is no way around or through this impasse. Any trust we put in experience will be completely unfounded. We cannot even justify saying that “probably” the future will be like the past because probability assumes the very uniformity that needs to be proven:

If we be, therefore, engaged by arguments to put trust in past experience, and make it the standard of our future judgment, these arguments must be probable only...But that there is no argument of this kind, must appear, if our explication of that species of reasoning be admitted as solid and satisfactory. We have said that all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect; that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience; and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be like the past. To endeavor, therefore, proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be very evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question.<sup>16</sup>

For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past...If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded upon the supposition of that resemblance. Let the course of things be allowed hitherto ever so regular; that alone, without some new argument or inference, proves not that, for the future, it will continue so.<sup>17</sup>

Hume's argument at this point is brilliant, if not also utterly frustrating. Hume has caught those who would oppose his skepticism on the horns of a dilemma. If we agree with him that causality and uniformity are psychological expectations, or mere suppositions, with no rational grounding, then experience becomes useless as a source of knowledge. Science loses any foundation it might hope to have and is left suspended in mid-air. On the other hand, if we disagree, and try to justify learning from experience based on past success, we are merely arguing in a circle.

Hume has claimed we cannot justify the assumption that our future experience will resemble our past experiences. One cannot appeal to the past and say, “In the past the future was like the past, so in the future, the future will be like the past.” This is begging the question and side-stepping Hume's monumental challenge. Hume knows that we *will*

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, p. 22-23

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, p. 24.

assume we can trust our past experience to guide us in the future; what he is concerned to point out is that we have no *reason* for doing so. We simply cannot prove the future will be like the past. No man has experience of the future, and therefore, no man can tell us what it will be like. We expect future events to resemble past events, but we do so without warrant. As Hume says, it is a matter of “habit” or “custom.” “All inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of custom, not of reasoning.”<sup>18</sup> This is his “solution” to skeptical doubt.

## Hume As Skeptic

We have now a thumbnail sketch of Hume’s basic philosophy. He is an empiricist, but only concerning matters of fact. Relations of ideas are what we might call analytic, necessary, *a priori* truths that cannot be contradicted. Hume does not call these truths into question. His empiricism, however, does lead him to greatly limit what man can know about the factual world -- assuming there is such a world.

Hume asks, “how far is it possible to push these philosophical principles of doubt and uncertainty?”<sup>19</sup> Hume rejects the kind of antecedent skepticism that Descartes used in formulating his “Cogito.” He says (quite rightly) that this kind of “universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties” is not only impossible, but even if it were possible, it would be “entirely incurable.”<sup>20</sup>

Hume also rejects that kind of radical skepticism which is the consequent of all our scientific inquiry. This form of skepticism subjects even the most commonly held maxims to the same doubt as the most profound concepts of metaphysics and theology. Any kind of extreme skepticism, or Pyrrhonism, destroys human life and is refuted by the practices of normal life. No good can come from such questioning. Nature will always refute it.<sup>21</sup>

However, there are more moderate species of skepticism that Hume sees as very helpful to the study of philosophy. A skeptical procedure, in which we continually evaluate our “first principles,” check and double check our reasoning, and examine our conclusions rigorously, can be a useful method in preserving impartiality in our judgments and leading us to the truth. Moreover, Hume advocates a brand of skepticism he calls “mitigated scepticism.” This form of doubt puts a check on the human tendency to succumb to a blind dogmatism. We should limit “our inquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding.” We can have demonstrative knowledge of abstract sciences such as mathematics and logic. “All other inquiries of men regard matters of fact and existence and these are evidently incapable of demonstration.”<sup>22</sup> At

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, p. 102-103.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, p. 107ff.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, p. 111ff.

best, we can have only a tentative knowledge of the world of sensation; this knowledge must always be subject to revision by further experience and it is never absolutely certain.

## Part II: Critique

### Hume As Anti-Metaphysician

Hume has neatly carved the world into two airtight compartments; there are two separate domains that give very different types of knowledge. Properly speaking, we really only have knowledge of pure abstractions. Our “knowledge” of matters of fact cannot be proven because it is never logically certain. Thus, Hume severely limits what we can know. Knowledge of anything metaphysical is out of the question.

While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?

This narrow limitation, indeed, of our inquiries, is, in every respect, so reasonable, that it suffices to make the slightest examination into the natural powers of the human mind and to compare them with their objects, in order to recommend it to us. We shall then find what are the proper subjects of science and inquiry.<sup>23</sup>

Hume gives us no hope for finding a connection or point of contact between the realm of abstraction and the realm of fact. He has left us with only a tiny fragment of the knowledge we once thought we had. Granted, this knowledge is certain. But it also purely formal. We know nothing certain about the way the world really exists.

Hume concludes his *Enquiry* in dramatic fashion:

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.<sup>24</sup>

In light of the failure of Continental metaphysics, it is somewhat understandable why Hume would want to discard this field of inquiry altogether. However, metaphysics may not be as dispensable as Hume claims. It seems that certain metaphysical presuppositions are necessary for any kind of knowledge whatsoever. Indeed, it seems that the house of human knowledge -- however great or small we may think it is -- must rest on a

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid*, p. 112.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, p. 114.



metaphysical foundation. Otherwise, we are bound to end up with the Pyrrhonism that even the skeptic Hume detests.

It can be shown quite easily that some approaches to metaphysics are simply destructive of any and all knowledge. Hume allows for knowledge of such things as logic, numbers, geometric axioms, etc. But these are abstract, immaterial entities. Clearly, Hume must rule out materialism. We do not touch or see or taste numbers; they are non-physical. Likewise, mental laws, such as laws of logic, and classes, such as the class of "three sided figures," would seem to rule out materialism and atomism. If the Pythagorean theorem is simply the result of electro-chemical events in my brain, how can I say it applies to all triangles, as conceived of in all brains? If everything is simply matter in motion, how can I know  $2 + 2 = 4$  ?

My point is certainly not to say that Hume has accepted a metaphysic incompatible with his knowledge of relations of ideas. He nowhere claims to be a materialist or naturalist or atomist. Indeed, Hume explicitly accepts *no* metaphysic. All I hope to demonstrate here is that Hume is not off the hook. He still must interact with metaphysical questions; he cannot be as indifferent to metaphysics as he would like. He simply cannot be a metaphysical agnostic. He rests on a metaphysical position of some sort even as he argues that no metaphysic can be known. Contrary to Hume's humble sounding pleas to leave metaphysics alone because it is beyond the grasp of man's intellect, *some* metaphysical view *must* be assumed.<sup>25</sup> At the very least, certain positions must be ruled out. Knowledge of relations of ideas is just not compatible with any view of reality.

Hume might respond to what I have said here by saying that relations of ideas are actually only mental "customs" or "habits." Alternatively, he might say that they are simply verbal conventions. But he cannot really resort to any kind of conventionalism, whether verbal or mental, because this would undermine the necessary and certain character of these relations. Plus, he would still have to specify just what the metaphysical status of a number is or what the nature of a law of logic is. These questions are just too central to attempt to escape.

### **Hume on the Senses and the Self**

Turning from relations of ideas to matters of fact, we must examine Hume's analysis of human sense experience. Hume's skepticism in this realm is simply the logical result of following out the empiricist's program.

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<sup>25</sup>Interestingly, another British empiricist before Hume ran into the inescapability of metaphysics as well. Locke's empiricism would seem to rule out metaphysical knowledge, yet Locke knew he had to have it. He ends up defining "substance" as "a-something-I-know-not-what." No empiricist can really develop his philosophy without allowing some metaphysical principles into his system. Even the attempt to reject metaphysics involves metaphysical claims.

*as the Philosopher dream*

Obviously, if all we know are our perceptions, we can never truly know that we have experienced the external world -- or that there even is an external world for us to experience. As Hume asks, why should we believe our ideas match up to external, objective reality?<sup>26</sup> The only answer he can give, consistent with his empiricism, is that we have an instinct<sup>27</sup> to trust our senses and assume that they are reporting to us the nature of reality. If a skeptic were to challenge our belief in an external world, we could give no rational justification to answer him. All we can do is *pretend* there is a world out there and that it is just like we perceive it.<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen, Hume believes in three possible connections among ideas: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. Hume must explain where these relations come from. If our minds are blank slates, with no inborn notions, how did we learn to make these connections? If all knowledge must be traced back to perception, and we never perceive these connections, how can we come to know what they are? How can minds manufacture what is unperceived? If we do not sense causality, and all the contents of our thinking derive from experience, how did we ever come up with the idea of a causal nexus between events? And why should *all* human minds share just these particular connections? How does Hume have the right to assume all minds work this way? Why should all minds think alike? How does Hume account for our conceptual structures?

But there are not only problems with the source of these connecting principles, as seen above, there are also problems with the way these associations are actually used. I think Hume has underestimated the destructive strength of his "sensory atomism." If all experiences are really loose and separate, as Hume claims, then how can there be any connection at all? If every event is distinct, can any two events *really* be put together in any kind of coherent fashion? If every impression is really a discrete, isolated unit, it seems no connection with other events is possible. Man's mind is simply not a strong enough cement to hold all of reality together.

At this point, Hume switches hats, from philosopher to psychologist. He would agree that connections cannot be found in the events themselves. But it is our habitual way of thinking to connect them. By instinct and custom, we learn to group events together. The principles of connection are not in the real world, but are purely psychological.

I would object that Hume is simply not being true to experience at this point. Psychologically, he is simply wrong. I do not psychologically or experientially sense that I am connecting events in my experience. I experience them *as related*. But that aside, there is a tremendous philosophical difficulty with Hume's attempted solution. The

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<sup>26</sup>See especially *Enquiry* p. 102ff.

<sup>27</sup>In order for Hume to make the notion of "instinct" plausible he needs to explain it more thoroughly than he does in the *Enquiry*. How is instinct different from innate ideas? How is it common to all of humanity? What is its source? Do we have an impression of "instinct" so that we can know what it is?

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, p. 104ff.

problem is that he assumes that there is a self that continues to exist through these perceptions. However, we certainly do not have any perception of selfhood. We do not perceive our own identity as we take in one sensation after another. Therefore, how can I supply connections for my incoming experiences when I do not even know if there is an "I"? On Hume's premises, there is no reason for there to be any continuum of events at all, nor is there any basis for assuming the self can tie these events together in coherent relationships. *Who* does the experiencing? *Who* does the connecting? How can we know ourselves?

It will not help to say we have an immediate perception of the self, for we do not. *There is no impression we have from which the idea of self can be derived.* Without some metaphysical argument, there is no reason to believe the self is a constant. Human experience -- if it could even be called "human" -- would reduce to "sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Earlier, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*,<sup>29</sup> Hume addressed the problem of selfhood this way:

[Men] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions...The mind is a kind of theater where several perceptions successively make their appearance... There is properly no simplicity in it at one time nor identity in different... The comparison of the theater must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place where these senses are represented, or of the materials of which it is composed.<sup>30</sup>

Hume has cheated here. How can the self be a "bundle" of perceptions? What holds this "bundle" or "collection" together? We certainly have no continual perception of this "bundle." If anything, Hume has begged the question. He has not provided a basis for believing there is an enduring self that perceives.

By the same token, a constant stream of perceptions does not prove there is an underlying, durable self. We may have successive perceptions, we may even perceive that our bodies take up the same space continually, but none of this proves identity. Gordon Clark explains, using the illustration of a ship at sea:

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<sup>29</sup>I realize that Hume later called the *Treatise* "that juvenile work, which the author never acknowledged" and referred students and critics to the *Enquiry*. However, there are other indications that Hume did not consider the substance of the two works to be very different. At any rate, Hume does not take up this problem of personal identity in the *Enquiry* and so we must assume he either was satisfied with his earlier answer or was dissatisfied but could not improve upon it. *Not like the latter*

<sup>30</sup>*Treatise*, I, iv, 6. Quoted in Gordon Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1989), p.385.

On its first voyage a few of its minor parts prove defective and are replaced when it reaches its home port. Its next voyage is stormy and a mast is broken. On a later occasion it strikes some rocks and its keel must be repaired. This process continues until every part of the original ship has been replaced. Now, if the new parts had been put together all at once, we should have called it a new and different ship; but because they were replaced gradually, no one of them bearing a large proportion to the whole, and especially because the ship preserves the same size and functions in the same manner for the same purpose, we do not scruple to call it the same ship. Similarly, if a bundle of ideas were completely replaced by another set all at once, or even if a small number -- identified as the body -- should remain over, while the memory, education, and habits be lost, we should say that a new person had appeared; but if the change is gradual, if the mutual relation of the parts continues, and the whole preserves the same general functions, we recognize it as the same person and mistakenly ascribe to it an uninterrupted existence.<sup>31</sup>

To use another illustration, it is as though Hume were trying to get an infinite number of beads without holes (our experiences) on a string without beginning or end (the "self"). Hume has simply reduced all experience to chaotic non-sense. Brute facts are simply unintelligible to an unknown self.

Difficulties of this sort could be multiplied. For example, how can Hume tell us so dogmatically about what is going on in other people's minds? He does not have universal experience; how can he make such universal statements?<sup>32</sup> More intensely, how does he even know that there are other people? How does he avoid solipsism? These are the kinds of difficult questions that Hume's philosophy raises, but does not answer. Without the "cash value" of metaphysical foundations, Hume's philosophy is bankrupt.

### **Hume On Causality**

Thus far, Hume has destroyed the possibility of justifying belief in an external world and in the identity of the self. We must now scrutinize more closely the notion of causality, which Hume also destroys in any objective sense. According to Hume we have no empirical perception of causality and therefore no empirical justification of causality either.

For Hume, no events can be necessarily connected. Therefore, the relation of cause and effect cannot be found "out there" in the world. Rather, we impose this connection on our perceptions out of psychological habit. Thinking in terms of causality is simply a habit of the mind. True, we have a "lively expectation" that certain events will be conjoined, but this expectation is not founded on anything deductive. It is not rational, but instinctive; it is not logical, but imaginative.

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid*, p. 386.

<sup>32</sup>For example, note the reference to "all mankind" on p.14 of the *Enquiry*.

Moreover, much of the anti-metaphysical thrust of recent philosophy may be traced back to the failure of the Continental rationalists of the seventeenth century to develop a coherent metaphysical scheme. Men such as Rene Descartes (1596-1650), Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) all sought to construct a rationalistic philosophy based on self-evident truths. Starting with "clear and distinct ideas," these men hoped to engage in "arm chair philosophy," deducing conclusions about reality from unquestionable *a priori* principles. Rationalists had an unflinching confidence in man's intellectual ability to solve any problem and comprehensively describe the universe.

The Cartesian program was based on a method of radical doubt. Descartes interacted with extreme skepticism, in the hope of finding an indubitable point of reference. The result was the "Cogito": I think, therefore I am. While putting aside the difficulties with Descartes' "Cogito" for now, it is enough for us to note that Descartes deduced from his starting point that there are two kinds of substances, mind and body. Metaphysically, Cartesian rationalism ended in a dualism. Having separated mind and body, Descartes found it almost impossible to bring them back into a coherent relationship. Any unity Descartes claimed to have would appear quite superficial.

Spinoza also wanted to begin his approach with "clear and distinct ideas." He defined a "substance" as that which exists independently of other things because it is that which unites things. Thus, Spinoza deduced that there could only be one substance, which may be called "god" or "nature." Only one ultimate substance exists because if there were two (or more), they would condition one another. Spinoza did not have to worry about unity because everything is already part of one substance. The metaphysical outcome of Spinoza's philosophy was thus monism.

Leibniz used Spinoza's definition of "substance" as something independent, but drew a radically different conclusion. Leibniz reasoned that in reality, there must be a plurality of independent things that have no relation to one another. These individual, independent bits of substance were called "monads." The monads were unified by a "grand monad," i.e., god, in what Leibniz called the theory of pre-established harmony. Metaphysically, the rationalism of Leibniz had produced an odd type of atomism.

While the above analysis is quite simplistic and far from complete, it is enough to demonstrate that Continental rationalism was a failure. Starting from supposedly self-evident truths, three great philosophers ended up with three very different pictures of the world: dualism, monism, and atomism. Clearly, something had gone wrong. If man has innate, *a priori* ideas that are indubitable, why was there such diversity of philosophical opinion? How could truths that were supposedly self-evident and self-establishing cause such disagreement? How could such divergent metaphysical claims be resolved? Could it be that clarity and distinctness were really quite subjective? With this background in view, it is somewhat easy to understand the reaction against the rationalism and metaphysics of the Continental philosophers by the eighteenth century

Hume could use a taste of his own medicine at this point. When he says that people, by nature, have an inclination to think in terms of cause and effect, on what is he basing his analysis? How does he know that people will continue to think this way? Obviously, he is rooting his future expectation of how men will think on past experience of how they have thought. In other words, his critique of induction is itself based on induction. He has drawn unwarranted generalizations about the working of the human mind. Even on his own terms, he has no way to rationally justify this procedure. And if he cannot rationally justify what he is saying, why should we listen? If his objection to causality cannot be rationally justified, does it really need to be answered? Hume is simply reasoning in a circle -- and a vicious circle, at that.

This same critique applies more broadly to his appeal to custom. Hume says it is a matter of "custom" that we say one event "caused" or "produced" another.

For wherever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of understanding, we always say, that this propensity is the effect of *custom*. By employing that word, we pretend not to have given the ultimate reason of such a propensity. We only point out a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects. Perhaps we can push our inquiries no farther, or pretend to give the cause of this cause; but must rest contented with it as the ultimate principle, which we can assign, of all our conclusions from experience...All inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of custom, not of reasoning.<sup>33</sup>

First of all, it should be noted that we could just as easily substitute the word "irrationality" for the word "custom." In other words, Hume's account for our use of the notion of causality is simply that it is irrational. But perhaps more importantly, Hume has once again begged the question. Hume wants to use the term "custom" to explain our causal inferences. However, this term itself is explained in terms of causality. Custom is the *effect* of a repeated propensity to act in a certain way. We infer causality over and over again, and this *causes* the practice to become a custom. Perhaps we should not be too hard on Hume at this point for he does not claim to give an ultimate explanation (or cause) for our use of causality. But certainly he cannot claim to have given an adequate account either.

### Hume, Science, and Skepticism

Hume's denial of the objectivity of causality has devastating consequences for the project of building human knowledge. For example, on a Humean basis, there would be no reason to think we could ever discover a cure for cancer or AIDS. Why not just assume these diseases are uncaused and spend the research money on something more worthwhile? Hume has completely subjectivized and psychologized science. Without a

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, p. 28.

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metaphysical foundation, that allows us to assume causality and uniformity in a real external world, experimental science becomes theoretically pointless. Hume is not the only one to see this. Another anti-metaphysician, Bertrand Russell, was forced into the same conclusion concerning induction:

All inductive arguments in the last resort reduce themselves to the following form: "If this is true, that is true: now that is true, therefore this is true." This argument is, of course, formally fallacious. Suppose I were to say: "If bread is a stone and stones are nourishing, then this bread will nourish me; now this bread does nourish me; therefore it is a stone, and stones are nourishing." If I were to advance such an argument, I should certainly be thought foolish, yet it would not be fundamentally different from the argument upon which all scientific laws are based.<sup>34</sup>

On this kind of worldview, no scientific law is rationally possible. The whole scientific enterprise is unjustifiable.

Hume (and Russell) might respond pragmatically at this point -- the successes of science make it worthwhile any way. But perhaps the successes science actually prove Hume wrong! Perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to peer more closely into the foundations of science, to examine what presuppositions are necessary in order to rationally justify scientific endeavors. But then, of course, we are back to metaphysics.

Hume refutes radical skepticism by simply pointing to the experiences of common life:

The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or excessive principles of skepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult if not impossible, to refute. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put into opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals...

For here is the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigor. We need only ask such a sceptic, *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer...[The skeptic] must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence...Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian

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<sup>34</sup>"Limitations of Scientific Method." Quoted in Gordon Clark, *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God*, (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1987), p. xi.

may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches.<sup>35</sup>

how? Hume has basically refuted the skeptic by saying, "You may profess skepticism, but you cannot live that way." But it seems the exact same argument could be turned against Hume's less radical skepticism. Does not a trivial event, such as a game of billiards, refute Hume? What genuine good does his form of skepticism accomplish? Must we wait in lethargy, refusing to pursue science until it can be rationally demonstrated to be fruitful? Hume may claim we cannot rationally justify belief in an external world, but he lives *as if* we could. Hume views cause and effect as mere custom, not the result of reasoning, but lives *as if* causality were rationally warranted. Hume has no way of verifying the continual existence of the self, but live *as if* he could. Hume says metaphysical knowledge is beyond man's reach, but acts *as if* it were not. And on and on we could go. His practice refutes his philosophy. It is one thing to profess to be an anti-metaphysician; it is another thing to try to live like one!<sup>36</sup>

What do we call a person who professes to believe one thing, but acts as if something else were the case? We call such a person a hypocrite. While calling Hume a "philosophical hypocrite" may sound quite strong, and even *ad hominem*, I use the label merely to point out that that Hume has left us with an unlivable philosophy. It would be utterly impossible to live out Hume's worldview consistently. Or to put it in a slightly different form, life in a Humean world would not be possible. We cannot live without *some* metaphysical knowledge. We cannot live in a world in which we are utterly sealed off from the metaphysical realm.

is knowledge required? Or will belief do?  
**A Final Transcendental Critique of Hume's Empiricism**

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<sup>35</sup>*Enquiry*, p. 109-111.

<sup>36</sup>At one point Hume seems cognizant of this difficulty. In questioning the inductive principle, he realizes someone may point out that, "My practice refutes my doubt." In other words, Hume acts *as if* nature were uniform, so he has no right to call it into question. He responds: "But you mistake the purport of my question. As an agent, I am quite satisfied in the point; but as philosopher, who has some curiosity, I will not say scepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference." (*Enquiry*, p. [107]). What Hume overlooks is that all men *assume* a metaphysical structure of reality. We all presuppose the uniformity of nature that makes the inductive principle possible. In other words, metaphysics is inescapable. A certain metaphysical conception is transcendently necessary. It is true from the impossibility of the contrary. If the house of human knowledge is to be what it is, it must have this foundational pillar. An in-depth discussion of this metaphysical transcendental goes beyond the scope of this paper, but more will be said about it briefly below.



Can Hume's philosophy provide the preconditions necessary to make sense out of human experience? Hume has left us with no way of knowing the future or the past. We cannot know ourselves, causality, or suprasensible reality. His empiricism is simply not rich enough to account for our conceptual structures. Unfortunately, Hume seems unbothered by the semi-skeptical conclusions he has left us with. But perhaps he has not followed through on his premises consistently enough, for if he were to do so, he would be left with utter skepticism. Not even Hume wants to go this far -- but it is hard to see how he can find any solid stopping point short of this kind of Pyrrhonism. He may not *like* Pyrrhonism, but that does not mean he can avoid it or defeat it.

When we cross-examine Hume's philosophy, does it meet its own criteria? Hume says that "all the materials of our thinking are derived from our outward or inward sentiment."<sup>37</sup> In other words, all the content our mind has to work with comes from sense experience, either from objects that appear to be outside of us, or from reflection on those sensations within us. But has anyone ever sensed this truth? Can the demands of empiricism be verified empirically? Has anyone's inward or outward sentiment ever informed him that all the materials of our thought are limited to such sentiments? How can we ever have sensory perception of such a philosophical proposition? And even if Hume does claim to have had such a perception, what of those of us who have not? The bottom line is that if Hume's view of the world were actually correct, we could never know it.

The same kind of internal critique can be applied to Hume's empirical criterion of meaning. Hume claims:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality<sup>38</sup>

Once again, we must ask: Has anyone ever had an impression that only philosophical terms rooted in experience are meaningful? Is it even possible to have experience of such a proposition? Surely Hume's criterion is non-empirical in nature. It does not result from empirical investigation, but controls it. Hume's standard, if applied to his own work, would make his own philosophy meaningless. He cannot pass his own test. In other words, he has refuted himself. It is as if Hume allowed himself an arbitrary philosophical assumption at the outset and then dogmatically asserted, "No more philosophical assumptions allowed!" But surely this is not credible.

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid*, p. 13. Obviously, Hume is targeting this criterion at anyone who would engage in metaphysics.

There are other ways in which Hume's system is internally flawed. Hume's anti-metaphysical empiricism forces him into a radical nominalism, it would seem. All he can allow for are particular events. There are no universals to bind these particulars together. There is no overarching principle that can unify Hume's world. If this is the case (and I do not see how he can evade it), Hume has repeatedly worked with capital borrowed from metaphysicians -- without acknowledging his debt to them. He has smuggled in unexamined metaphysical presuppositions.

Hume writes continually as though there were classes of certain events. For example, he speaks of past billiard ball games and loaves of bread that appeared in past experience. Or, Hume speaks as though there were a category of actions we may call "custom" or "habit." But I daresay Hume has not taken his own philosophy seriously enough when he does this. How can these categories, such as "billiards," "bread," and "custom" exist in Hume's world? What right do we have to speak this way?

Hume cannot appeal to memory because there is no "self" that can remember. Hume cannot speak as if there were a similarity between past events and present events, for who has ever had a sensation of "similarity"? Granting there is a "self," it may experience similar events, but not "similarity." If all events are loose and separate, every case must be unique and there is no such thing as "billiards" -- only one experience after another in a constant stream. For Hume to be consistent, he would have to give up all names, groupings, classes, kinds, etc. There can be no unity at all for there is no unifier! Everything would be brand new all the time. To push even harder, Hume really does not even have a right to language, for words and grammar presuppose unity that Hume simply cannot justify. He has no "super glue" with which to put the world back together. I am afraid not even a good game of backgammon can make these headaches go away!

## Conclusion

Hume rightfully earned the nickname, "The Father of Modern Skepticism." However, his philosophy is even more skeptical than he would want to admit. There is nothing to keep Hume's mitigated skepticism from collapsing into complete skepticism. At least three important conclusions may be drawn from the above analysis of Hume's philosophy.

First of all, Hume was correct to see that Continental rationalism was a failure. He is to be commended (along with other British empiricists) for trying to take philosophy in a new, more "practical" direction. With the complete collapse of rationalism in the background, Hume's attempt to construct an empirical philosophy is understandable. Rationalism had ended in subjectivism and skepticism. The goddess reason had proven to be a demoness. But Hume is proof that empiricism fares no better. It, too, runs into the dead end of subjectivism and skepticism. It also fails to provide the necessary preconditions for making sense out of reality.

Secondly, Hume serves as a useful foil in showing the necessity of metaphysics. Separating epistemology and metaphysics has disastrous consequences. Certain

metaphysical commitments must be made if man is to have knowledge of what Hume calls relations of ideas. But metaphysical assumptions are also necessary if man is to be able to know matters of fact. There is more to empirical knowledge than meets the eye. Hume wants to seal off the realm of metaphysics from human inquiry, and yet avoid utter skepticism. This is simply not possible.

Finally, Hume should have considered the role divine revelation could play in saving his philosophy. Hume's writings seem to display a certain hostility to divine revelation, but without warrant. He says towards the end of the *Enquiry*:

Divinity or Theology, as it proves the existence of a Deity, and the immortality of souls, is composed partly of our reasonings concerning particular, partly concerning general facts...its best and most solid foundation is *faith* and divine revelation.<sup>39</sup>

Divine revelation is, of course, full of metaphysical claims. They must be taken by faith because only God could know them. Man could not figure them out on his own. But that is just the point -- without such light from above, man is left in the dark. Unless Hume is guilty of the kind of anti-metaphysical prejudice Walsh was quoted referring to at the beginning of this paper, he should at least consider what revelation might offer in the way of rehabilitating his philosophy. It seems revelation might give Hume just what he needs in the doctrines of creation (God made man and gave him senses that are generally trustworthy<sup>40</sup>) and providence (God controls the universe in an orderly and uniform fashion, so man may learn from experience and rely on causal inferences).

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, p. 114.

<sup>40</sup>I recognize Hume believes it is futile to appeal to God as the foundation of trusting our senses: "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 this veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive." *Enquiry*, p. 105. However, Hume has not adequately dealt with this question. He has not even consulted divine revelation to see if it sheds any light on the issue. Perhaps the supreme Being has told us when and how to use our senses, and when to limit our trust in them. At any rate, Hume prematurely dismisses this solution.