

More work for the imagination

Hume already has the imagination

- (a) forming ideas (based on impressions) including abstract general ideas
- (b) associating ideas which resemble, are contiguous, are in cause and effect relations
- (c) expecting effects where causes present; hypothesising causes where effects present (there being no rational justification for induction)
- (d) telling us of genuine possibilities - if I can imagine it then it is possible (i.e. being a philosophical tool)

[A celebrated example of (d) not mentioned so far in these handouts:

At *Treatise* SB pp. 78-9; NN I.3.iii para 1

Hume disputes the accepted view or "general maxim in philosophy, that

whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence.

This is commonly taken for granted in all reasonings, without any proof given or demanded."

But Hume says that we have no grounds for the belief that we know this maxim intuitively. Indeed we have good grounds for not accepting it at all since we can - as he thinks - easily imagine the opposite - for example, imagine anything coming to be or beginning right here and now...

If we imagine a rabbit coming into existence right here on the table in front of us, it would always be possible to detach the idea we form of the new rabbit from the idea we have of what came before it.

We can easily imagine, Hume would say, the rabbit coming into existence *ex nihilo* (now it isn't there, next instant it is).

Even if we imagine it coming to be by being born of this mother rabbit, we can always 'imagine away' the actual mother rabbit and imagine the bunny having a different mother. How? Why?

Because - as Hume has repeatedly maintained - no idea has any intrinsic connection with any other idea.

We could even imagine this bunny coming into being as the product of a Frankenstein's monster history - made out of bunny spare parts...any idea can precede or follow any other. So, equally, it is possible, Hume thinks, for anything to come of anything - or, indeed, nothing at all.

Of course we might question

(a) whether we are even really imagining (at any point) the rabbit coming to be without a cause. *Ex nihilo* creation, after all, is not 'without a cause' (in fact what is usually associated with such creation is a super cause i.e. God) but 'out of nothing' creation - creation of the materials and what they constitute in the same act.

(b) whether imaginability really proves possibility, coherent conceivability - or just picturability. Are these the same thing?]

Now (in *Treatise* SB pp. 186-225; NN I.4.ii, pp.125-144) comes one of the imagination's biggest tasks: producing our belief in the existence and persistence of the external world (objects, bodies).

Is Hume a sceptic?

I would say - 'to different degrees, about different things':

- yes, about beliefs about matters of fact being rationally justified
- not at all, about causes (except about our knowledge of them)
- definitely, about necessary connections in nature (though perhaps not, about some powers and connections in nature)
- totally, about our *knowledge* of the external world

"nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions" (SB p.67; NN I.2.vi para 8)

SB p. 15-6; NN I.1.vi para 1- we have no idea of material substance (no possible impression - of either sense or reflection)

SB p. 232-3; NN I.4.v para 3-5 - and no idea of immaterial substance either

Hume starts *Treatise* I.4.ii by saying, in effect, 'we cannot doubt that body exists' and then asking 'why do we believe it?' This sounds odd - if we are so constituted by nature that we can't help believing in the external world of material bodies what is the point of enquiring why we believe it?

Commentators suggest

- maybe Hume means us to look for the mechanism by which nature works to produce this belief

- maybe he means it makes no sense to ask the universal question 'do bodies exist?' although it does make sense to ask 'do dogs exist?' 'do chairs exist?' etc.

Why believe body exists?

belief in body

belief in continuity belief in distinctness

= continued existence independent of spatially

unperceived mind removed

What are 'objects of perception'?

At this stage Hume leaves it ambiguous between

- 'our perceptions' (the vulgar/Berkeley)

- 'representatives' (Locke et al)

Now he starts investigating the sources of the belief in body.

In brief, his first finding is

- Neither sense nor reason gives us the belief in the external world.

- Thus - there is nothing else for it to be but a product of the imagination.

Neither our belief in continuity nor our belief in distinctness could come from the senses - how could they? (A sense perception of an object is precisely not an experience of an object continuing its existence unperceived! And neither is a sense perception of an object a perception of the object's being independent of the mind of the perceiver or spatially removed from the subject of that experience.)

Nor do these two types of belief come from reason or only boffins would have these beliefs whereas they are universal in human nature (in ordinary circumstances).

Locke and Berkeley both said -

their force and involuntariness are what makes us regard certain

impressions as 'of the objective'

Hume says 'no, the passions have force and involuntariness and we don't regard them as independent, external, objective' and we should agree - hallucinations, after-images both forceful and involuntary - but surely not continuous/distinct.

Coherence and Constancy

What makes us think our perceptions continued and distinct?

Constancy = great resemblance to each other

Coherence = compatibility with each other given covering principals of cause and effect

A gappy, interrupted series of impressions feels like a continuous-observation series, e.g. two impression series

(i) - 'a b c d e f g h' - I watch as the fire blazes up and then dies down

(ii) - 'a*b*- - - g*h*' - I nod off in the middle then imagine c*d*e*f* into gap

Hume thinks only some of our resemblant impression series are such as to make our imaginations run them together into a so-called body or material object. The rest are 'internal and fleeting' impressions. What forces us to imagine that our perceptions (sometimes) have "existed and operated" in the gaps in our impressions?

Three examples (SB pp. 196-197; NN I.4.ii para 20):

1) The squeaky door - a case where I am experiencing a familiar effect but not its cause: I hypothesise the continued-if-unperceived door as explaining the perceived effect (squeak).

2) The plump porter - hypothesising continued, independent existence for the stairs explains the porter's presence.

3) The letter from a distant friend - I wasn't perceiving the intervening ocean and postal service but hypothesising their continued existence explains this newly arrived letter in my friend's handwriting which says he is 200 leagues off.

Coherence-of-appearances to be contrasted with cause-and-effect

reasoning (C-a) reasoning (C-e)

Yes, both derived from custom, past experience but...

whereas having observed Cs regularly followed by Es (C-e)

you infer this E was produced by (an unobserved) C

or this C will be followed by an E (not yet observed)

in (C-a) we never observe bodies as well as our impressions of them

and compare to ensure they match

(and sometimes posit one in the absence of the other)

because we can't observe both - we never perceive anything but our impressions.

So much is coherence.

What of constancy?

In a continuous observation we have maximal resemblance between earlier and later impressions and so we identify them and say we are 'still perceiving the same thing' or some such.

Where there are gaps (as we would say 'when the object is out of sight') we are led to imagine identity persists.

** for identity and personal identity in detail see next handout**

We can't quite forget either

- the gaps in perfectly resemblant but interrupted impressions-series (constancy)

- the gaps in series where there are changes but repeated/familiar patterns (coherence)

despite our strong propensity to identify certain perceptions with others.

To resolve this unease? we realise continuation-unperceived isn't actually absurd for perceptions. We can "feign" that they go on existing unperceived in the gaps in our perceptions.

Feigning turns to belief

When the propensity to unite gap-filled perceptions by identity arises from some lively impressions of memory - these transfer some liveliness to the fiction, making it a belief.

We have now the vulgar (= popular) belief i.e. that our perceptions continue existing when we aren't perceiving them.

Further (philosophic) reflection puts a spanner in the works:

empirical/experimental evidence presents itself (SB pp.210-211; NN I.4.ii para 45ff.) "when we press one eye with a finger" ...our perceptions can't exist independently of us and it is just our perceptions we perceive...

The solution to this discovery? A quick retreat to representationalism.

i.e. an uneasy mix -

The vulgar belief in continued existence (pleases the imagination) [bodies are continuous]

Realisation that perceptions can't exist unperceived (pleases reason) [representatives are interrupted]

But we soon realise representationalism is untenable too!

Neither the vulgar nor the philosophic view rationally justified...there are no other options... **scepticism about the external world is undefeatable.**

This malady can only be cured by "carelessness and inattention" (SB p.218; NN I.4.ii para 57)

Is Hume right to be sceptical?

His main contention - on which the rest of his case for scepticism depends -

We only ever perceive our perceptions

i.e. all our beliefs about the world/bodies ultimately based on sense experience and this is a veil we can't penetrate.

His position is that our impressions are the objects of our perception (we sense, not material things, but only impressions.)

How establish this?

- an argument from perceptual relativity -

when we inspect an object from different angles/distances

what we see changes

the object doesn't change

therefore the object isn't what we see

- an argument from the causal facts of perception -

since your long-sighted vision of the object differs from my short-sighted one

but the object stays the same

what we see must be something other than the object itself

- an illusion (of seeing double)

press one eyeball and you will see double

since half the things you then see you know depend on you and yet aren't discernibly different in nature from the other half

the things you see are one and all perceptions

All we perceive are perceptions. QED

Are these unassailable? No, they all seem vulnerable:

- 1) Does what we see when we look from different angles/distances change? Or just how it seems?
- 2) Do you and I see different things? Or just the same thing, differently?
- 3) Are there really twice as many things seen in the eyeball-pressing example? Or just seeming to see two of everything?

The sceptical arguments all rely on interposing what the twentieth century called 'sense data' (Hume's perceptions) between the observer and the world and then querying the legitimacy of claiming there is a world beyond the sense data.

But neither how it is (seems) with what is sensed - the appearance of a thing

nor how it is with the sensing subject - how it appears to the subject

should be made into an extra entity somehow floating between subject and object.

Hume simply refuses to recognise any impression we might have as an impression of something, as he says, "specifically different" (of a different species or type) from a perception.

Is he just begging the question?