

Hume

Socrates rejected the pre-Socratic physicists because he believed that care of one's own soul--the pursuit of the good life--was more important (Ethics over physics). The Aristotle and the Stoics believed that there was a rational force in the universe, and that by understanding this rational force, by examining the essential rationality of the universe, we understand ourselves as a part of this universe (Metaphysics).

With the Descartes and then 17th and 18th century rationalists, you have a split between the universe and the individual--the universe is simply too big, we can't know it. This is not, however, a return to Socrates (and his concern solely for the individual, in opposition to the universe). Rather, the rationalists (emphasis on the mind)/empiricists (emphasis on the senses) believe that you cannot understand the universe--it is infinite--, but you can understand the universe as it is found/lived/experienced by humanity. Humanity is finite--and as finite, it is knowable. We can understand the universe to the degree that the universe is us. We, as a part of the universe, gives us a window into the universe.

For Hume, human experience is the foundation and limitation to all science, to all valid thought. It is Hume's project to describe this experience--the foundational experience--and to dispel all philosophical or scientific principles that go beyond its authority.

Hume uses an assume theory of ideas to describe human experience--all objects of the mind are called "perceptions," which, in turn, are divided into two classes: impressions and ideas. These two classes are distinguished by the experiences of feeling, or sensing, on the one hand, and thinking, or reasoning, on the other hand.

The mind is limited to the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing materials from the senses. Our ideas are only copies of impressions. Ideas are naturally faint and obscure, and they are apt to confound with other ideas. In contrast, impressions--both outward and inward--are vivid and distinct.

There is a principle of connection between ideas as they appear in memory or the imagination. These ideas introduce each other with a degree of method and regularity. According to Hume, there are three principles of connection among our ideas: Resemblance, Contiguity in space and time, and Cause and Effect.

All objects of reason may be divided naturally into two kinds: Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact. Relations of Ideas include the sciences of geometry and math, that is, all that is intuitively and demonstratively certain--the external, objective world is not needed to ascertain their truth. It is important to note that certainty is grounded in the law of contradiction--A cannot be not-A. You cannot be both A and not-A. For example, If James is a man. Then, you can claim with absolute certainty that the statement, "James is not a man," is false. For James cannot be a man and not a man at the same time.

Matters of Fact, on the other hand, are different, and their "truth" is not as great--it is not certain. The contrary of every fact is always possible. The contrary of a matter of fact does not imply a contradiction--the sun not coming up in the morning is not a contradiction; it would mean the end of life as we may know it, but it is not false.

According to Hume, all reasoning concerning matters of fact is founded on relations of cause and effect. All reasoning from matters of fact stems from experience, or a posteriori. We find particular objects conjoined in experience over and over again. We grow accustomed to feeling heat when we encounter fire, and, with time, we reason that fire causes heat--the one fact follows from the other fact. According to Hume, the notion of cause and effect is completely arbitrary--it is not, in other words, necessary--it does not imply a contradiction if A does not lead to B. Cause and effect are arbitrary--they are not a priori, there is no necessity here. The sun, by definition, does not have to rise in the morning.

All our experimental conclusions proceed on the supposition that the future will conform to the past, and from causes which appear similar, we expect similar effects. This is the sum of all our experimental conclusions.

We learn about facts from the principle of Custom or Habit, when repetition of an act produces a propensity to renew the same act, without being impelled by reasoning.

Habit alone is the principle that renders experience useful to us--without custom, we would be ignorant of all matters of fact beyond immediate sense perception. Heat and flame are always conjoined. When we encounter flame, we experience heat. The mind tends to join them, by custom. We grow to expect heat when we see flame. And, we believe, that such a relationship does exist now and expect that it will exist in the future.

When a billiard ball hits another billiard ball we expect that the second ball will move.

I can, however, imagine a billiard ball stopping when it hits another billiard ball--this image is, according to Hume, accompanied by a different feeling than the image of the second ball moving, but it does not imply a contradiction--if the second ball does not move, it is not "false." Belief--is only a feeling attached to the idea of judgment, and this feeling is separate from the feeling attached to the fiction of the imagination.

It can be argued that Hume is here claiming that nature prevails over our limited reasoning -- knowledge of the world--of matters of fact -- is not dependent on our reasoning and understanding. Rather, our knowledge is compelled through our beliefs, which are grounded in our emotions, or feelings. In our experience of cause and effect, we have only one event followed by another, and when we have similar events that are followed by other similar events, these two events become conjoined in our minds. We grow to expect the second event when we see encounter the first event--like my rabbit sitting up on his hind legs when he hears the refrigerator opens. To Charles the rabbit, the opening of the refrigerator door leads to a vegetable on his plate--A lead to B--and he has this belief, grounded in the emotions of desire and happiness, which has developed over the months of hearing the refrigerator door open and vegetables appearing.

Belief is only a feeling attached to an idea of judgment--and this feeling is separate from the feeling attached to fiction of the imagination. Cause and effect is only one event followed by another, and when we have similar event that are follow by other similar events, that is, conjoined, we grow to expect them to be conjoined in the future. This is a belief, and it is only a belief. If they are not conjoined at some point, there is no contradiction involved.