

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006  
Russell Marcus, Instructor  
email: [philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org](mailto:philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org)  
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>  
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, May 1

## I. Introduction to Hume, continued

Consider again the eight claims at Handout, I.

The first four are uncontroversial beliefs, based on empirical evidence: our sense experience, memories, testimony from others, historical chains of evidence.

We have seen that the empiricist has trouble with claim five, that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

This should not be a surprise, since many philosophers have claimed that we do not have empirical evidence for mathematical truths.

Descartes, remember, called these innate truths.

I mentioned last week that the empiricist also has trouble with claims six through eight:

- 6) The sun will rise tomorrow.
- 7) Objects near the surface of the Earth accelerate toward the center of the Earth at  $9.8 \text{ m/s}^2$ .
- 8) The future will resemble the past.

At first glance, that the empiricist has any difficulty with these should be surprising.

These are scientific truths, and science proceeds by the gathering of empirical evidence.

Locke, for example, thought that the empiricist could account for these kinds of claims most readily.

But Berkeley understood natural laws merely as general regularities, interrupted by miracles.

Our discussion of Hume will make the empiricist's problems with science clearer.

We will return to these claims.

First, though, if the empiricist has difficulties even with empirical science, why should we believe in empiricism?

That is, Locke and Berkeley took this position as something like an assumption.

Hume provides an argument.

## II. Hume's argument for empiricism.

Hume's argument for empiricism (Handout, III):

1) All our beliefs about the world are either directly derived from sense impressions, or are the result of reasoning about cause and effect relations.

2) All our beliefs about cause and effect relations are based on experience, not reason.

So, all beliefs about the world are based on experience.

That is, empiricism is true.

Hume's argument is found in §2 - §4, Part 1.

### III. Hume, the New Science, and laws of motion.

What exactly did Newton discover, when the apple fell on his head?

1) There is no natural center of the universe.

2) Motion is simply change of place, not development toward some fulfilling goal (teleology).

That is, there are universal laws of motion that apply both on Earth and elsewhere.

3) Rest is simply a limiting case of motion, not the final fulfillment of a goal.

Rest, like motion, is a normal state which doesn't need to be explained in terms of an object reaching its goal, or "final cause".

Both motion and rest can be explained by the laws of motion.

The achievements of the New Science had to do with discovering laws of motion.

For examples of laws of motion, consider Newton's three laws:

L1: Inertia: an object in motion will remain in motion, an object at rest will remain at rest, unless acted on by an unbalanced force.

L2:  $F = ma$ .

L3: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Descartes and Locke both sought to provide a philosophical foundation for science.

Newton said that the principles of explanation, the laws, are to be "deduced from the phenomena." (Handout, IV)

We see lots of objects moving, and stopping, and we generate hypotheses about why this happens.

We see that in all E1, E2, E3.... a law applies.

We conclude that in all similar cases, this law must apply.

Some terminology:

Induction: Deriving a general law from particular cases (generalizing).

Deduction: Inferring a particular case from a general rule or law.

Induction, the process described above, is the foundation of all science.

Hume argues that it relies on analogy, p 69.

This is because we have to consider when cases are similar, in order to know when a law applies.

So, laws of motion are generalizations from experimental evidence.

The phenomena, the  $E_n$ , are sensory experiences.

This is Hume's empiricism.

For Descartes, we reason to these laws.

For Hume, we base them in principles of induction over sense experiences.

### IV. The Contents of the Mind: Ideas and Impressions

According to empiricism, only our sense experience furnishes our minds with its contents.

Hume divides the contents of the mind into ideas and impressions, p10.

An impression is a sensation at hand, a vibrant idea, like a hand on a burning stove, or the sound of a voice, or what you are looking at right now.

An idea is the thought of that burning sensation ten minutes later.

The mind has simple ideas and complex ones.

Simple ideas are derived directly from impressions.

We can also have original ideas, ones that we construct ourselves, like those of unicorns.

These are complex ideas, made up of combinations of simple ideas.

Hume does admit of a limited exception to the general rule that all the contents of the mind are simple or

complex ideas, or impressions.

We might be able to fill in a missing shade of blue, pp 12-3.

We will call his policy 'Hume's Rule': All knowledge must trace back to original impressions; see p 13.

Locke tried to provide an empiricist foundation for all of science. See Book I, Chapter I, §1.

Berkeley showed that Locke's principles could not support materialism.

One might try to defend science as descriptive of the world of ideas, even though Berkeley would not.

Essentially, Hume is carrying out Locke's project of accounting for all of our knowledge without appealing to Descartes' innate ideas.

Hume wants to clarify the limits of the empiricist project.

What kinds of beliefs can the empiricist not account for?

Hume's claim is that the process of science itself is indefensible.

The problem for empiricists is even worse than Berkeley depicted.

## V. Overthrowing Science

Scientific generalizations which do not limit themselves to past observations go beyond sense evidence.

Descartes argues that evidence of reason can allow us to make the inductive leap.

That will not work for Hume, obviously.

We can not go beyond the evidence of our senses, pp 93-4.

So, all scientific generalizations which do not limit themselves to observed evidence are unjustified.

Physical laws like Newtonian gravitation, or the gas laws, go beyond experimental evidence.

Even the existence of a physical world is a scientific hypothesis generated by experience, p 104, but also p 107.

Hume agrees with Berkeley on the primary/secondary distinction and impossibility of proving the external world on the basis of experience, but rejects recourse to God, p 105.

The God hypothesis goes beyond legitimate inference, goes beyond the data.

"When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in 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. (*Enquiry*, Hackett, 114)