

Notes on Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

“Is faith a basis for belief?” “How much can we rely on personal experience as a basis for belief [in religious claims/scientific claims/whatever...]?” ...these are questions that David Hume had some strikingly original and subtle answers for.

As we'll see following Exam I, when we study epistemology, David Hume was one of the great *empiricists* of the English-speaking tradition (though David Hume was Scottish!) Empiricists argue that *experience*, and *not reason alone*, constitute or form the basis of all knowledge.

For David Hume, to appreciate the role of experience, we must separate what kind of reasoning we perform when we're dealing with closed, formal, and artificial domains (like math) where we (in principle) possess all the information. We must distinguish this from open, informal, and natural domains (like experience) in which we *never* possess all the information. In the first case, we can use *deductive* reasoning like logic (what you just learned), in which we can make universal claims (like A, and E forms) as well as specific claims (like I and O forms) with absolute certainty. On the other hand, in the case of experience, all we can ever do is use *inductive* reasoning (moving from specific claims to general claims.) And when we make such general claims, we can *never* be 100% certain of them. So for example, just because in every observed instance I've experienced a crow that happens to be black, this does *not* enable me to make the general law-like claim: “All crows are black,” with any certainty, based on these experienced instance. We're not God. We *don't* possess *all* the information in the world. Therefore, all universal claims, like the kind we make in logic, are unwarranted, when applied to what we can experience.

So how does this relate to religion? Hume simply points out that rationality (conceived as a logical enterprise) *cannot* serve as a basis for religious faith. This is most dramatically illustrated by Demea's position: he outright states that human reason cannot fathom such issues pertaining to faith. Therefore, faith doesn't need reason. The mysteries faith deals with exceed rational or philosophical discussion.

Demea is articulating a *mystical* position. It's a 'consistent' one, insofar as ruling out the possibility that faith can be subject to philosophical scrutiny or analysis. It's obviously not a very satisfying one, philosophically speaking, since it's a non-starter: It blocks the possibility of any illuminating rational discussion.

Philo, of course, is also 'consistent,' and advocates a rationalist position. In his view, his logic and reason cause him to reject matters of religion and faith. Cleanthes wants to have it both ways: give a rational account for matters of faith.

According to Hume, or at least one way to interpret what Hume is saying here, all these three characters represent tendencies of reasoning that are ultimately harmful or incomplete, because they miss certain basic points. *Of course*, as Philo points out, there exists no repeatable ‘data’ of experience, like in the case of science, in which we can base our religious faith on. (As Hume reminds us in other writings, by definition a ‘miracle’ is something with virtually zero likelihood of happening.) But as Hume later shows in the *Dialogues*, even in the case of science, much of our reasoning is by ‘habit,’ or ‘custom’ (or association) for reasons depicted above: Scientific reasoning is inductive: moving from the specific to the general, and so by nature is never 100% certain, like logic applied to closed, artificial systems.

So what Hume is trying to say here is that logic and reasoning alone, while providing a necessary framework, are alone never *sufficient* .. our conclusions, in matters outside of logic, are motivated by *passions*. For Hume, a *passion* isn’t just some emotion...it’s a deep psychological predisposition based on a variety of characteristics, that moves us to act and behave in certain basic ways. We have passions for security, communication, order, etc. The legitimacy of a particular passion cannot be proven by deductive reasoning alone. The best one can do, is show that a passion may be *reasonable*.

In the case of the *Dialogues*, Philo thinks that religious faith cannot be reasonable to have, due to the lack of evidence supportable by observation. Cleanthes’ position is more nuanced. What *is* his position? Read on! Below is a brief synopsis of Hume and an exposition of some passages in the text.

David Hume (1711-1776) The Genius of Scotland: A Brief Summary

Scotland, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, witnessed some remarkable minds that determined the subsequent course of Western history. (James Watt: technology, Adam Smith: Economics, David Hume: philosophy/economics/history.)

David Hume, like England’s predecessor John Locke, wrote philosophy “on the side.” Locke earned his living as a physician. Hume was trained in law, worked as a librarian, and served political posts before his successful publications of *A History of England* gave him financial reward and independence . Aside from his four major publications in philosophy (*Treatise of Human Nature*, [1739 (vol 1), 1740 (vol 2)], *Essays: Moral and Political* [1741-2] *Enquiry into Human Understanding* [1750], *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (DNR)* [1777, posth.] This only scratches the surface: he also published a highly successful and influential *History of England* [1754, 1756, 1759, 1762.]

Hume figured himself an epistemological “Copernicus,” directing our understanding away from what’s “out there in the world” to the *source*: human understanding¹. He described his *Treatise* as a study on “what objects our understanding were...fitted to deal with.” He advanced a highly nuanced and subtly *skeptical* position which can be summarized in the following central claim:

- **H1: We cannot *found* (i.e. establish) knowledge of the world upon sensory experience, we can only examine the psychology of our beliefs about the world...though it’s an “irresistible and fortunate part of our nature to have such beliefs.”**

What is this “irresistible and fortunate part of our nature?” Philo (basically the mouthpiece of Hume’s ideas) articulates it in the outset: “Experience, therefore, proves that there is an original principle of order in mind, not in matter. From similar effects we infer similar causes.” (Part II, p.61)

This pithy statement essentially “nuked” most of what was considered essential in Western philosophy.²

Here’s why: First, a couple of definitions:

- **D1: A statement is known *apriori* if its truth or falsity does not depend on experience, except in terms of defining the statement’s terms.**
- **D2: A statement is known *aposteriori* if its truth or falsity depends on how things have been, are, or will be, as a matter of contingent fact.**

For example, consider the statement: “ $2 + 2 = 4$.” Its truth doesn’t depend on experience, except as a means to *define* the concepts “2,” “+,” “=,” “4.” Once I know what these are, I don’t need to refer to experience. The truth is built into the conceptual architecture of mathematics.

On the other hand, the statement “8 people missed PHIL 100 Sect 0207 discussion section Feb 10, 2006” is *aposteriori*. Its *truth* not only obviously depends on a set of contingent facts (a certain time and place) but I can only be *certain* of this claim by performing some kind of empirical test: taking the roll. There’s *no other way*. I *certainly*

¹ This can be thought of “Copernican” because the basis of knowledge *depends on the dynamic faculty of understanding*, and *not* on what’s *fixed* (presumed to be static) out there in the world. (Analogous to the Earth’s *moving* versus the previous belief of its ‘fixed state.’)

² It represented what historians describe as *the epistemological turn*...a philosophical position which puts *epistemology* as its central enterprise, displacing metaphysics. In other words, questions concerning the ‘ultimate nature of reality’ were subsumed under questions concerning *how we come to know reality*. Immanuel Kant, in reply to Hume, can be seen as the leading figure of this epistemological turn. But as Kant noted, Hume “shook me out of my dogmatic slumber,” leading him to write his monumental *Critiques*. In other words, no Hume, then no Kant.

can't come to this realization by reasoning *apriori* on the definition or 'essences' of PHIL100, Feb 10, 2006, students, and form some kind of syllogism thereon.

Now all this seems painfully obvious. Then again, as the saying goes, "genius is the art of restating the obvious (in a new way)." Hume's central notion was:

- **H2 : *Apriori* reasoning is useless when applied to statements concerning facts of the physical (experienced) world.**

From the *Enquiry*: "If we reason *apriori* anything may appear to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may...extinguish the Sun, or the wish of man to control the planets in their orbits."

Again, seems painfully obvious. Like in the previous example about taking class roll. No amount of *apriori* reasoning could *ever* get me to even *form* the statement: "Eight people missed PHIL 100 Sect 0207 discussion section Feb 10, 2006."

But recall Philo's statement again:

"Experience, therefore, proves that there is an original principle of order in mind, not in matter. From similar effects we infer similar causes."

...in the light of some other statements he makes soon afterward:

"Can a conclusion, with any propriety, be transferred from parts to the whole?" (PartII, p.62)

What Philo is articulating, here and elsewhere in the *Dialogues*, is another central Humean claim, which derives from H2:

- **H3: The only reliable reasoning about the experienced physical world is based on *induction* (the hallmark of *aposteriori* reasoning) and *not* on *deduction* (the hallmark of *apriori* reasoning.) Induction, however, proceeds *not* from reason, but from *habit*.**

This is what made Hume's skepticism so subtly devastating. Keep in mind, that in Hume's time, the "science" of deductive reasoning was pretty much limited to syllogistic logic—i.e., what this course covered the first weeks. Nowadays, logic (and therefore deduction) is *far* more powerful, and *is* applied in a variety of "empirical" sciences like computer science, economics, etc.³ (H3 is expressed, for example, in rather elaborate form, by *Cleanthes* (ironically) in Part IX, page 76.⁴)

³ With the aid of *probability theory*, which didn't exist in Hume's time.

⁴ "I shall not leave it to Philo..to point out the weakness of this metaphysical reasoning...I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact...prov[ing] it by any arguments *a priori*..." (p. 76, beginning at bottom left column)

On the inadequacy of *apriori* deduction, (i.e. H2) Philo remarks (ironically in an implied syllogism!) “Our ideas reach no further than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations.” (Part II, 59) [Implied conclusion: “We can have no ideas of divine attributes and operations.”⁵]

But why is induction based on habit, and not reason? In naked, unqualified form, inductive reasoning is based on the following “inference.”

**All (observed, experienced) P are Q
Therefore, all P are Q**

This move is obviously unwarranted, it’s an example of the **fallacy of composition**, which reads: “If *some* P are Q, then *all* P are Q.” ☹ (wrong!!!)

But we perform these (logically wrong) maneuvers all the time in our *aposteriori* assessments of the world. For example: “Joe Schmo has been showing up late for work every day since I hired him. Therefore, I can’t rely on Joe Schmo to be punctual, look at his track record.”⁶

This kind of reasoning is an example of the “irresistible and fortunate part of our nature...to have such beliefs” mentioned in H1. For Hume, they’re based on the mind’s *laws of association* connecting “atomic” items of sense-data, in direct analogy of Newton’s *laws of force* connecting atoms.

Strictly speaking, for Hume, the mind habitually associates *ideas*, which are the “traces,” or “imprints” made by the “atoms” of sense-data. Consider Philo’s remark to Cleanthes, for instance:

“In all instances which we have ever seen, ideas are copied from real objects...You [Cleanthes] reverse this order, and give thought the precedence. In all instances which we have ever seen, thought has no influence upon matter...except to have an equal reciprocal influence upon it. No animal can move immediately anything but the members of its own body; and indeed, the equality of action and re-action seems to be a universal law of nature.” (Part VIII, p. 75)

Note in the above passage the reference to Isaac Newton’s Third Law (“To every action [a contact force] there’s an equal and opposite reaction.”) Hume strove to base his philosophy so much on Newtonian science, because, quite simply, Newtonian science was basically *the* science of his time.

⁵ As seen is class, this can be translated into EAE₁ standard form, where: S = “human ideas” M: “things in human experience,” P: “things describing divine attributes and operations.”

⁶ Recall (footnote 4) that probability theory hadn’t been developed in Hume’s time. Today, if we wanted to be careful, we’d qualify our remark about Joe Schmo with some kind of degree of confidence (I.e., “I can be 95% confident that Joe Schmo is a slacker who is incapable of showing up on time.”) There’s a whole science behind these claims that didn’t exist in Hume’s time. We call this statistical science “hypothesis testing.”

Now we come full circle. The above citations from Philo are directed against Cleanthes' *natural theology*, i.e., theology based on natural reason (a prime example being the design argument.) But what's good for the goose, is good for the gander. In other words, Hume's attack on natural theology applies equally well to natural philosophy (i.e. science—most notably, *physics*, despite Hume's admiration thereon.) Cleanthes sets up this claim when he rhetorically addresses Philo:

“And if the argument for theism [i.e. natural theology] be, as you pretend, contradictory to the principles of logic; its universal, its irresistible influence proves clearly, that there may be arguments of a like irregular nature. Whatever cavils may be urged; an orderly world...will still be received as an incontestable proof of design and intention.” (Part III, p 65)

Cleanthes bases his conclusion (for natural theology) on the premise of an orderly world, a scientific claim. But Philo swipes the rug underneath him (of course!) *There is no rational warrant for an orderly world...the mind spins its web of order purely on the basis of habit and custom, in associating ideas :*

“Yes! Cried PHILO...we have other earths...Are not the satellites moons, which move round Jupiter and Saturn, and...round the sun? **These analogies and resemblances, with others...are the sole proofs of the Copernican system.** And to you it belongs to consider, whether you have any analogies of the same kind to support your theory.” (Part II, p 63)

So as the boldfaced sentence indicates, any general inductive claim (like some law of physics) is unwarranted by H3. Science is based on the mind's customary associations, which are analogies, whole sole truth is based on contingent facts about the world. So in this respect, we shouldn't kid ourselves with notions like “scientific laws” that presume themselves universal out of our immediate experience.⁷

This stated, however, as the last sentence indicates, science is the lesser of the evils insofar as its associations are *based* on observed fact. The claims of natural theology, though beginning in statements about the experienced world, infer *outside* the world in its talk of causes. “When I enquired concerning that cause of that supreme reason and intelligence, into which [Cleanthes] resolves every thing...*We must stop somewhere...nor is it ever within the reach of human capacity to explain ultimate causes...The matter seems entirely arbitrary...*” (Part V, p 72)

⁷ For Hume, all scientific laws are fundamentally based on a *principle of causation*: “every effect there is a cause.” In the *Treatise* and also in the *Enquiry* Hume demolishes the general claim, by arguing that it's just a contingent association the mind makes between individual bits of sensory experience. You see traces of Hume's arguments against causation in his reference to “occult powers” in the last paragraph of page 68 (Part IV) “It was usual with the Peripatetics [early Greek philosophers]...when the cause of any phenomenon was demanded...to have recourse to their *faculties* or *occult qualities*...” For Hume, however, to elevate causation into some general, metaphysical principle is equivalent to postulating in occult qualities.

Hume's subtle skepticism produced an even subtler and more powerful response: Immanuel Kant's. Kant found Hume's claims about habitual association unacceptable in the case of science. Kant basically argued that physical laws like Newton's Laws *can* be universal generalizations, *because* they are *a priori*, but they're also *synthetic*. For instance, a law like " $F = ma$ " (force = mass x acceleration) is *a priori* because of its mathematical character. But it's also *synthetic*, in the sense that it gives us *new conceptual information* about the world. How? Because, the law gives us a definition of force through a surprising *synthesis* (i.e., not obvious) of the concepts of mass and acceleration.

...So, in the face of this skeptical attack, what becomes of religion?

This comprises the last third of the Dialogues. Hume is articulating, in nuanced and dramatic detail, part of his theory of *passions*:

"In this point, said PHILO, the learned are perfectly agreed with the vulgar; in all letters, sacred and profane, the topic of human misery has been insisted on with most pathetic eloquence...The poets, who speak from sentiment, without a system, and whose testimony has therefore the more authority, abound in images of this nature." [X, p. 78]

"Labour and poverty, so abhorred by every on, are the certain lot of the far greater number: And those few privileged persons, who enjoy ease and opulence, never reach contentment or true felicity...Not satisfied with life, afraid of death. **This is the secret chain, say I, that holds us.**" [X, p. 79]

These passages carry almost an Old Testament tones: *Ecclesiastes* and the story of *Job* come to mind. The conceit of natural theology in posing its unwarranted claims glosses over, among other things, the problem of evil. Philo outlines four circumstances that perpetually give rise to the inescapable and irreducible fact of evil and suffering:

- 1.) "[T]he contrivance or economy...by which pains, as well as pleasure...are employed to excite creatures into action, and make them vigilant in the great work of self-reservation." (XI, 84)
- 2.) "[T]he conducting of the world by general laws...seem[ing] nowise necessary for a very perfect Being." (ibid.)
- 3.) "[T]he great frugality with which all powers and faculties are distributed to every particular being...nature seems to have formed an exact calculation of the necessities of her creatures; and like a *rigid master*, has afforded them little more powers...than what are strictly sufficient to supply those necessities." (p 85)
- 4.) "[T]he inaccurate workmanship of all...principles of the great machine of nature."

In short, at the risk of sounding glib, we're thrust in a world seemingly autonomously dictated by laws rendering "the natural state of the life of man...nasty, brutish, and

short.” (to quote Hobbes, the 17th century philosopher) Whether in the constant presence of hazard (4), treacherously capricious assaults on our health and well-being that nonetheless work in ‘lawful’ (consistent) manner (2), or the competition induced by scarcity (1, 3)), the Manichean⁸ argument at least seems the more plausible. (XI, p. 86)

So where do we go? Remarks Cleanthes, nearing the end of this exhausting debate, following Demea’s angry departure:

“My inclination...[is that] Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all.” (XII, 89)

And Philo?

“To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.” (XII, p. 90)

To which the narrator adds:

“I cannot but think that Philo’s principles are more probable than Demea’s; but those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth.” (XIII, 91)

It would prove too easy and misrepresentative to cynically assume Hume adds this stuff in the end to placate church authorities. For one thing, the Dialogues were published posthumously. The church of England, in the Enlightenment though still relatively powerful, clearly did *not* have the kind of authority as prevalent in the Medieval.

So why would Hume conclude thus? Here’s the subtlety: Cleanthes principles approach nearer to the truth...of ...**the “irresistible and fortunate part of our nature to have such beliefs.”** We *cannot help* associate thus, as long as we’re honest and admit that theological (and moral) insights spring from our *psychology*. There’s no metaphysical fact of the matter, though.

This is the part of the essence of Hume’s skepticism, applied to religion (and implicitly to ethics) their truth stemming from *solely* from “an original principle of order in mind, not in matter” For ethics and religion, the content is *emotive*, i.e. rests on *passions*.⁹ Though ‘true’ (in accord with our nature) they lack cognitive or strictly logical/propositional content.

Again, however subtle Hume’s skepticism and psychologizing was, perhaps Kant’s response here was even subtler. Kant argued that the nature of faith, for instance, was an

⁸ The view held in antiquity that life is a perpetual struggle between transcendent good and an evil power, using us as pawns.

⁹ It’s important to keep in mind the Hume articulated a very elaborate theory of passions that I’m not discussing here. The gist, however, is just because ethics/religion are essentially constituted by passions does *not* mean that ethics and religion are *mere* passions.

antinomy. In other words: we're set up to ask questions *from* reason that ultimately *transcend* reason. This is how reason works. The question of the justification of faith, like the existential question: "Is life worth living?" is an example of an *antinomy*. Reason is equally adept (or inept) at answering in its favor or opposition. Reason, in its characteristically dialectical process, eventually poses questions that reason cannot answer. This 'weakness' actually proves to be its greatest strength here: this is what makes human reason an *open* system.

Rational dogmatists or empirical skeptics (like Hume) miss this point, so in their own way, presume otherwise. Thus they simultaneously demand too little and too much of what reason can deliver, presupposing, in their own ways, that reason is a closed system. For the rationalist, such 'closure' implies too much, so their speculations end up 'running amok in the transcendent' (to use Kant's phrase.) For an empiricist like Hume, his associationist psychology closes up reason, rendering it somewhat impotent in a skeptical straightjacket.