

Notes for October 27, 2006

- **Follow-up remarks on Locke, Berkeley Hume:**

Prof. Odell contrasted the arguments of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in the mirror of general themes of skepticism (both ancient and modern.¹) All four of the above mentioned philosophers used aspects of skepticism to varying degree and in some form or fashion in their arguments, but it would be erroneous to call them ‘skeptics.’ Only Hume was, in a general sense, a skeptic. To a far lesser extent, it could be argued that Lock was skeptical concerning properties of material substance, insofar as he admitted we have no direct sensory access of them. (We ‘infer’ primary qualities, i.e. the actual properties of material substance, through the causal mechanism described by the causal theory of perception – Recall Oct 20 notes.)

Here, I’ll just offer some brief historical remarks to give an indication of why, in particular, Locke, Berkeley, Hume argued and concluded *what* and the *way* they did. Consider the following remarks from Sir Isaiah Berlin², an eminent historian and philosopher of the late twentieth century:

When some branch of human inquiry, say physics or biology, won notable success by employing this or that new and fertile technique, an attempt was invariably made to apply analogous techniques to philosophical problems...mathematical techniques—deduction from ‘self evident’ axioms according to fixed rules, tests of internal consistency, *a priori* methods, standards of clarity and rigor proper to mathematics—were applied to philosophy also [think of Descartes here]...This led to notable successes and equally notable failures, as the over-enthusiastic and fanatical application of techniques rich in results in one field, when mechanically applied to another, not necessarily similar to the first, commonly does. (p. 14)

Berlin here is hinting that the underlying *method* that all the prominent 17th and 18th century philosophers were employing, namely those resembling natural science (or then described as ‘Natural Philosophy’) in spirit if not in letter, may have been based on a false analogy. Or at the very least, the *enthusiasm* by which Descartes, for instance, embraced the successes of his breakthroughs in mathematics, or Locke, in his admiration of chemist Robert Boyle, or Berkeley and Hume, in their deference to Isaac Newton, may have caused all these thinkers to clumsily apply or misapply such methods in inappropriate areas of enquiry. Is it *really* the case that the providences of metaphysics, epistemology, psychology could be subjected to the same overall manner of enquiry that Newton had demonstrated so successfully with his corpuscular & force theory in the case of planets, stars, and falling apples? What

¹ See pp 5-6, of Odell’s “Handout on God and Skepticism,” main PHIL100 course website <http://www.glue.umd.edu/~wkallfel/PHIL100Fall2006/index.htm>

² *The Age of Enlightenment: The 18th Century Philosophers*, Meridian Classics: New American Library, 1956. Sir Isaiah Berlin

captivated and enthralled these 17th and 18th century philosophers so much was the epistemic and metaphysical promise of *reductionism* that the successes of these new sciences offered. That is to say, that any complicated entity could be understood as merely being an aggregate of simpler entities, governed by precise, mathematical laws.³ One explains the whole, so to speak, as being simply the sum of its parts, in the reductionistic world-view.⁴ Reductionistic science was indeed the ‘new theology’ that dominated philosophical thinking in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The British empiricist philosophers, whose work gradually came to dominate European thought, applied this conception to the mind: The mind was treated as if it were a box containing mental equivalents of the Newtonian particles. These were called ‘ideas.’ These ‘ideas’ are distinct and separate entities, ‘simple,’ i.e. possessing no parts into which they can be split, that is, literally atomic...dropping into the mind like so many grains of sand into an hourglass; there, in some way, they either continue in isolation, or are compounded...in the way [or so it was thought] in which material objects...are compounded out of molecules or atoms. (ibid., p. 18)

A rather curious and questionable picture, to say the least! But such a picture conformed naturally to reductionistic science. Even Descartes, for that matter, though he wrote his *Meditations* before Newton, ascribed to some form of reductionism, insofar as he believed all our representations are based on ‘clear and distinct’ ideas or concepts.⁵

Hume, perhaps is most explicit about this. Thoughts are simply ‘molecules’ of simpler ‘ideas,’ which are themselves derived from ‘impressions.’ (190-191, Bratman). Impressions, or what we experience as ‘sense-data,’ are distinguished by their character of ‘liveliness,’ (or intensity) when compared to the ‘fainter’ ensuing idea.⁶ (191) For example, I receive an especially lively impression registered as a burning sensation on my finger. My ensuing (fainter) idea is ‘ouch! I burned the ... out of my finger!’ This is followed by less lively, and more complex combinations of ideas like: ‘I should be more careful, I didn’t realize that cup was so hot, etc...’ According to Hume, all these ideas combine by laws (analogous to Newton’s laws of force) of association (§ III, pp. 192-193)

³ This view is often described as a *mechanistic* philosophy, for obvious reasons. Machines, after all, are mere composites of simpler entities governed by precise laws.

⁴ This is contrasted with the *emergence* outlook, which maintains, so to speak, that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, or at the very least, that properties of the whole are not reducible to properties of the parts. Emergence has been a topic enjoying somewhat of a revival in philosophy and in science in recent decades.

⁵ See pp 2-3 Oct 13 “Notes on Descartes’ *Meditations*:
<http://www.glue.umd.edu/~wkallfel/PHIL100Fall2006/WK/index.html>

⁶ Hume uses ‘liveliness,’ an admittedly subjective criterion, so he wouldn’t have to talk about external objects and their associated primary qualities, as Locke did, producing the tensions between unobservable material substrate versus observable ideas prevalent in Locke’s empiricism. Hume wasn’t too happy with this standard, admitting, *a’ la* skeptical dream arguments, that it’s possible to experience impressions far livelier in dreams than in some instances when awake.

Berkeley, as described in detail in the Oct 20 notes (“Notes on Berkeley, Locke, and Hume”) should also be construed as an empiricist and a reductionist in the extreme. His reductionism is betrayed by his denial of the existence of a ‘general’ notion like ‘matter’ (p. 156—recall my critique of his claim on page 4, Oct. 20 notes). And of course, his extreme empiricism echoes strongly Locke’s worry that material substrate cannot be directly observed—causing Berkeley of course to reject this concept altogether (“I have no reason for believing the existence of Matter...” p.170, recall discussion in pp. 3-4, Oct. 20 notes) Hence, analogous to Newton’s universal gravitation, Berkeley stipulates God as the master-perceiver, SuperMind, etc., to ensure regularity and coherence in all one’s ideas/sensations. Again, writes Berlin:

When Berkeley criticizes Locke...what he is principally attacking is the notion that there can be an idea which is not an absolutely determinate image...‘abstract ideas’ [like ‘material substance’]...seem to Berkeley a contradiction in terms, because if they are ideas, they must be concrete entities, and cannot also be abstract...not having any particular properties given to the senses or the imagination. Whether his attack on Locke is fair or not, what is characteristic to both [Locke and Berkeley] (and to Hume and many other contemporary empiricists...) that the mind is a container within which ideas...circulate and form patterns as they would in a complicated slot machine; three-dimensional Newtonian space has its counterpart in the inner ‘space’ of the mind over which the inner eye—the faculty of reflection—presides. (ibid., p. 19)

- **Discussion Highlights**

It’s hard to read Hume and not feel troubled...Hume’s skepticism in particular seems to raise more questions than it answers. Indeed, it was the great philosopher Immanuel Kant who credited Hume as having “awakened me out of my dogmatic slumber.” I touch on some of the points/questions raised:

What is the origin of all our thoughts? According to Hume, all our concepts are produced by ‘laws of association’ in the imagination (employing principles like Resemblance, Contiguity – p192) based ultimately on sensation, or the liveliest of impressions. So in a fundamental sense, all concepts are based in the imagination, ultimately derived from sensations. So even fictitious ideas like ‘golden mountain’ are produced in the imagination by associating lively impressions like ‘gold’ with ‘mountain.’ Ayal Robkin (Sect. 0205, 10:00am) expressed doubts concerning this picture—his doubts stemming from a rather central debate between rationalists and empiricists: conceivability or imaginability, which is more basic to thought? For instance, Descartes argued rather forcefully that our thoughts are based on whether or not we can *conceive* of something, and *imagination* isn’t necessary for that. (For instance: I can *conceive* of concepts like infinity, a million-sided polygon, etc., without being able to, or for that matter *having to imagine* such notions.) Matthew Langbehn (sect 0205) on the other hand found the Humean notion plausible, and pointed out that for Hume, ‘imagination’ need not necessarily literally imply mental visualization.

How do understand Hume's critique of causation? "All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause* and *Effect*" (194) sayeth Hume, who proceeds to undermine the deductive certainty of such a concept, everywhere. Causation is nothing more than association of 'contiguous' (temporally succeeding) events...no 'secret powers' (198) connect such events. It is simply a matter of 'Custom or Habit' (200) to assume, for example, that some connection exists between an impression of a struck match, followed, in time with an impression of a lit match. "[T]here is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea...of a necessary connection." (208) For instance, hitting a billiard ball with another: "What alteration has happened to give rise this idea of *connexion* [depicted in the transmitting of motion from one billiard ball to the next]? Nothing but that he [the observer] now *feels* these events to be *connected* in his imagination..."(212)

So, apart from undermining the deductive certainty of *any* law-like claim that supposedly has general applicability (like Newton's laws), undermining the deductive certainty of causation dissolves the supposed connection between material and mental substance, to the extent that Hume was skeptical concerning both kinds. There is only experience: of which sensation (lively impressions) arise, producing (by 'custom') derivative ideas. That's it.

So, for instance, Jordan Adair (Sect 0203, 12:00) asked the rather pertinent question concerning what would Hume have to say about stepping in the path of an oncoming bus? Isn't it a foregone conclusion that I'll get run over and (at best) seriously injured, most likely fatally? In other words, isn't there a most obvious connection between such two events, that we'd have to agree would go beyond some mere "connection in the imagination?"

Well, strictly speaking, Hume would answer: "No, it's not a foregone conclusion, [that you'll be seriously or possibly fatally injured if you step in the path of a speeding bus] *if by "foregone conclusion" you mean deductive certainty.*" All 'matters of fact' are ultimately connected by chains of association based on *inductive*, not *deductive* reasoning. Inductive reasoning is based on regularities we experience up to the present (181). One can never make a general claim, that's deductively certain, based on inductive reasoning. Bertrand Russell illustrates in his 'unfortunate chicken' example, who by induction, comes to believe that his future will resemble his past: leading a happy chicken life free to run about on the farm, eating his feed the farmer so generously provides him with every morning.⁷ Well this generalization stops the day the farmer decides to chop off the chicken's head! So, strictly speaking, for Hume it is logically possible that the future may not resemble the past, and that there could conceivably be some instance in which nothing may happen. On the other hand, as Hume as quick to point out, this is really an academic issue. The observed *regularities* in nature, contingent as though they may be (i.e. possessing no logically necessary character) *are nevertheless never arbitrary*. We must not confuse contingency

⁷ We may assume this is a traditional farm, where the chicken isn't "factory farmed!"

with arbitrariness. This is the basis of Hume's 'shrug.' Deductive certainty doesn't refute skepticism, but the contingent patterns and regularities in nature render such skepticism irrelevant in the face of experience.

Johnathan Miller (Sect 0203, 12:00) followed with asking if there's anything in Hume's philosophy that he considered *necessary*? Does Hume tell us, in other words, that everything is a matter of contingency? Is it a contingent claim, for instance, that "2+2=4" and/or that one day in the future 2+2 may not equal four?

Well, no, according to Hume. For Hume, what was deductively certain were simply matters of logical necessity...tautological statements, for instance, like " $x = x$ " (or " x is identical with itself") or more sophisticated logical claims, like for instance, rules of valid argument forms. The key point, however, for Hume, is that such matters of *a priori* necessity are devoid of empirical content: they pertain to logical *form* only. On the other hand, all statements containing any informative claim referring to experience are 'matters of fact,' for Hume, and not 'matters of logical necessity.' Matters of fact are (at best) based on induction, not deduction. Conversely, one can never argue from a standpoint of a priori reasoning alone to make a posteriori claims concerning empirical (or generally metaphysical) facts (so-called). This is what, for instance, Hume thought was wrong about using some a priori valid argument to claim that God exists (like Anselm's ontological argument).

Jared Smalley (Sect 0207, 1:00) asked a question which touches on a fundamental problem Hume wrestled with: "How is learning possible, in the Humean account?" On the face of it, we could tell the story that learning takes place according to lively sensations producing novel ideas, themselves being associated in novel ways.

But there is one problem here: "learning" presupposes the existence of an *agent* or "self" that does the learning. Hume did not see how such a coherent entity emerges, in his empirically skeptical philosophy. It's just associations of ideas, but such chains of associations alone won't yield up anything like a stable entity that does the experiencing, namely, the self.