HUME (1711-1776)

With Berkeley’s idealism, some very uncomfortable consequences of Cartesian dualism, the split between mind and experience, on the one hand, and the body and the physical world on the other, was starting to become obvious. Hume drew the logical consequences from the initial Cartesian starting point. He carried through the empiricist epistemological critique to its final extreme. Hume drew out the implications of Cartesian dualism, the representational theory of knowledge, the mind as a mirror of nature, and the empiricist view of knowledge and came up with a thoroughgoing skepticism, not just the hidden or modified skepticism of Locke, but a skepticism the likes of which had not been seen since the ancients.

In sharp contrast to Bishop Berkeley, Hume considered himself something of a pagan. He established quite a reputation in Paris, where he was the bon vivant of the Enlightenment, and in Edinburgh where he was denied a university position because of his atheism.

As a young man, while most of his colleagues were focused on the conflict between the new science and traditional religion, Hume devoted his study to the ancient world and classical philosophy. Hume was nevertheless very much an Enlightenment figure, one of the most brilliant of the Enlightenment enthusiasts. His skepticism was, paradoxically, the clearest example of solid, self-critical Enlightenment thinking. He came to the conclusion that reason, both in science and in philosophy, had overstepped its reach. The best thinking of the Enlightenment could not accomplish what it had set out to do.

Hume’s skepticism was tempered by a naturalism. What reason could not accomplish, he thought nature would do for us anyway. Even if reason is somewhat limited, nature provides us with enough good sense to make our way in the world. If reason could not guarantee morals, human nature is equipped with adequate sentiments to behave reasonably well toward one another. Hume thus put his faith not in reason and knowledge, but in human nature. Morality didn’t need to be grounded on certain knowledge, nor did it require a religious foundation. If reason could not justify belief in God, then belief in God wasn’t necessary anyway. If such beliefs could not be grounded, no matter, “commit them to the flames.”

Hume’s Conception of the Mind: Impressions and Ideas
Hume accepts Locke and Berkeley’s view that we never directly perceive anything but perceptions
“nothing can be present to the mind but an image or perception”
his major concern of the Enquiry is to give an analysis of the different types of ideas we have and then draw out the implications

begins by observing that not all perceptions are of the same type distinguishes between sense-perceptions, on the one hand, and imagination, memory, and thoughts on the other these are to be distinguished not on the basis, as Locke tried to do, by maintaining that some are caused by external objects and some just products of the mind’s own activity
they are thus not distinguished in terms of internal/external cause
but rather simply by their different degrees of “force or vivacity”

“we may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species which are
distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity” (Enquiry, p. 539)

*simple* ideas or perceptions are faint but exact copies of impressions
*complex* ideas or perceptions are just compounds of simple ideas

*impressions* are thus only lively, vivid perceptions—or simply *sense-perceptions*
thoughts, ideas, memories, imagination are thus only faint copies of impressions
“all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones”
(Enquiry, p. 539)

Is Hume right here?
It may be legitimate to simply define “impressions” as our more lively perceptions, and “ideas”
as less lively perceptions, but is it the case that all cases of seeing, hearing, etc are more lively
than all cases of remembering, imagining, and thinking?
Hume says that “The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation.”
Is this so?

Since Hume is insistent that no reasoning *a priori* can ever establish a matter of fact, it would
seem that, on his account, there can be no *a priori* reason why all impressions are more lively
than all imagining and thinking, even if it is the case that the latter are copies of the former.

Is Hume right in his contention that all of our perceptions or ideas are either sense-perceptions or
copies of them?
he attempts to give two arguments for this view:
1) an analysis of all of our ideas would show that they can all be traced back to *simple* ideas that
are copied from some feeling or sentiment
he asserts that this can only be refuted by demonstrating at least one idea not traceable to this
source
this is Hume’s version of Locke’s challenge by which Locke also tried to defend the empiricist
thesis about the origin and content of all of our ideas

But does Hume ever really allow a counter-instance to be presented?
Hume will focus his analysis on causality
Is it possible that our idea of causality is not simply a copy of an impression?
(This would be Kant’s response)
Hume never seems to allow this possibility for he goes on to say that any term that cannot be
traced to a corresponding impression is meaningless.
thus he is either reduced to dogmatism or must give up his empiricist thesis about the mind

2) talks about cases of a defective organ of sense
a blind man can form no notion of color, a deaf man of sounds
Hume offers one possible contradictory phenomenon: gives the story about a man who has enjoyed good sight and has “become perfectly acquainted” with all colors except for one shade of blue. He acknowledges that if such a person were shown all shades of blue but that one, all in a contiguous order from darkest to lightest blue, that the individual would be able to notice the gap and would be able to imagine the missing shade without ever actually having seen it. But this one instance, he asserts, is not enough to make any difference.

Another problem: he regards simple ideas as faint but exact copies of impressions. “our thought is a faithful mirror and copies its objects truly” (Enquiry, p. 539) How can something be an exact but faint copy?

Hume goes on to talk about the “association of ideas” and elaborates three principle of association by which all ideas are related to one another:
1) resemblances
2) contiguity
3) cause & effect

**Hume’s Skepticism**
Hume’s skepticism is based on a number of doctrines that had developed so far in modern philosophy:
1) he accepted Descartes’ dualism of mind and body, and the distinction between experience and the world to which it refers.

2) he was committed to empiricism, agreeing with Locke’s general orientation. All knowledge, he agreed, must come from experience.

3) he agreed with Berkeley’s criticism of Locke, but rejected his idealist solution. He accepted Berkeley’s conclusion that human experience was indeed of the phenomenal only, of sense impressions. So he accepted Berkeley’s argument against Locke’s representational realism, on a material substance as the cause of our ideas. But he found Berkeley’s reliance on a spiritual substance, God, as the cause of our ideas from sensation, equally without justification.

4) he accepted the distinction we saw in Leibniz between two types of truths: truths of reason, which are necessary truths, or analytic truths; and the truths of fact, contingent, or synthetic truths.

This is what is often referred to as Hume’s ‘fork’:
“All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, ‘Relations of Ideas,’ and ‘Matters of Fact’” (Enquiry, p. 542)

Hume condemned the arguments for religion because they were neither of these. Part of Hume’s aim, consistent with his empiricist predecessors, was to refute the metaphysical claims of philosophical rationalism and its deductive logic. On his account pure reason could
only yield the analytic, or necessary truths—tautologies. Reason alone could not assert a truth about the ultimate nature of things.

However, it turns out that not only the metaphysical claims of the rationalists, but also many of our most basic beliefs, the belief in causality, the principle of induction, beliefs which seem to be basic to knowledge itself, beliefs which seem indispensable for scientific inquiry to proceed at all, also fail to pass this test, and are neither relations of ideas or matters of fact.

Is Hume right about the ‘fork’? Is Hume justified in asserting that “the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible,” and that therefore no existential proposition can be certain? take the proposition “I exist” Descartes and Leibniz thought this intuitively certain

what about Hume’s proposition that ‘nothing can be present to the mind but an image or perception’? Hume seems to regard this as indisputable and certain yet surely it is not just a ‘relation of ideas’ but a matter of fact

what about the law of noncontradiction? Is it just a relation of ideas with no application to matter of fact?

**The Causal Connection**

Hume’s concern with ‘matters of fact’ concerning particular things other than what is currently present in the mind leads to the problem of causality: “what is the nature of the evidence which assures us of any real existence or matter of fact beyond the present testimony of the senses or the record of memory” (Enquiry, p. 542)

this leads directly to the matter of causality for all reasoning concerning matter of fact is founded on the relation of cause and effect it is only by means of this relation that we can make any judgment beyond the evidence of memory or senses

yet how do we arrive at our knowledge of cause and effect? Not by reasoning *a priori*, but entirely from experience, when we find particular objects constantly conjoined with each other only experience can show which events are associated with other events every effect is distinct from its cause thus no *a priori* reasoning can a particular object must have this particular effect we only see the constant conjunction, not the necessary connection

“When I see, for instance, a billiard ball moving in a straight line towards another, even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me as the result of their contact or impulse, may I not conceive that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight
line or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give preference to the one which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference” (*Enquiry*, p. 544)

Causality depends upon:
1) contiguity in space
2) succession in time
3) constant conjunction
4) some *necessary* connection between cause & effect

do we ever see the necessary connection by which there is a constant conjunction

we observe spatial contiguity, succession in time, and constant conjunction if we observe the event a number of times, but do we ever observe the necessary connection?

Think of examples where we observe spatial contiguity, succession in time, and constant conjunction, but where this clearly doesn’t add up to cause & effect:

we never observe the necessary connection
this requirement of the necessary connection leads to the principle of the uniformity of nature (principle of induction): the idea that the future will be like the past
we have observed that event A has caused B in the past
we may have observed it many times
but the notion of necessary connection depends on the claim that the future definitely will be like the past

*Principle of Induction*

The assumption that the future will be like the past is what is called the ‘Principle of the Uniformity of Nature,’ or what has since been called the ‘Principle of Induction’

this Principle makes the causal argument valid:
Matson’s example:
1) in the course of nature everyone who has drunk hemlock has died
2) the course of nature *always* continues uniformly (principle of induction)
3) therefore, the next person to drink hemlock will die

all are reasoning from past to future is based on principle of induction
for Hume this principle is also not analytic
we can at least conceive of the future being different from the past,
of some change in the course of nature
e.g., we can at least intelligibly describe a situation in which the sun does not rise tomorrow

if not analytic, can it be supported from experience?
How could we ever argue from experience that the future will be like the past?
thus, the uniformity of nature can be demonstrated neither by reason nor by experience, neither a priori nor a posteriori
thus there is no external justification for the principle of induction
thus just as in poetry and music, in philosophy we must follow our taste and sentiment

His point is not that the future will not be like the past
we assumes that we do and must operate on the assumption that it will be like the past
the point is that this assumption is just that, an assumption

thus all our reasonings employing the category of causality,
and therefore all our conclusions concerning matters of fact and existence in the world are not certain, and thus not knowledge
we are left with a leap of faith
a matter of custom or habit

summing up the analysis of causality:

begins with a distinction between sensory impressions and ideas:
sensory impressions are the basis of any knowledge
they come with a force and liveliness that makes them unique
ideas are faint copies of sense impressions
one can experience through the senses an impression of the color blue
and on the basis of this impression have an idea of that color

the question is: what causes the impression?
If every valid idea has a basis in a corresponding impression
then to what impression can the mind point to for its idea of causality?
Hume’s answer: None!

If the mind analyzes its experience without preconception
it must recognize that all its supposed knowledge must come from a continuous chaotic volley of sensations

and on these sensations the mind imposes an order of its own
the mind cannot really know what causes the sensations
for it never experiences “cause” as a sensation
it experiences only simple impressions and causality is not one of them
the mind assumes a causal relation only through an association of ideas
only a habit of the human imagination
all that man has to base his knowledge on are impressions in the mind
he cannot assume to know what exists beyond those impressions

thus the presumed basis for all human knowledge, the causal relation, is never ratified by direct human experience
the mind only experiences impressions that suggest they are caused by an objective substance existing independently of the mind  
but the mind never experiences that substance, only the suggestive impressions  
cause must be recognized as merely the accident of repeated conjunction of events in the mind  

the apparent causal necessity in phenomena is the necessity only of subjective conviction  
it has no objective basis  
one perceives the regularity of events, but not their necessity  

science is possible, but it is a science only of the phenomenal only, of appearances registered in the mind, and its certainty is a subjective one, determined not by nature but by human psychology  

even the ideas of space and time are ultimately not independent realities as Newton assumed  
they are instead simply the result of a habit of association of ideas  
the notions of space and time are abstracted by the mind from repeated experience  
at bottom the mind experiences only particulars  
any relation between these particulars is woven by the mind into the fabric of its experience  
in other words, the mind experiences with impressions only a buzzing confusion  
the mind must organize these impressions in order to make sense of experience  

thus the intelligibility of the world reflects the habits of the mind, not the nature of reality  

if knowledge is based on experience, and induction cannot be justified, then man can have no certain knowledge.  

In terms of Plato’s fundamental distinction between “knowledge” and “opinion”, Hume’s conclusion was that we were going to have to be content with opinion. We never do get out of the cave, all we can ever know are the shadows. . . . Plato held sense impressions to be faint copies of ideas, Hume held ideas to be faint copies of sense impressions. . . .  

Mind, Body, The External World  
what does Hume say about the mind, the self, the body, things, and the external world generally?  

How do his views about our ideas of these topics lead beyond the empiricist thesis of the origin and content of our ideas, to which he is committed?  

In a number of passages he seems willing to speak of nature and the world as something independent of our ideas  
even though, because we never directly perceive anything other than our ideas, we can never know anything of it  

he does speak at times of a “correspondence” between our perceptions and the external world
even though he agrees with Berkeley’s dissolution of Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities
he seems willing to allow that it is both reasonable and meaningful to hold
that our perceptions have some sort of unknown source which is independent of them

seems to accept in some sense Descartes’ dualism
as he is willing to speak of both mind or soul and body
and to speak of them as different, but connected in some way
though their true natures and the manner in which they are related remain unknown
a “mysterious union of body and soul”
does not seem to conclude from our ignorance about these matters
that it is meaningless to speak of them

it is obvious why he holds that we can never have knowledge
of the existence and natures of these things
given that we never directly perceive any of them

section XII of the Enquiry
endorses many of Berkeley’s critical arguments and negative conclusions
seems to agree with Berkeley when he states:
“the existence which we consider when we say this house and that tree are nothing but perceptions in the mind”
also agrees with Berkeley’s critique of Locke’s causal theory of perception
but does not argue that Locke’s theory is false, even nonsensical, as Berkeley does
rather maintains a more modestly skeptical position of simply acknowledging that we have no grounds whatever for asserting it to be true
does not follow Berkeley in turning to a spiritual cause of our perceptions
he simply concludes we have no knowledge about the source of our perceptions

seems that he is willing to allow some version of a causal theory of our perceptions
in that he acknowledges “a certain unknown, inexplicable something as the cause of our perceptions”
we don’t have knowledge of the cause
nor even knowledge that there is something independent of our perceptions

thus, though we may speak of an external world independent of our perceptions
and of the existence of our bodies as things independent of our minds
we can never have any knowledge of either
nor can we have knowledge either of the existence or nature of our minds
except insofar as we have some sort of direct experience of them
about all such matters we must remain silent

thus his position is not materialism or immaterialism but skepticism
we are entitled to speak neither of material nor spiritual substances
we experience no substance underlying the qualities
thus his main departure from Berkeley is in arguing that we must take the same position Berkeley took regarding material substance with spiritual substance as well and thus comes to question the notion of the *self*.

Thus agrees with Locke who held that the notion of spiritual substance stands or falls with the notion of material substance except instead of holding that they both stand as Locke held Hume concludes they both fall.

Famous quote “I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing *but* the perception.”

We never have a single impression that corresponds with the term ‘self’ the term ‘self’ simply refers to a certain collection of impressions we have thus, the mind just is a bundle or collection of perceptions this is at least what his doctrine about the origin and content or our ideas compels him to say yet he does not stop here.

Just as the notion of causality involves more than the notion of constant conjunction of events and requires the notion of a necessary connection our ideas of objects and the self, as ideas of substances and not just qualities, involves the notions of continuity and identity.

This raises a problem for Hume given his thesis about the origin and content of our ideas the way he tries to handle the problem is similar to his treatment of the problem of causality.

In the case of causality he does say we have an impression corresponding to the idea of necessary connection but it is not objectively perceived but rather, subjective—a feeling or impression produced by a disposition to think one event necessarily follows another.

Same sort of thing happens with our ideas of objects and the self the notions of continuity and identity do not correspond to anything objectively perceived they do correspond to subjective impressions—certain *feelings* established in the imagination [does this suggest something of a prelude to Romanticism?]

In the *Treatise* Hume emphasizes the importance of memory: “As memory alone acquaints us with the continuation and extent of this succession of perceptions, it is to be considered upon that account chiefly as the source of personal identity” (*Treatise*, p. 530)

Thus Hume holds that our ideas of objects and the self are not utterly meaningless he holds true to his empiricism in finding these ideas to be copies of impressions but they are subjective impressions the continuity and identity of objects and the self just like the necessary connection between causes and effects.
turns out to be something like fictions of the imagination
they are contributions of the mind to experience
not derived from sense-perception itself
(in this view Hume is not very far from Kant)

But Hume still thinks of the mind as a passive mirror
the mind is only a bundle of impressions
but his theory of knowledge and perception requires constant reference to the activity of
something that which is not itself a sense-perception or bundle of sense-perceptions

this is a point where Kant took a radical modification of Hume’s position to be necessary

Kant would find Hume’s theory questionable in holding that our ideas of causation, objects, the
self, etc. to be copies of subjective impressions
Hume must say this to be consistent with his empiricist thesis that all of our ideas are copies of
impressions
one can grant his basic point that these notions are not derived directly from sense-perceptions
but rather are imposed by the mind
and yet reject his contention that they are copies of impressions at all
they are perhaps ideas of mental dispositions

if this is right then, as Kant saw, there are important exceptions to the empiricist account of the
origin and content of our ideas

Religion
Hume’s Dialogues marks a decisive turning point in philosophy of religion
devastates natural theology
thus leaving only a choice to believe or not to believe,
either the choice of unbelief or a leap of faith
afterwards religious faith must be essentially a non-rational affair

the Dialogues present three arguments against arguments for the existence of God:
I. The Ontological Argument (either Anselm or Descartes’ version)
Descartes’ Version
1) I have an idea of God as a perfect being
2) it is more perfect to exist than not to exist
Thus, 3) God exists

Applying Hume’s fork what would you expect Hume would say to this argument:
Is it a Relation of Ideas or a Matter of Fact?
If a Matter of Fact it must be traced to some sense-impression
but there can be no sense-impression of this God as God is a being who cannot be known by the
senses, thus the argument cannot be based on a Matter of Fact
Is it a Relation of Ideas?
The first premise is a relation of ideas
but in Hume’s view Relations of Ideas tell us nothing about the world
they only tell us about the relations between ideas in the mind
the idea of God’s existing and God’s actually existing are two different things

II. Descartes’ argument that only God could be the cause of my idea of God
1) I have an idea of God
2) Only God has sufficient reality to cause my idea of God.
Thus, 3) God exists

How would Hume attack this argument?
Like in the Ontological Argument Descartes moves from (1) the idea of God to (2) God’s actual existence. But instead of treating the idea of God as a definition, in this argument Descartes treats the idea of God as the effect whose only possible cause is the really existing God.

Hume, of course, attacks the argument because it is based on the concept of cause and effect just as there is no way of observing the necessary connection underlying causality
Hume will argue that analyzing the idea of God cannot establish anything with regard to the cause of the idea
all Descartes can discover in analyzing his idea of God is information about his idea of God

Hume’s main target in the Dialogues is devoted not to these Rationalist arguments for he thinks these arguments can be disposed of pretty easily
he devotes most of the Dialogues to undermining the Empiricist or Cosmological argument that is based on experience or observation not from pure reasoning
this is the famous argument from design

III. The Argument from Design
1) the universe exhibits the features of a wondrously perfect design
2) a wondrously perfect design could only have been created by a divine intelligence
Thus, 3) a divine intelligence (God) exists

or another formation
1) the universe is like a clock
2) a clock has a maker
Thus, 3) the universe has a maker (God)

in Hume’s day, the argument from design, due to Newton’s influence, had become the dominant proof of God’s existence
Newton seemed to have discovered God’s design
Despite his admiration for Newton, Hume held that there was nothing in Nature that testified to a divine designer
Hume attacks the argument from a number of angles

1) the apparent order and “design” of the universe may have been the result of much trial and error rather than intelligent design. Thus, even if the argument proves the world had a maker, it certainly doesn’t prove a maker such as the Christian conception of God.

But were this world ever so perfect a production, it must still remain uncertain, whether all the excellences of the work can justly be ascribed to the workman. If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea must we form of the ingenuity of the carpenter, who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel, when we find him a stupid mechanic, who imitated others, and copied an art, which through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving? Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out: Much labor lost: Many fruitless trails made: And a slow, but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the art of world making.

2) Even if the world was the product of design, it might be the product of many designers. Thus the argument does not accomplish what those who put it forth intend: it may prove a plurality of gods just as much as the one god.

A great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a commonwealth: why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world? . . . You will find a numerous society of Deities as explicable as one universal Deity, who possesses, within himself, the powers and perfections of the whole society.

3) the universe is not at all wondrously designed, but instead falls far short of “intelligent or benevolent design.” this brings up the problem of evil

Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children.

Summary
Basically, Hume follows Berkeley in his criticism of Locke, but then throws out Berkeley’s belief in God, thus leading empiricism and the whole development of modern philosophy into a deep skepticism. He reaches the troubling conclusion that our most basic beliefs, upon which all our knowledge is founded, cannot be established by reason. Nor can reason provide the foundation for morals. All we have is our natural sentiment or sympathy and a natural concern for utility, and with these we do the best we can in constructing a just society. Like Aristotle, Hume ends up relying upon a good upbringing, cultivation of traditional virtues, a conservative respect for tradition. As in his aesthetics, in which taste is subjective, and therefore the best one can do in aesthetic judgment is to rely on the collective judgment of the experts, the moral judgment too appeals to sentiment and the good sense of expertise.
Questions
1. What is Hume’s basic philosophical position? How does his philosophy compare with his empiricist predecessors Locke and Berkeley? What did he take the importance or the role of philosophy to be?

2. What are four assumptions of his predecessors that leads Hume to his skeptical conclusions? What is the difference between two interpretations of Hume’s skepticism—the soft or hard Humean skepticism?

3. Explain Hume’s notion of the mind and his theory of human knowledge. What is the distinction Hume makes between two kinds of perceptions—impressions and ideas? How does Hume distinguish between simple and complex perceptions?

4. What is meant by “Hume’s fork”? How does Hume use this fork to not only undermine metaphysical and theological beliefs but also the notion of the causal connection? Why is the notion of the causal connection so important and why, thus, was Hume’s skepticism so deeply troubling to the Enlightenment?

5. What is Hume’s solution to the doubts he raised concerning the relation of cause and effect and thus our knowledge of the world? What common thread here ties his epistemological conclusions with his aesthetics, ethics, and his politics?

6. Hume follows Berkeley in criticizing the notion of material substance. How does he go beyond Berkeley in dismissing the notion of spiritual substance as well? What consequences follow for the notion of personal identity and the immortality of the soul?

7. Explain Hume’s devastating critique of the argument from design for God’s existence in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. 