

David Hume and Skepticism

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Enlightenment Epistemology

- Time focused on the idea of human progress → that humanity is ever working towards more perfect knowledge, more perfect political systems
- Advancements in natural sciences
- Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, 1687, attempts to bring together various physical occurrences into single system, such as planets and motion on earth
 - Stimulated intellectual thought and activity in the eighteenth century
 - Encourages European philosophers to think about nature as orderly and with consistent laws that are controlled by mathematics → we are able to know these laws and understand the world
- Conception of nature changes during this time → rise of modern science
- Enlightenment epistemologists tasked with participate in creating new knowledge of nature → create framework in which to interpret this new knowledge

David Hume (1711-1776)

- Philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment
- Best known today for skepticism, empiricism, and naturalism
- *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) → wanted to create naturalistic psychology
- Together with Locke, rejected innate ideas → all knowledge comes from experience
- Is later going or question the validity of sensory experience in *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)



Skepticism challenges this new knowledge

- Enlightenment generally characterized as the triumph of reason and empiricism → but there is tension in regards to what can count as true knowledge
- David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) best reflect the challenge of skepticism
 - John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)
 - G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1704)
 - David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)
- Rather than seeing Hume as an aberration, better to see his work as important outcome of questioning the authority of belief that is central to the Enlightenment
- Several types of skepticism explored by Hume → skeptical of both sensory perception and rational enquiry
- Skepticism of new scientific confidence → even if scientific rules/principles are certain... their application might be faulty because of the imperfection of our faculties (therefore, scientific conclusions should not be considered certain)

Responding to Descartes

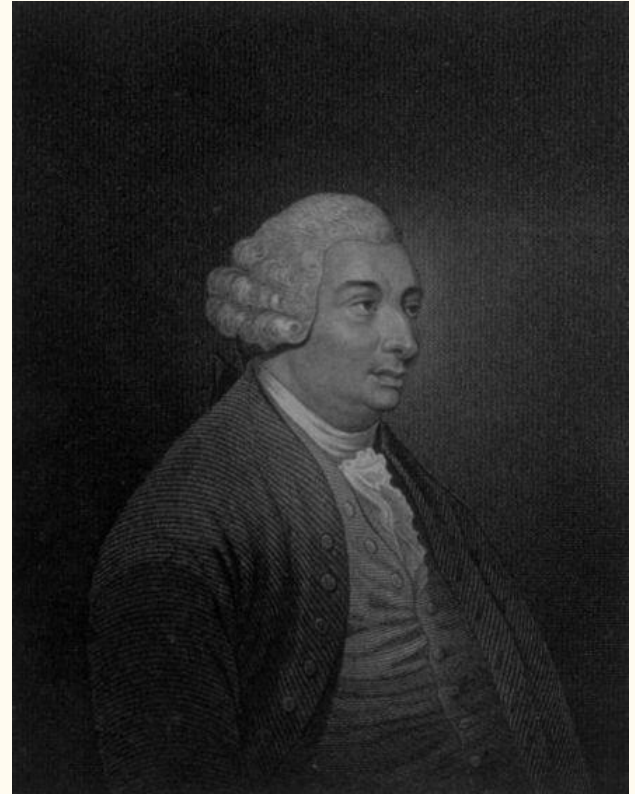
- Descartes said that in order to find true knowledge we had to first go back to the very foundations → skepticism
- Descartes outlines the skeptical position so well, that his attempted redemption of knowledge falls short
- Hume impressed by Descartes's skepticism, unimpressed by his rationalism
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Against Reason. Against Experience.

- Hume: “all knowledge degenerates into probability” (*Treatise of Human Nature*, I.iv.i)
- All judgements, assertions, certainties of conclusion.... These are all just judgements that we have to assess → since we must question everything this leads “at last [to] a total extinction of belief and evidence”.
- Challenges inductive reasoning and causal reasoning
 - Causal reasoning: we take past observations as evidence for judging what might happen in the future in similar situations → this assumes that the future will resemble the past → essential assumption relies on circular justification → nothing rational in causal or inductive judgements
 - Also calls into question experience it self as a foundation for knowledge → challenges even Newtonian science
- Experience can only tell us about the present moment and rationality is mere probability

Can any epistemology withstand critical scrutiny?

- Once skepticism is unleashed → difficulty in holding conviction in any epistemological authority
- In *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume finishes with despair about the possibility of true knowledge → conflicts with optimism and confidence we normally associate with the Enlightenment
- However, also important to perhaps consider this skepticism as part of an essential undercurrent of Enlightenment philosophy



Can we step beyond first principles? Are there even first principles?

“There is a species of scepticism, antecedent to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Descartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgement. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject” (Hume, XII.i.116).

Challenging Descartes

“To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit. If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention, that, if the external world be once called in question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes” (Hume, XII.i.120).

Mitigated v. excessive skepticism

- **Mitigated skepticism:** doubting certain kinds of knowledge, but perhaps not all
 - Epistemic claims regarding causation (causal knowledge), existence of self and God
 - Modern example might be having doubt about government reports regarding 9/11 attacks
- **Pyrrhonism or excessive skepticism:** Ancient Greek philosophical school which rejects dogma, encourages suspension of belief and judgement over all beliefs
 - Inspired by Pyrrho and Timon of Phlius 4th century BCE
 - Known in the Renaissance through the skeptical works of Sextus Empiricus (2nd-3rd centuries CE)
 - Sextus Empiricus's works were republished and redistributed during the Renaissance and played important role in development of early modern epistemology

Is skepticism useful?

“The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupation of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals. [...] For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour” (Hume, XII.ii.126-8).