

Week 11 Notes

Philo 101 Online | Hunter College

Daniel W. Harris

1 Hume's Empiricism

The 18th-Century Scottish philosopher David Hume is probably the most influential empiricist who has ever lived. According to Hume, the vast majority of what we know we get through the senses, and the vast majority of our beliefs that cannot be justified via the senses should not be thought of as knowledge, but as mere opinion, the product of unjustified habits of mind.

Of course, Hume recognizes that many of our beliefs, if they were justified at all, would have to be justified by something other than sensory evidence. On this, Hume agrees with rationalists like Plato and Descartes. But Hume disagrees about what conclusion we should draw from this fact. Plato and Descartes conclude that many of our beliefs that aren't justified by sensory evidence are justified in some other way, and so still count as knowledge. But Hume is an empiricist: he argues that the majority of our beliefs that aren't justified by sense evidence therefore aren't justified at all.

Hume recognizes that we have a tendency to believe many things that are not directly supported by sensory evidence. For example, Hume points out that although we often witness one event preceding another and conclude that the latter was caused by the former—i.e., that the former *made* the latter happen—our senses do not grant us access to facts about causation itself. One of his examples is billiard balls (which are similar to pool balls). When we see one ball strike another, and then the second ball moving away, we conclude that the first ball caused the second ball to move. But all we can *see* is one event (the movement of the first ball) followed by another event (the movement of the second ball). We can't *see* the connection between these two events. Rather, we *infer* that there is some connection. But why do we infer it, and what justifies the inference?

This line of thought is quite similar to Descartes' thought about the wax: although our senses reveal hard wax, followed by melted wax, they can't tell us about the connection between these two things. We must *infer* this connection. In other words: our belief that it is the same wax that continues to exist in its solid and liquid forms is not justified by sensory evidence alone. So, what justifies our inference? The answer, according to Descartes, is that the mind alone allows us to infer the identity of the wax over time.

But this answer doesn't satisfy Hume. He agrees that nothing in our sensory experience could justify the belief that one billiard ball causes the other to move, as well as our belief that one and the same piece of wax changes states. But he does not think that our justification for these beliefs therefore comes from the mind alone. Rather, he thinks that these beliefs may not be justified at all. They could turn out to be the result of mere habits of mind—or, as Hume puts it, “customs”—which we ultimately have no good reason to rely on.

Here is a key passage in which Hume makes this point (from pp.12–13 of the assigned reading):

I venture to assert, as true without exception, that knowledge about causes is never acquired through a priori reasoning, and always comes from our experience of finding that particular objects are constantly associated with one other. [When Hume is discussing cause and effect, his word 'object' often covers events as well as things.] Present an object to a man whose skill and intelligence are as great as you like; if the object is of a kind that is entirely new to him, no amount of studying of its perceptible qualities will enable him to discover any of its causes or effects. Adam, even if his reasoning abilities were perfect from the start, couldn't have inferred from the fluidity and transparency of water that it could drown him, or from the light and warmth of fire that it could burn him. The qualities of an object that appear to the senses never reveal the causes that produced the object or the effects that it will have; nor can our reason, unaided by experience, ever draw any conclusion about real existence and matters of fact.

The proposition that *causes and effects are discoverable not by reason but by experience* will be freely granted (1) with regard to objects that we remember having once been altogether unknown to us; for in those cases we remember the time when we were quite unable to tell what would arise from those objects. Present two smooth pieces of

marble to a man who has no knowledge of physics—he will not be able to work out that they will stick together in such a way that it takes great force to separate them by pulling them directly away from one another, while it will be easy to slide them apart. (2) Events that aren't much like the common course of nature are also readily agreed to be known only by experience; and nobody thinks that the explosion of gunpowder, or the attraction of a magnet, could ever be discovered by arguments *a priori*—i.e. by simply thinking about gunpowder and magnets, without bringing in anything known from experience. (3) Similarly, when an effect is thought to depend on an intricate machinery or secret structure of parts, we don't hesitate to attribute all our knowledge of it to experience. No-one would assert that he can give the ultimate reason why milk or bread is nourishing for a man but not for a lion or a tiger.

But this same proposition—that causes and effects cannot be discovered by reason—may seem less obvious when it is applied to events of kinds (1) that we have been familiar with all our lives, (2) that are very like the whole course of nature, and (3) that are supposed to depend on the simple perceptible qualities of objects and not on any secret structure of parts. We are apt to imagine that we could discover these effects purely through reason, without experience. We fancy that if we had been suddenly brought into this world, we could have known straight off that when one billiard ball strikes another it will make it move—knowing this for certain, without having to try it out on billiard balls. Custom has such a great influence! At its strongest it not only hides our natural ignorance but even conceals *itself*: just because custom is so strongly at work, we aren't aware of its being at work at all.

This chain of thought has struck many philosophers as eminently reasonable. Given that our “faculty of judgment” can't discover a thing's causal powers without systematically investigating those powers by means of sensory experience, it can't be that we have innate knowledge of such things. And so it must be the experience of one type of event constantly following another—what Hume calls “constant conjunction”—that leads us to infer that there is a causal connection between events of these two kinds.

Does this show that we *can* have knowledge about how events cause other events, but that we just need to have a *lot* of experience in order to do so? Hume does not think so. Ultimately, he argues that we are unjustified in all of our beliefs about

cause-and-effect, like our beliefs about the future, and, indeed, all of our beliefs about things that we can't directly experience. All of these beliefs, Hume argues, depend on habits of mind (or "customs") which aren't justified or justifiable.

This is a form of philosophical skepticism that is very different from the kind that Descartes gave us. Descartes tried to show—if only temporarily—that we can't trust any of our beliefs that are based on sensory evidence. Hume accepts that we can have knowledge based on direct sensory evidence, but argues that our other beliefs about matters of fact (i.e., about the outside world) are unjustified. And for Hume, this is not merely a temporary kind of skepticism; it is his final position on the matter.

Your task for this week is to try to understand Hume's argument for this skeptical conclusion—a very famous argument that philosophers usually call "the problem of induction". To do this, you will have to carefully read the assigned excerpt of Hume's *Enquiry into Human Understanding*, paying special attention to Section 4, "Sceptical doubts about the operations of the understanding" and Section 5, "Sceptical Solution to these Doubts". This is a complex argument, and it will be difficult for you to understand and summarize it. You may have to read the text more than once. (You may also want to read Jeff Speaks' commentary on the text, which I think is helpful.) But your struggle with the text will be worth it: Hume's argument is one of the most powerful in the history of Western thought, and the skepticism to which it gives rise is one of the most difficult to defeat that we know of.