

Foreshadowing natural selection: Hume and the limit of Locke's atomism
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ABSTRACT

It is argued that Hume's preoccupation with the problem of skepticism stems from his acceptance of Lockean atomism, and that Hume's solution to the problem is a form of naturalism that foreshadows Darwinian theory while remaining inchoate for want of a mechanism comparable to natural selection. The poster presents textual support for this conclusion, drawn from the *Treatise of Human Nature, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

INTRODUCTION:

The history of British epistemology from Hobbes to Hume can be viewed as an effort to work out the epistemic implications of atomism. The traditional view of Hume as a skeptic (e.g., Stove, 1973; Strawson, 1992; Fogelin, 1985)* stems, I would argue, from his rigorous acceptance, in Book I of the *Treatise*, of the epistemic limitations imposed by the atomist ontology. However, the psychological account of cognition developed in Book I as well as the theories of human emotion and ethical sensibility articulated in Books II & III and in his later work, rests on more holistic assumptions. Hume's discussion of cognition focuses less on the necessity for skepticism than on its limits and his treatment of reason as a kind of feeling or instinct opens the way for an understanding of human psychology which, as Norman Kemp Smith (2005) has suggested, is more consistent with the views of nineteenth century naturalists, including Darwin who explicitly acknowledged a debt to Hume (Darwin, 1980), than with those of the logical positivists.

* Reference list accompanies the printed handout.

THE NATURAL LIMITS OF SKEPTICISM:

The apparent skepticism of Book I of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* results from Hume's adherence to Locke's dictum that only particular things exist, (*Essay*.3.3.1; 14) which leaves no way to affirm the reality of relations between elementary things. Such a formulation makes it impossible to posit the real existence of complex ordinary objects or of causal processes in the external world including any putative causal relations between externally existing entities and our own sense perceptions. Such a disjunction between the internal world of perceptions and the external environment encouraged skepticism or as in the case of Bishop Berkeley (1988) an assertion that unperceived objects do not exist.

Hume accepted the psychological implications of the basic Lockean theory of ideas, including the doctrine that the objects of our direct experience include nothing but perceptions: discrete ideas and impressions perceived by the mind (*T*.1.2.6.8; 67). He did not, however, feel an obligation to say anything about the sources of our perceptions: "As to those impressions, which arise from the senses . . . 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. *Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose*" (*T*. 1.3.5.2; 84. Emphasis added.). Hume restricted his discussion to the law-like regularities of the human mind, which he found to be determined by two basic and unavoidable beliefs: one an automatic tendency to accept the evidence of our senses as to the apparent permanence of ordinary complex objects, and the other the inescapable impulse to reason on the basis of the principle of causation.

As to the first, he observes in the *Treatise* that: "tis in vain to ask, Whether there be body or not? That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (*T*1.4.2.1; 187). This observation is repeated in the first *Enquiry*: "It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct or prepossession, to repose faith in their senses; and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe, which depends not on our perception" (*EHU*.12.1; ¶ 118, p151). And of the second, he says: "there is nothing existent, either externally or internally, which is not to be

considered either as a cause or an effect; tho' 'tis plain there is no one quality, which universally belongs to all beings, and gives them a title to that denomination" *T*1.3.2.5; 75); "custom [i.e., repetition] . . . determines the imagination to make a transition from the idea of one object to that of its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to a more lively idea [i.e., belief] of the other" (*T*1.3.14.31; 170).

Qua ideas, beliefs in general as well as our belief in object permanence and causality are only distinguishable from mere supposition in terms of the vivacity of the ideas involved (*T*.1.3.5.7), and, as Kemp Smith (2005) has observed, the problem of skepticism arose, for Hume, from the fact that, given his Lockean atomist assumptions, these two fundamental beliefs tend to contradict and undermine each other as perception tells us of real complex objects – chairs, tables etc. – while reason says that all we can know are discrete perceptions. Hume tells us in the *Treatise*, "opposition betwixt our reason and our senses; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body" (*T*.1.4.4.15; 231). And in the first *Enquiry* he observes, ". . . objection to the evidence of sense or to the opinion of external existence consists in this, that such an opinion, if rested on natural instinct, is contrary to reason, and if referred to reason, is contrary to natural instinct" (*EHU*. 12.1; 155; ¶ 123).

But the force and necessity of both beliefs is so strong that whatever skepticism arises from their contradictory tendencies can't, psychologically, take root because human nature will not allow it: "nature breaks the force of all skeptical arguments" (*T*. 1.4.1.12; 187). He notes that, "Thus the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless, esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations" (*T*.1.4.2.1; 187). "Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this total scepticism" he says, "has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty,

which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable" (T1.4.1.7; 183).

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STATUS OF REASON

But, while our mental processes do not allow us to doubt either causality or object permanence in general, the epistemic status of both beliefs requires caution, or relative skepticism, in specific cases. Hume tells us that, "Where reason is lively and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us" (T.1.4.7.11; 270). This, as has been noted by contemporary philosophers and historians of philosophy, is a psychological argument (Garrett, 1997; Stroud, 2004; Schmidt, 2003). And, as a psychological question, Hume's critique is not leveled at reason, *tout court*, but is rather an argument that skepticism results from reason being used in abstraction from the rest of our psychological faculties (Mounce, 1999).

Though Hume argues that the fallibility of our senses and reasoning make it imprudent to believe too strongly in any specific apparently causal relationship or the reality of any particular sensed object, he is nonetheless quite certain that we have no choice but to believe in the general principles of both causation and object permanence (T1.4.1.7; 183). "[T]is in vain to ask, Whether there be body or not? That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (1.4.2.1; 187). We do not have perceptual evidence of either causation or object permanence; we are simply psychologically incapable of not believing both (T1.4.1.7; 183).

Belief, as I have noted above, is for Hume a matter of the "liveliness" of a particular piece of reasoning (T.1.4.7.11; 270). It is, therefore, neither observation nor demonstration, but rather a quality of the impression in question that suggests whether a particular conclusion is *probably* accurate. Belief, thus, is "more properly an act of the, sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures" (T 1.4.1.8; 184), and, "probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation" (T.1.3.8.12; 103). He goes on to say: "'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy" (*ibid.*). And, it is in

this spirit that Hume has famously argued that, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (*T.2.3.3.4*; 415).

HOLISM AND NATURE

By integrating the abstractions “reason” and “sentiment” in the psychological phenomenon of belief, Hume avoids both the paralysis of skepticism and the idealist and solipsistic consequences of the classical empiricist’s atomistic theory of ideas. Reason becomes, for him, “a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls” (*T.1.3.16.9*; 179). The cause of this instinct, for him, is nature – both in the sense of it being a part of human nature, but also in the sense of it being a product of Nature in the larger sense – seen as an active force or agent, and described in language reminiscent of Spinoza’s notion of the causal efficacy of *totus Naturae* (*E1p16c*, 1p18). He says: “*Nature*, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity *has determin'd us* to judge . . . [by] a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable” (*T.1.4.1.7*; 183. Emphasis added.). He uses similar language in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* where he says that moral judgment “depends on some internal sense or feeling which *nature has made* universal in the whole species” (*EPM. 1.137*; 173. Emphasis added.)

Hume’s conception of the activity of nature, like Spinoza’s, does not, of course, include anything like the concept of natural selection. For him reason is “unintelligible” (*T.1.3.16.9*; 179), not only because it cannot provide its own validation, but also because Hume cannot suggest a clear mechanism by which nature has imbued us with this “wonderful instinct” (*ibid.*). But even without a dynamic or developmental model, Hume does grasp the fact that human psychology, both cognitive and emotional, exists on a continuum with that of non-human animals. In the *Treatise*, he argues from similarities between human and animal reasoning in adapting means to ends (*T1.3.16.2*; 176), and a common etiology for a variety of passions across species. He notes, for example, that we: “may observe, not only that love and hatred are common to the whole sensitive creation, but likewise that their causes, as above-explain'd, are of so simple a nature, that they may easily be suppos'd to operate on mere animals” (*T.2.2.12.1*;

394-5. See also: *T.1.3.16.2*; 176: *T.2.1.12.2-4*; 325-6). And, in the first *Enquiry*, in a short section on the Reasoning of Animals, he notes that animals learn and make inferences from experiencing uniformities in nature, and suggests that human learning is an extension of the same process (the ‘sameness’ of which is, itself, an example of a uniformity in nature) (*EHU.9*; 104-8, ¶ 82-5). Like Spinoza (*E3*, preface), Hume conceived of nature as rather more seamless, particularly with respect to human kinship with animals, than did most of his predecessors and contemporaries (Stroud, 2004; Baier, 1991).

He also seems aware, however inchoately, that survival and adaptation play a role in the natural development of cognitive capacities. His fundamental definition of reason, in humans and animals, is its function of adapting means to ends, “which tend[s] to self-preservation, to the obtaining pleasure (*sic*), and avoiding pain” (*T.1.3.16.2*; 176). In his discussion of human curiosity he notes the similarity between the intellectual search for knowledge and the motivational states involved in hunting, which states overlap with the motivational states involved in both the predatory and foraging behavior of animals (*T.2.3.10.8*; 451-2). Also, he recognizes that, in addition to pure love of knowledge, human curiosity, is also motivated by the practical, which is to say adaptive, desire to form a stable conception of our environment so as not to be surprised and disoriented by each new event (*T.2.3.10.12*; 453-4). His reluctance to posit any kind of direct connections among events in the environment prevents him from being entirely clear on this question. In the first *Enquiry* his uncertainty even takes him into speculations about a “kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas” (*EHU.5.2*; ¶44, p54). This Leibnizean mood does not last, however, and in the very next sentence he suggests that custom (by which he means the repetition of events) is the mechanism by which this correspondence has been effected (*ibid.*).

CONCLUSION:

Hume, while completely undermining the claims of philosophic dogma, whether Rationalist or Empiricist, gives us a psychology that focuses on belief as a fallible but nonetheless reasonable link between the human mind and the natural world

of which it is a part. It is precisely by understanding mind – both its cognitive and emotional aspects – as a natural phenomenon that he avoids the skeptical nihilism that has been ascribed to him. Though he had no clear conception of any mechanism or developmental process by which nature produced the human mind and imbued it with its tendencies to belief – in reason and perception, both – he did realize that reason’s coherence and experience’s intelligibility depend on the adaptive purposes they serve; and he recognized the essential kinship of human and animal minds. It is, thus, not surprising that Charles Darwin would have studied Hume’s work with interest and credited him with having influenced his own intellectual development (Darwin, 1980). Darwin’s theory, in a sense, completes Hume’s: providing, in natural selection, the natural mechanism that Hume could only allude to by speaking of Nature in anthropomorphic tones. That Hume could have had such a profound insight without the reassurance of this mechanism is evidence of his particular genius, though the want of such a mechanism partially accounts for the failure of his contemporaries and many of his successors to recognize the real import of his work.

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