

Hume, David, 1711-76, Scottish philosopher and historian. Hume carried the empiricism of John Locke and George Berkeley to the logical extreme of radical skepticism. He repudiated the possibility of certain knowledge, finding in the mind nothing but a series of sensations, and held that cause-and-effect in the natural world derives solely from the conjunction of two impressions. Hume's skepticism is also evident in his writings on religion, in which he rejected any rational or natural theology. David Hume lived in the constitutional monarchy of George II under the Prime Ministers Walpole, Pelham and Pitt, a Britain which had thoroughly established a stable bourgeois system of government and was interested in building its Empire. Hume died in the year of the American War of Independence. Hume denied theological doctrines and acknowledged the evils that religion had wrought upon humanity. How was one to develop then a "secular" system of philosophy and morality. What answer could be given to Berkeley's "proof" that the concept of a material world beyond sensation was a "metaphysical absurdity"? How could we get on with science and industry, trade and conquest, without religion? Hume accepted Berkeley's proof, but developed the philosophy of Skepticism, a British compromise, in which, while the knowledge we gain from experience cannot constitute theoretical knowledge or necessity, it is good enough for practical purposes, sufficient for practical life. Hume says:

Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, that it will rise. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section IV, Part I, 20)

At the end of Section 9 Hume writes: "But our wonder will perhaps cease or diminish when we consider that the experimental (experiential) reasoning itself, which we possess in common with beasts, and on which the whole of conduct depends, is nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power that acts in us unknown to ourselves, and in its chief operations is not directed by any such

relations or comparison of ideas as are the proper objects of our intellectual faculties." Hume's argument that human instincts are similar to animal instincts, however humans differ from animals in regards to the facts makes sense, but it makes more sense to combine experience with thought.

Hume's arguments seem directed at Descartes. Hume argues that man gains knowledge from experience and that we should be skeptical of all other knowledge. Descartes believes all knowledge comes from the mind, and that the only thing we cannot question is our existence "I think, therefore I am." For Descartes, nothing else can be proven. Hume counters with:

In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: the mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. Or. To express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section II, 13.)

Hume offers two arguments to defend this opinion, both refute Descartes' idea of man as a rational thinking being. Descartes tried to prove God existed through rationalization and thought, however for Hume all knowledge is gained through experiences derived from our instincts. Hume says that:

when we analyze our thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment. Even those ideas, which at first view, seem the most wide of this origin, are found, upon a nearer scrutiny, to be derived from it. The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section II, 14)

A person could argue that yes this makes sense, but how do you explain the different degrees of knowledge people attain. Since we all gather experiences throughout our life, we must actually be rationalizing upon these experiences, and gaining knowledge from these rationalizations. Hume argues:

A man of mild manners can form no idea of inveterate revenge or cruelty; nor can a selfish heart easily conceive the heights of friendship and generosity. It is readily allowed, that other beings may possess many senses of which we can have no conception; because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit, by the actual feeling and sensation. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section II, 15)

Here Hume goes too far. In defense of his own argument, he makes a claim he cannot prove through experience. He is rationalizing that experiences differ between individuals because we all have different senses. Other beings can have knowledge of cruelty and generosity, even if it is not in the nature to behave in such a way. However, these senses are a product of a beings past experiences and rationalization of those experiences not just one or the other as Descartes and Hume would have us think.

Hume claims that humans are like animals:

learn many things from experience, and infer, that the same events will always follow the same causes. By this principle they become acquainted with the more obvious properties of external objects, and gradually, from their birth, treasure up a knowledge of the nature of fire, water, earth, stones, heights, depths, &c., and of the effects which result from their operation. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section IX, 83.)

The young are stronger, but the old more cunning. The older an animal or human gets, the more knowledge they possess. This knowledge is gained mostly through experience. A person can spend years in a classroom studying various subjects, but until they actually use that knowledge, and experience in the field the knowledge is useless. Hume writes in Section IX;

It is custom alone, which engages animals, from every object, that strikes their senses, to infer its usual attendant, and carries their imagination, from the appearance of the one, to conceive the other, in that particular manner, which we dominate belief. No other explication can be given of this operation, in all the higher, as well as lower

classes of sensitive beings, which fall under our notice and observation. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section IX, 84.)

The knowledge gained from these experiences is not gathered through reasoning, but instinct.

Animals, therefore, are not guided in these inferences by reasoning: Neither are children: Neither are the generality of mankind, in their ordinary actions and conclusions: Neither are philosophers themselves, who, in all the active parts of life, are, in the main, the same with the vulgar, and are governed by the same maxims. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section IX, 84.)

Hume says it is not reasoning, but custom that separates man's gathering of knowledge from animals.

But no man, having seen only one body move after being impelled by another, could infer that every other body will move after a like impulse. All inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of customs, not of reasoning.

Custom then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past. (Hume, David S. "Concerning Human Understanding" Section V, Part I, 36)

Hume's obvious goal was to refute Descartes, and defend Berkely. He does an admirable job, considering any statement even remotely acknowledging Descartes' theory of thought as being the only thing we cannot disprove, would in turn disprove his own theories. However, Hume misses the boat, in his defense of his own beliefs. True knowledge is gained from the thought process and experience. It is the combination of these two factors that allows us to define truth. Descartes was half right, and Berkely was half right. Truth cannot be determined until the possible results have been rationalized, and the actual results of events have been measured.