

Notes on Hume's View of the External World

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1. Introduction: Hume's apparently unstable position

It is genuinely hard to work out Hume's own view of the external world, for his own discussions seem to imply that the belief in the continued and distinct existence of body is:

(a) dubiously coherent:

"I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. ... 'Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and 'tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions ... are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses. ... What ... can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood?" (T 1.4.2.56)

"Thus there is a direct and total 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)

(b) clearly false in its vulgar form:

"the vulgar *suppose* their perceptions to be their only objects, and at the same time *believe* the continu'd existence of matter ... Now upon that supposition, 'tis a false opinion that any of our objects, or perceptions, are identically the same after an interruption" (T 1.4.2.43)

"Whoever wou'd explain the origin of the common opinion concerning the continu'd and distinct existence of body ... must proceed upon the supposition, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue to exist even when they are not perceiv'd. Tho' this opinion be false, 'tis the most natural of any, and has alone any primary recommendation to the fancy." (T 1.4.2.48)

(c) nevertheless psychologically universal and almost irresistible in that form:

"The persons, who entertain this opinion concerning the identity of our resembling perceptions, are in general all the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind, (that is, all of us, at one time or other) and consequently such as suppose their perceptions to be their only objects" (T 1.4.2.36)

"'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence. 'Tis also certain, that this very perception or object is suppos'd to have a continu'd uninterrupted being, and neither to be annihilated by our absence, nor to be brought into existence by our presence." (T 1.4.2.38)

"philosophers ... immediately upon leaving their closets, mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue identically and uninterruptedly the same in all their interrupted appearances" (T 1.4.2.53)

"I ... take it for granted, whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is ... an external ... world" (T 1.4.2.57)

(c) seems to imply that Hume will revert to the vulgar view when he "leaves his closet", but what is his considered view when he is within his closet, trying to get to the truth about external bodies?

2. Various interpretations

Harold Noonan (1999), in a very clear and useful discussion, takes the sceptical problems of *Treatise* 1.4.4 – concerning the primary/secondary quality distinction – as undermining Hume’s attempt at *T* 1.4.4.1 to give a consistent account of the distinction between the principles of the understanding and those of the narrow imagination, leaving Hume in a sceptical quandary: “Thus our common belief in an external world is indubitable, but in no way justified and, being false, incapable of any justification” (p. 186).

Robert Fogelin (1985, pp. 2, 92) thinks that Hume – when philosophically reflective – is a Pyrrhonian sceptic who aims to highlight irreconcilable differences between the various points of view discussed in *Treatise* 1.4.2, with none of these providing a stable outcome. While we are studying in our “closets”, we may become convinced sceptics, but then as soon as we leave and allow “carelessness and inattention” to take over, our vulgar belief in the external world is restored. In 1998 (within a *Hume Studies* discussion of Garrett 1997), Fogelin coined the term “radical perspectivalism” to capture this idea that there is no consistent position – we take one perspective when we are in our study, and a different perspective in common life. Miriam McCormick (1999), following Terence Penelhum (*God and Skepticism*, 1983), calls this “off-again-on-again” scepticism, but she suggests that Hume finds a more stable position in *Treatise* 1.4.7 by moving away from the extreme scepticism considered in *Treatise* 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 towards a more *mitigated* scepticism like that expressed in *Enquiry* 12.¹

Don Baxter (2006) also takes Hume to be a Pyrrhonian sceptic about the external world, but provides a more detailed examination of Hume’s discussion – e.g. on identity of objects – and usefully surveys a number of alternative views in the literature on Hume (and on relevant cognitive science).

John Bricke (1980) provides a philosophically sensitive analysis of both the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* discussions. He shows sympathy with the perspectival view championed by Fogelin, and likewise finds Hume’s position ultimately unstable, though he finally concludes that Hume is himself probably a representative realist, whose sceptical attack on such realism is intended not to refute it outright but only to undermine our confidence in building theories that stray too far from the vulgar perspective.

Don Garrett (1997) attempts to develop a consistent Humean position, based on his view of Hume as primarily a cognitive scientist rather than a sceptical philosopher. He does this by thoroughly downplaying the extreme scepticism that others have found in these sections: “Nowhere does Hume claim that most of our beliefs in the existence of continued and distinct existences are unworthy of assent, nor that such beliefs should be rejected or suspended.” (p. 220). See also his 2015 book, pp. 97-105, 220-22. Garrett’s reading involves some delicate interpretation of Hume’s statements, some of which superficially appear to tell in more radically sceptical direction.

John Wright (1983) understands most of Hume’s *Treatise* discussion as devoted to explaining – in terms that are at least implicitly physiological - the “vulgar” belief in external objects that are supposedly identical to our perceptions. *This* belief is clearly false, but importantly paves the way *psychologically* for representative realism by setting the scene for the “obvious” argument from sensory variation that is presented at *T* 1.4.2.45 and *E* 12.9. Representative realism is thus an example of those “reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (*E* 12.25) which Hume commends, and he can consistently endorse it because its dependence on the false vulgar view is psychological rather than logical.

¹ McCormick takes the view that the view of scepticism in the *Treatise* is fundamentally similar to that of the *Enquiry*, but notes the very different “manner” of its presentation. In particular, she suggests that the intense first-personal nature of Hume’s expression of his feelings responding to scepticism – for example at *T* 1.4.2.56 and 1.4.7.8 – should not be interpreted as implying a different view from the calmer third-person account of the *Enquiry*.

3. Hume's attitude towards the "vulgar" and "philosophical" views

As we have seen, Hume seems in *T* 1.4.2 to imply that most of the time he – like the rest of us – adopts the vulgar view that identifies perceptions and objects:

"The persons, who entertain this opinion concerning the identity of our resembling perceptions, are in general all the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind, (that is, all of us, at one time or other)" (*T* 1.4.2.36)

"'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence." (*T* 1.4.2.38)

"we find, that philosophers ... immediately upon leaving their closets, mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue identically and uninterruptedly the same in all their interrupted appearances." (*T* 1.4.2.53)

But Hume is also very clear that *the vulgar view is false*, and easily seen to be so:

"'tis a false opinion that any of our ... perceptions, are identically the same after an interruption; and consequently the opinion of their identity can never arise from reason, but must arise from the imagination" (*T* 1.4.2.43)

"a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion ... we quickly perceive, that the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience" (*T* 1.4.2.44)

"we clearly perceive, that all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits" (*T* 1.4.2.45)

"a little reflection destroys this conclusion, that our perceptions have a continu'd existence, by shewing that they have a dependent one" (*T* 1.4.2.50)

Thus it seems hard to credit that he becomes a vulgar believer as soon as he leaves his study. But even within his study – where he is clearly aware of the falsehood of the vulgar view – Hume generally evinces a firm belief in external objects such as billiard balls (*T* 1.3.14.18, *E* 4.8-10) and dice (*T* 1.3.11.6-13, *E* 6.2-3), and not least the people whose thought and behaviour constitutes the subject-matter of so much of his philosophy. This explains why so many interpreters have assumed that he must be some kind of "representative realist", adopting what he calls the "double existence" or "philosophical" view.

Yet this seems in tension with his attitude towards the philosophical view as expressed towards the end of *Treatise* 1.4.2, where he insists repeatedly that it "has no primary recommendation either to reason or the imagination" (*T* 1.4.2.46-9), and even seems to talk of it with contempt:

"however philosophical this new system may be esteem'd, I assert that 'tis only a palliative remedy, and that it contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself. There are no principles either of the understanding or fancy, which lead us directly to embrace this opinion of the double existence of perceptions and objects, nor can we arrive at it but by passing thro' the common hypothesis of the identity and continuance of our interrupted perceptions. (*T* 1.4.2.46)

"This philosophical system ... is the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embrac'd by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other. ... Not being able to reconcile these two enemies, we endeavour to set ourselves at ease as much as possible, by successively granting to each whatever it demands, and by feigning a double existence, where each may find something, that has all the conditions it desires. (*T* 1.4.2.52)

His apparently despairing penultimate paragraph of *Treatise* 1.4.2, as we have seen, seems to damn *both*

the vulgar *and* the philosophical view:

“’Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same ... [as does the] popular system. And as to our philosophical one, ’tis liable to the same difficulties; and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition. Philosophers deny our resembling perceptions to be identically the same, and uninterrupted; and yet have so great a propensity to believe them such, that they arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions, to which they attribute these qualities. I say, a new set of perceptions: For we may well suppose in general, but ’tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions. What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?”
(T 1.4.2.56)

It is tempting to think that Hume’s rhetoric here has got the better of him, because even if it is the case that the philosophical view has dubious origins, arising only in reaction to the difficulties of the vulgar view and being “the monstrous offspring” of two contrary principles, it is surely superior to the vulgar view in that *it is not manifestly false*. Manifest falsehood is a pretty serious negative, so saying that the “philosophical system ... contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system” looks like a serious overstatement. If Hume in his study is to be a believer in external objects – as he seems to be – then he must apparently be some kind of representative realist, and hence must adopt some form of “double existence” view that acknowledges a distinction between perceptions and objects.

4. The view of the *Enquiry*

The first *Enquiry* discussion of the external world is much shorter than that of the *Treatise*, but is helpful for clarifying some key points of his view. First, the vulgar belief in external objects is natural and universal:

“It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct ..., 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, ... Even the animal creation are governed by a like opinion, and preserve this belief of external objects, in all their thoughts, designs, and actions.

It seems also evident, that, when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other. This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist, independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. ...” (E 12.7-8)

As in the *Treatise*, the vulgar view is easily seen to be false:

“But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed ... The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: But the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: It was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent.” (E 12.9)

The last sentence here seems to imply that Hume accepts some form of representative realism, though he goes on to say, as in the *Treatise* (though far less emphatically) that such a “new system” runs contrary to the “irresistible instinct of nature” and cannot be justified by argument. Here he presents, in an elegantly condensed form, what is essentially the same argument that he had previously given at

T 1.4.2.47, to the effect that no causal inference can enable us to infer objects from perceptions:

“It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: How shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning.” (E 12.12)

The first sentence here, however, is quite significant: *if it is indeed “a question of fact”* whether external objects exist, then at least it cannot be *contradictory*, and this is arguably an advance on *Treatise* 1.4.2, where the belief in external objects seemed to involve incoherent “fictions” in which identity was falsely ascribed to different things at different times. The *Enquiry* – fortunately – avoids the view repeatedly expressed in the *Treatise*, that “one of the essential qualities of identity [is] *invariableness*” (T 1.4.2.31, cf. 1.4.3.2 and 1.4.6.6); indeed it does not discuss identity at all. This may be significant in delivering a view of external objects which is at least *coherent* and hence whose truth can be “a question of fact” (see also E 12.16 below).

After briefly attacking Descartes’s attempt to justify the external world by appeal to God (E 12.13), Hume sums up in much the same spirit at T 1.4.2, but again far less emphatically:

“This is a topic, therefore, in which the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph, when they endeavour to introduce an universal doubt into all subjects of human knowledge and enquiry. Do you follow the instincts and propensities of nature, ... in assenting to the veracity of sense? But these lead you to believe, that the very perception or sensible image is the external object. Do you disclaim this principle, in order to embrace a more rational opinion, that the perceptions are only representations of something external? You here depart from your natural propensities and more obvious sentiments; and yet are not able to satisfy your reason, which can never find any convincing argument from experience to prove, that the perceptions are connected with any external objects.” (E 12.14)

It also seems significant that here Hume explicitly describes representative realism as “a more rational opinion” than the vulgar view.

In the penultimate paragraph of *Enquiry* 12 Part 1, Hume briefly discusses the difficulty over primary and secondary qualities that was the topic of *Treatise* 1.4.4:

“It is universally allowed by modern enquirers, that all the sensible qualities of objects, such as hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, etc. are merely secondary, and exist not in the objects themselves, but are perceptions of the mind, without any external archetype or model, which they represent. If this be allowed, with regard to secondary qualities, it must also follow, with regard to the supposed primary qualities of extension and solidity; nor can the latter be any more entitled to that denomination than the former. The idea of extension is entirely acquired from the senses of sight and feeling; and if all the qualities, perceived by the senses, be in the mind, not in the object, the same conclusion must reach the idea of extension, which is wholly dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. Nothing can save us from this conclusion, but the asserting, that the ideas of those primary qualities are attained by *Abstraction*; an opinion, which, if we examine it accurately, we shall find to be unintelligible, and even absurd. An extension, that is neither tangible nor visible, cannot possibly be conceived: And a tangible or visible extension, which is neither hard nor soft, black nor white, is equally beyond the reach of human conception. Let any man try to conceive a triangle in general, which is neither Isosceles nor Scalenum, nor has any particular length or proportion of sides; and he will soon perceive the absurdity of all the scholastic notions with regard to abstraction and general ideas.” (E 12.15)

Here the argument is presented much more succinctly, and combined with Berkeley’s claim that an appeal to *abstract ideas* of the Lockean sort provides no escape. Of particular interest, however, is what Hume goes on to say in the short but significant final paragraph:

“Thus the first philosophical 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, and at the same time carries no rational evidence with it, to convince an impartial enquirer. The second objection goes farther, and represents this opinion as contrary to reason: at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object. Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable something, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it.” (E 12.16)

Here the first sentence summarises the “first philosophical objection” from T 1.4.2 and E 12.14, but notice that the second sentence is also highly relevant to the interpretation of this “first objection”, for it says that the “second objection” (about primary and secondary qualities) “*goes farther* [in representing] this opinion *as contrary to reason*”. Like E 12.12, this corroborates that Hume does not see the “first objection” as showing belief in external objects to be “contrary to reason” or *incoherent*. But now the “second objection” seems to remain as a serious difficulty, “at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object”. What does Hume mean by adding this tantalising qualification? Could he possibly – unlikely though this might seem – be opening the door to a Lockean theory that sees secondary qualities as powers in objects? The final sentence of E 12.16 is even more tantalising, as I highlight in my 2016 paper “Hume’s Chief Argument” (p. 100):

“if our thinking about external objects is restricted to ideas copied from our sensations, then the merely relative notion that we can have of them as independent entities seems to be “so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it” (E 12.16). This subtle phrase, however, is ambiguous, and I suspect deliberately so, reflecting Hume’s two minds on the issue. On the one hand, thinking of “the cause of our perceptions” as “a certain unknown, inexplicable something” is so pathetically contentless that it hardly qualifies as a thought of a substantial object. But on the other hand, this lack of substantial content perfectly suits Hume’s irreligious purposes and his desire to cripple any ambition towards a rival metaphysics based on supposed rational insight into the nature of matter (such as Locke’s and Clarke’s insistence that matter and motion cannot create thought).² Having found a phrase that nicely captures this ambivalence, and without any more satisfactory philosophical resolution to offer, Hume allows his discussion to end here, with a footnote which credits Berkeley for the preceding argument about primary and secondary qualities and observes that such “merely sceptical” arguments typically “admit of no answer and produce no conviction” (E 12.16 n. 32). This observation corresponds with his already-stated pretext for giving so little attention to such arguments: that they “can so little serve to any serious purpose” (E 12.15). Thus Hume apparently wants to rise above extreme skepticism even when he has no satisfactory philosophical answer to it.

A footnote observes “The final sentence of EU 12.16 was added only in the posthumous 1777 edition, perhaps corroborating my speculation that Hume was in two minds, composing his ambivalent conclusion only when his terminal illness was making clear that he would never personally resolve this.” Another footnote suggests that “To find an answer, I believe Hume would have had to reject his Copy Principle and crude ‘constant conjunction’ view of inductive inference, countenancing both ‘inference to the best explanation’ and postulation of entities with which we are not acquainted.³ It is unsurprising, in view of ... [his longstanding commitment to his Copy Principle], that he did not explore this avenue.”

² Here a footnote suggests that “By contrast, Hume presumably considers that even a minimal and relative conception of objects is enough to sustain the inductive science that he himself favours.”

³ At T 1.4.2.20 Hume seems to get close to invoking external objects *of a known kind* in an explanatory role, but does not consider that explanatory power might also, perhaps, sanction invoking external objects as *theoretical* entities with which we are not acquainted (and hence of which we have no impression-derived ideas), even though this may well mean that we can think of them only as “a certain unknown, inexplicable something, as the cause of our perceptions”.

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