

ON HUME by Manuel Velasquez

The man who most deeply influenced our modern perspectives on knowledge is the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume. To a large extent, the philosophers who followed Hume either enthusiastically embraced his empiricist views or desperately sought to refute his claims. In either case, they were reacting to the radical empiricism he formulated. Everyone who comes after Hume must take his arguments into account.

David Hume, the “ultimate skeptic,” was born in 1711 into a comfortable family who lived on a small country estate called Ninewells in Edinburgh, Scotland. Hume’s father died when David was two. His mother, who took over the task of rearing him, said of the boy: “Davey is a well-meanin’ critter, but uncommon weak minded.” Nevertheless, a few weeks before his twelfth birthday, Hume entered Edinburgh University, where his family hoped he would be able to earn a degree in law. But university life was unpleasant for Hume, and two years later he dropped out without finishing his degree, having convinced his family that he could as easily study law at home. As Hume later wrote, “My studious disposition, my sobriety, and my industry gave my family a notion that the law was a proper profession for me. But I found an insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning, and while they fancied I was poring over [the legal texts of] Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Vergil were the authors which I was secretly devouring.”¹ As a teenager, Hume sat around the house reading and complaining that he was being forced to struggle with various physical and mental ailments.

Then, in his late teens, Hume convinced himself that he had found a truly new philosophy. As he put it, “There seemed to be opened up to me a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond measure and made me, with an ardour natural to young men, throw up every other pleasure or business to apply entirely to it.” David then spent much of his day trying to think out and express to others the “new” thoughts he believed that he had discovered.

Although living at home, Hume apparently managed to get around. At the age of twenty-two he was accused by a young woman named Anne Galbraith of fathering her child, who had been conceived out of wedlock. Hume was sent away to work in the office of a Bristol merchant, but before the year was out he had quit the job he so detested and was sent to live in France on a tiny allowance. There, he spent the next three years living in “rigid frugality” while writing a book, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which he tried to express his new philosophy. The book was published in 1737, and by 1739 David was once again living at home in Ninewells, confident that he would soon be famous. To his bitter disappointment, when the book appeared, no one cared: “It fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur from the zealots.”²

In 1745, Hume tried to get a position teaching ethics at Edinburgh University but was turned down. Instead he took the job of tutor to a young marquise, who unfortunately turned out to be insane. The next several years Hume spent alternately working as a secretary for a general and living at home. He wrote continuously during this period, producing, among other things, a much shorter and simplified version of his *Treatise* titled *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and numerous essays on politics, literature, history, and economics. In 1752, Hume secured a position as librarian at Edinburgh University but was fired when the curators objected that his selection of books, such as *The History of Love-Making Among the French*, was obscene.

But by 1763 Hume’s writings had made him famous, and that year, when he traveled to France as secretary for the British ambassador, he found himself at the center of the intellectual life of Parisian high society. There, he met and had an intense love affair with the Countess de Boufflers. Three years later, having grown homesick, Hume left the

countess and returned to England. After working for three years as undersecretary of state, Hume retired in 1769 to Edinburgh, where he lived “very opulent” and, finally, very famous, until his death in 1776.

Like Berkeley before him, Hume based his philosophy on the observation that all of our genuine knowledge (or “thoughts”) about the world around us derives from the sensations provided by our senses. To explain this, Hume divided the contents of our minds into two groups, our sensations (which he called impressions) and our thoughts. All our thoughts, he held, are “copies” of our sensations and are derived from them. Even complex thoughts about things that do not exist, such as the thought of a golden mountain, are formed by putting together memories of simple sensations we once experienced: the sensation of gold and the sensation of mountain. Hume concluded that because genuine knowledge depends on prior sensory experience, assertions that are not based on sensory experience cannot be genuine knowledge:

Everyone will readily allow that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind when a man feels the pain of excessive heat or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation or anticipates it by his imagination. . . . Here, therefore, we may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated Thoughts or Ideas. . . . Let us . . . use a little freedom and call [the other class] Impressions. . . . By the term impression, then, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. . . . Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man. . . . What never was seen or heard of, may yet be conceived. . . .

But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, . . . all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience. When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, gold and mountain, with which we were formerly acquainted. . . . In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or our inward sentiments. . . . Or, to express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.

To prove this, the two following arguments will, I hope, be sufficient. First: 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 . . . 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. . . .

Second: If it happens, from a defect of the organ, that a man is not susceptible of [some] sensation, we always find that he is as little susceptible of the correspondent ideas. A blind man can form no notion of colors, [nor] a deaf man of sounds. Here, therefore, is a proposition which . . . might . . . banish all that jargon which had so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings. . . . When we entertain any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.³

Hume’s “proposition”—that meaningful concepts must be “derived” from “impressions”—was a crucial step in his attempt to undermine our claims to knowledge. If a concept is not based on the sensations or “impressions” of our sense experience, he held, then it must be meaningless. Hume applied this idea ruthlessly. He argued that claims about the existence of an external world are meaningless. All we are acquainted with are the sensations we have. We have no grounds, then, for saying that an external world also exists that somehow causes us to have those sensations:

By what argument can it be proved, that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects, . . . and could not arise either from the energy of the mind itself, . . . or from some other cause still more unknown to us?

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 anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connection with objects. The supposition of such a connection is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning.⁴

Not only are we unable to know whether there is an outer world; we are also unable to claim that there is any inner self. The very idea of a personal me, of the inner person called “I,” has no foundation, Hume claims:

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. . . .

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self. . . . For from what impression could this idea be derived? . . . If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression

must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea. . . .

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. . . .

[S]etting aside some metaphysicians . . . , I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. . . . The mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.⁵

We cannot know whether there is any outer world beyond our sensations because all we are acquainted with are our sensations. Neither can we know whether there is an inner self because, again, all we experience is a constant flow of sensations, and we never perceive, among these sensations, an object called an inner self. All we can say, Hume claims, is that we are “a bundle or collection of different perceptions.” Beyond the existence of these perceptions, we can know nothing.

What, then, is left for us to know? Perhaps a great deal. For we are at least acquainted with the perceptions our senses display before us. And from these perceptions we can reason to others. For example, if I perceive a flame, then I know that there will be heat; if I hear a voice, then I know that a person must be present. This kind of knowledge is based on our knowledge of cause and effect. I have learned that flames cause heat, so I reason from the flame to the heat; I have found that voices are the effects of people, so I reason from the voice to the person. In fact, all the natural sciences consist of laws based on our knowledge of cause and effect. On the basis of a few experiments, for example, the science of physics asserts that if an object is dropped, gravity will cause it to fall at 32 feet per second per second. Clearly, then, from the present things we perceive, our knowledge of causes enables us to know what the future will be like. And all the natural sciences— physics, chemistry, biology—are based on this kind of causal knowledge.

But Hume, in a devastating attack on knowledge, argues that none of our knowledge of cause and effect has a rational basis. And if our causal knowledge is not rationally justified, then all the natural sciences are similarly unjustified. Hume begins by pointing out that all our knowledge of causal laws rests on our experience of the world:

All reasoning concerning matter of fact seems to be founded on the relation of Cause and Effect. . . . A man, finding a watch or any other machine in a desert island, would conclude that there had once been men in that island. All our reasonings concerning fact are of the same nature. . . . The hearing of an articulate voice and rational discourse in the dark assures us of the presence of some person. Why? Because these are the effects of the human [being]. . . .

If we would satisfy ourselves, therefore, concerning the nature of that evidence which assures us of matters of fact, we must inquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect.

I shall venture to affirm, as a general proposition which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation . . . arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other.⁶

All causal knowledge, Hume is saying, is based on our experience that in the past, events of one kind have been “constantly conjoined” with events of another kind. In the past, for example, I may have seen that when one billiard ball hits another, the second ball always rolls away. Thus, the event of one billiard ball striking another has been “constantly conjoined” in my past experience with the event of the second ball rolling away. All the causal laws of the natural sciences and all the causal knowledge of our everyday lives, then, are based on our past experience of such “constant conjunctions.” But this scientific and everyday reliance on past experience, Hume points out, raises a problem. How do we know that past experience is a reliable guide to the future?

We always presume when we see like sensible qualities, . . . that effects similar to those which we have experienced will follow from

them. . . . The bread which I formerly ate nourished me. . . . But does it follow that other bread must also nourish me at another time? The consequence seems nowise necessary. . . . These two propositions are far from being the same: I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect, and I foresee, that other objects which are, in appearance similar, will be attended with similar effects. The connection between these two propositions is not intuitive.⁷

In this passage, Hume suggests that all causal reasoning is based on the assumption that the future will be like the past. When I see a flame and reason that it will be hot, it is because in the past when I perceived flame I also perceived heat. But, Hume asks, how do we know that the future will be like the past? Clearly, there is no way of proving that the future will be like the past:

That there are no demonstrative arguments in the case seems evident, since it implies no contradiction that the course of nature may change, and that an object, seemingly like those which we have experienced, may be attended with different or contrary effects. May I not clearly and distinctly conceive that a body falling from the clouds, and which in all other respects resembles snow, has yet the taste of salt or feeling of fire? Is there any more intelligible proposition than to affirm that all the trees will flourish in December and January and decay in May and June? Now whatever is intelligible and can be distinctly conceived, implies no contradiction and can never be proved false by any demonstrative argument.⁸

So, we cannot prove with “demonstrative arguments” that the future will be like the past. Perhaps, then, we know that the future will be like the past because of past experience? No, Hume replies, we cannot use past experience to show that the future will be like the past. For if we don’t know that the future will be like the past, then we don’t know that past experience is a reliable guide. To argue that past experience proves we can rely on past experience is to argue in a circle:

For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be con- joined with similar sensible qualities. If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future, since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance. Let the course of things be allowed hitherto ever so regular, that alone, without some new argument or inference proves not that for the future it will continue so. Their secret nature and consequently all their effects and influence, may change, without any change in their sensible qualities. This happens sometimes, and with regard to some objects: why may it not happen always, and with regard to all objects? What logic, what process of argument, secures you against this supposition?⁹

Hume’s conclusion is devastating: We have no way of knowing that causal claims are justified. All the causal laws of the sciences and our everyday causal reasonings are based on an assumption that we cannot prove or rationally justify: the assumption that the future will be like the past. But if we cannot rationally show that the future will be like the past, then why do we continually move past our experience to conclusions about the future? Because, Hume claims, we are creatures of non-rational habit:

Suppose [a person] has lived so long in the world as to have observed similar objects or events to be constantly conjoined together. What is the consequence of this experience? He immediately infers the existence of one object from the appearance of the other. . . . There is some . . . principle which determines him to form such a conclusion.

This principle is CUSTOM or HABIT. For wherever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding, we always say that this propensity is the effect of custom. . . .

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.¹⁰

All claims about causal connections, then, are based on our experience that, in the past, events of a certain kind have been “constantly conjoined” with events of another kind. And habit moves us from this past experience to the conclusion that, in the future, all similar events will be similarly conjoined. In other words, from our past experience of the constant conjunction of events, we conclude by habit that one kind of event “causes” a second kind. But we cannot provide any rational justification for this habit of moving from the past to the future. All the causal laws of the sciences

and all the causal “knowledge” of everyday life are based on non-rational “habit.”

We cannot know whether an external world exists; we cannot say that the self exists; we cannot rationally justify the causal laws of any of the natural sciences or the causal reasonings of our everyday life. Can skepticism extend further? Yes. Hume went on to attack the foundations of religious belief: the claim that God exists. Hume believed that the best arguments for God’s existence were causal arguments: those that hold that God must exist because the design of the universe requires an all-powerful intelligent Creator. But all causal reasonings depend on past experience, Hume points out, and we have no past experience of other gods creating universes. Although our past experience of human beings and their products leads us to say that things such as watches require intelligent human creators, we have no past experience of other universes and gods that could lead us to say that universes require intelligent gods to create them:

In works of human art and contrivance, it is allowable to advance from the effect to the cause, and returning back from the cause, to form new inferences concerning the effect. . . . But what is the foundation of this method of reasoning? Plainly this: that man is a being whom we know by experience. . . . When, therefore, we find that any work has proceeded from the skill and industry of man, as we are otherwise acquainted with the nature of the animal, we can draw a hundred inferences concerning what may be expected from him; and these inferences will all be founded in experience and observation.

The case is not the same with our reasonings from the works of nature. The Deity is known to us only by his productions, and is a single being in the universe, not comprehended under any species or genus, from whose experienced attributes or qualities we can, by analogy, infer any attribute or quality in him. . . .

I much doubt whether it be possible for a cause to be known only by its effect . . . [when it has] no parallel and no similarity with any other cause or object that has ever fallen under our observation. It is only when two species of objects are found to be constantly conjoined, that we can infer the one from the other; and were an effect presented, which was entirely singular, and could not be comprehended under any known species, I do not see that we could form any conjecture or inference at all concerning its cause. If experience and observation and analogy be, indeed, the only guides which we can reasonably follow in inferences of this nature, both the effect and cause must bear a similarity and resemblance to other effects and causes which we know, and which we have found in many instances to be conjoined with each other. I leave to your own reflection to pursue the consequences of this principle.¹¹

The consequence of this principle, of course, is that we cannot argue from the existence of an orderly universe to the existence of an intelligent God. Hume’s skepticism, then, leaves our edifice of knowledge in shambles. The external world, the self, the causal laws of the natural sciences, our everyday causal reasoning, and our religious claims are all called into question. Can knowledge be saved? Many people think that Hume’s arguments definitively destroyed all hope that it might be. But in Germany a very ordinary man, Immanuel Kant, was spurred by Hume’s skepticism into constructing what many people look on as the most breathtakingly creative response that could be made to Hume.

Endnotes

1 David Hume, *The Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 608.

2 *Ibid.*

3 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1894), 17–20.

4 *Ibid.*, 152–153

5 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896), 251–253.

6 Hume, *An Enquiry*, 26–27.

7 *Ibid.*, 33–34.

8 *Ibid.*, 35.

9 *Ibid.*, 37–38

10 *Ibid.*, 42–44

11 *Ibid.*, 143–144, 148.