Hume and Modern Empiricism
LART602
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Reading: David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* I-XII (parts III, VII and XII recommended)[1]

See also the notes in Study Guide #9

Humean Skepticism

- By the middle of the 18th Century, rationalist principles continue to inspire such figures as Thomas Jefferson and Frederick the Great, but the rationalist movement is beginning to show some strain. Its loftiest goals, including knowledge of the divine and the relief of human suffering, remain stubbornly beyond our grasp, and some important challenges to rationalism are advanced both on the continent (by Voltaire) and in Britain (by Hume).
- Hume is particularly sweeping in his criticism of rationalism. He regards reason as nothing more than a faculty for the manipulation of ideas, where the content of ideas is strictly limited to information available in sense. His theory of ideas entails that they are mere copies of some sense impression or other, where these include internal sense (e.g., emotion, pain) and external sense (sight, sound, etc.). This confines human understanding to the sphere of human experience: we can know only what we experience directly.
- The implications of this view are surprisingly extensive. "Metaphysical ideas" such as those of *causation*, *persistence*, *change*, *identity*, *necessity*, *the self*, etc. lack any content not reducible to sense; and since these notions are generally not thought to be found in sense, strictly speaking, Hume's view is that these ideas lack significant content. Rather than knowing, precisely, what it is for one event to cause another, Hume asserts, we at most form an expectation that one will be followed by the other. Habit, not knowledge, is the general rule of human behavior and understanding, for Hume. We see this view discussed in Part I of the *Dialogues*: Cleanthes challenges Philo on the practical impossibility of believing his professed skepticism, while Philo maintains that skepticism can, in fact, make a substantial contribution to one's life.
- Skepticism, then, is the denial of human knowledge in one form or another. For Hume, this denial is the result of careful attention to the exact nature of our claims and such basis as they may have in experience. Hume is not saying that we know nothing at all; but he is saying that we know much less than we think we do.

[1] Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* may be found here: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm. See the following link for a somewhat simplified text: http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/hd.html

Hume's Critique of Natural Religion

- Natural religion asserts the possibility of human knowledge of the divine by either sense or reason (or, of course, some combination of the two). Hume attacks the two avenues separately: his attack on the design argument is an attack on our capacity to know God's nature or existence by sense; and his attack on the cosmological argument (in Part IX) is an attack on our capacity to know God by reason.
- The design argument seeks to demonstrate the nature and existence of God by reference to the empirical world – the world of sense. It is an argument by *analogy*, based on a principle of likeness: like effects have like causes. This is an important principle in human knowledge, Hume allows (as far as that goes; see above). But its capacity to carry us beyond that scope is essentially nil, on Hume's account.
- Cleanthes' argument (the design argument; stated in Part II) may be rendered thus:
  1. Like effects have like causes.
  2. The world (appears to be) one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines.
  3. All the other things of this kind of which we have experience are the products of human design, thought, and intelligence.
  4. Hence, the world has an "author," and "the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed."

  The thought behind (2) is the increasing and compelling evidence of the precise and lawful operation of the physical world, both biologically and chemically, to which intellectuals of the 17th and 18th Centuries were witness.[2]
- Philo's attacks on this argument are varied, but the central theme is that we lack the experience necessary to support inference to a god of the sort that we have in mind. If we conceive God as a "Supreme Being" (to use Descartes's term), one how is infinitely powerful, knowledgeable, and good, then it can only be from experience of something of similarly infinite stature, given the basic, empirical principle of the argument. That is, if we are infer *from experience* the nature of God, then our experience must be such as to warrant inference to an infinite and perfectly benevolent being. But the only kind of experience that could warrant inference to an infinite being would be experience of an some infinite power or complexity, but that is not a form of experience that we have. And our experience of the joys and sorrows of this world, while in many respects glorious, does not provide a basis for inference to a purely, supremely good being. At most, our experience warrants inference to a being (or beings) of some reason, with both benevolent and malevolent tendencies, Hume thinks.
- Hume's attack on theological arguments based in reason is, if anything, more powerful than his attack on the arguments from sense. The chief argument is Cleanthes' first, concerning contradiction and what is conceivable by us. The argument turns on an important feature of logic, recognition of which is one of

[2] A prominent expression of this view is that of William Paley, whose work may be found here: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14780.

many important observations owing to Hume: if a proposition is *provable* ("demonstrable") – if, in other words, it is a *theorem* – then the contrary proposition entails a contradiction. The contrary of a proposition is simply that proposition negated: for the proposition 'I exist', the contrary is 'I exist not'.[3] The trouble for theological knowledge is that its propositions typically are not of a form whose negation yields a contradiction. 'God exists' and 'God is good' can be negated, to yield 'God does not exist' and 'God is not good', which propositions don't obviously entail contradictions. If not, then it would seem that they are incapable of proof, meaning that reason by itself cannot tell us anything about the divine.

Hume and the Rational Order

- Hume's criticism of natural theology does not entail that the universe is chaotic. It could be, for all we know, that it is a highly ordered realm. But Hume raises significant challenges to our capacity to know the ultimate order of the universe. What sort of experience would we require to know that the universe has order, at bottom? How could we prove its orderliness, if the proposition, 'The world is chaotic,' seems not to entail a contradiction?
- While our observations of order are tantalizing, they bear comparison with the grounds of Cleanthes' argument. Yes, the biological world is orderly – to a point, in any case; and yes, the physical world is orderly – again, to a point, as far as we can tell. Can we suppose that all things in all places are similarly so ordered? If we are right in our characterization of physical law now, can we suppose that the laws will remain the same over time? A Humean skeptic might think not.

[3] Consider, for example, the proposition that all bachelors are unmarried. This is the sort of proposition that Hume will accept as "demonstrable"; it would seem to be provably true, given the meanings of 'bachelor' and 'unmarried'. If we deny this proposition, we get its contrary: It is not the case that all bachelors are unmarried. Now, if it not the case that all bachelors are unmarried, then there must be some bachelor who is married. This gives us a married bachelor. but, of course, the word 'bachelor' means "unmarried man". So, we have a married unmarried man, which is a contradiction.