Hume Notes
PHIL410
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From Descartes

- As we have seen, Descartes seems unable to provide an account connecting our metaphysical and/or empirical concepts with the empirical world. He maintains that (a) our natural tendency to think of or experience the world in these terms, along with (b) our inability to determine that such a tendency is erroneous and (c) the existence of a benevolent, non-deceiving God, ensure that (d) our experience of (or, anyway, careful judgments about) persisting, changeable objects is veridical.
- However, as we have seen, Descartes cannot rely on God to ensure this line of thought. So, if they do not derive from sense, what is the relation of metaphysical concepts to empirical reality?
- It might be useful to distinguish:
    - Empirical concepts – concepts signifying sensible qualities such as *brown* and *round*;
    - Metaphysical concepts – concepts signifying super-sensible qualities such as *persisting* and *changeable*.

  Descartes asserts that mere sensible (empirical) qualities do not constitute the true being of an object. Rather, the true qualities of an object are those revealed to "the mind" (reason) alone. See Meds. II and VI.
- Hume's arguments will underscore the impossibility of deriving metaphysical concepts by sense, and conclude that in fact we lack such concepts. Empirical knowledge, on his account, turns out not to be knowledge in any robust sense, but consists in habits that we acquire over time that help to ensure satisfactory life.
- As we shall see when we get to Kant, even the relationship between empirical concepts and the sensible may be problematic. (Note that Hume's "copy" relationship goes unanalyzed.)

Humean Psychology

- Ideas and Impressions: According to Hume, there are two basic classes of mental state, namely ideas and impressions. Ideas and impressions differ in "force and vivacity" by degree: every idea is weaker than every impression. Impressions are both "inner" and "outer", and include sensations and emotions. Ideas include concepts, memories, imaginings.
- Ideas from Impressions: According to Hume, ideas are "copies" of impressions, and impressions represent the sole source of ideas. In addition, Hume allows that ideas may be "compounded," "transposed," "augmented," and "diminished."
- Hume's arguments for this key point are these:
    - Analysis of complex ideas always yields simple ideas which are readily understood as copies of impressions. E.g., the concept of God yields the ideas of wisdom and goodness, themselves originating, presumably, in

some ordinary impression of wisdom or goodness. (Hume provide am ore specific example.)
    - Wherever we find some impairment to sense faculties, we find a corresponding lack of ideas. E.g., as in the blind who lack an understanding of color.
- The Missing Shade of Blue: Oddly enough, Hume carefully identifies an apparent exception to the above, in which one might formulate the idea of a certain shade of blue, if confronted with a spectrum with the appropriate gap. Why he thinks this exception unimportant is baffling, particularly since he will argue that lacking any sensation of causal power, we lack the idea.

Two Objects of Knowledge

- Hume divides the possible objects of knowledge into two classes: relations of ideas and matters of fact.
- Relations of ideas include arithmetical and geometrical propositions. These can be determined *a priori*, and the truth of such propositions is not dependent upon the nature or existence of the empirical order.
- In contemporary terms, Hume's relations of ideas are *analytic* truths. On a common definition, the predicate of such propositions is "contained in" its subject. Thus, for example, in 'Every bachelor is male,' we find the predicate *is male* contained in the subject *bachelor*.
- An important feature of relations of ideas, as Hume understands them, is that their negation implies a contradiction. While it is not so clear that negating every such statement entails a contradiction, we can see this in a simpler example: It is not the case that every bachelor is male. If *bachelor* is a compound of *unmarried* and *adult male*, then we get this contradiction: some unmarried adult male is not male.
- Note that Hume is calling attention to a traditional correlation between the analytic, the *a priori*, and reason. Reason is the faculty by which *a priori* judgments are made, and according to Hume (as with his predecessors), all such judgments are analytic. That reason, of its own accord, should tell us nothing about the empirical world per se is an important corollary, here, for Hume.
- Matters of fact concern the content and arrangement of the empirical world. They cannot be known by reason alone; they are not *a priori* truths, but rather their truth depends on the nature and existence of the empirical order. How, exactly, do we come to know such truths?
- First, note that Hume is willing to allow that the information of the senses is, generally, reliable. He is not trying to explain how my impression of a blue sky assures me of the reality of a blue sky. Hume's principal concern lies with information extending beyond immediate sense, beyond the empirical to the metaphysical – in particular, our knowledge of causal relations. This class of knowledge is of vital importance, as it tells us how to navigate our world, what to seek, what to avoid, etc.
- Hume stresses that we cannot learn causal relations *a priori*. Even, that is, apprised of the sensible properties of an object or substance before us, we cannot from these infer their causal powers. E.g., from the fluidity and transparency of

water, we cannot infer its capacity to drown us. The link, that is, between such properties of water and the events they may cause cannot be determined by reason.

- The relationship, then, between cause and effect is *arbitrary*, not determinable by reason. The relationship then can be learned only by experience. Notice, however, that the relationship thus learned is far from strict, and cannot rationally support prediction. Since the relation between cause and effect is arbitrary, experience of past such relations provides *no* evidence for further such relations.
    - Such evidence could only take one of two forms: reasoned or experienced.
    - But reason cannot make the connection between past cause-effect relations and a future one, because the past relations are arbitrary: there is no rational connection between cause and effect. Note, in particular, that there is no rational connection between these two ideas: object *x* has always been attended by effect *y*; object *x* will continue to be attended by effect *y*.
    - And experience cannot make the connection, because the future has yet to occur.
- It is only *habit*, asserts Hume, that makes us expect a past connection recur in the future. Such habits of course are useful. But their utility is no more an indication of their truth than is the past a sign of the future – no rational connection can be drawn between the two ideas.

The Causal Concept

- Having demonstrated that we cannot learn strict causal relations from experience, Hume conducts a more specific inquiry into the causal concept. Its most important feature is the idea of necessary connection or power: the notion that one thing is linked necessarily with or has the power to produce another, its effect. In accordance with his earlier-stated intention, Hume proceeds to seek the impression from which this idea derives.
- Hume observes that in experience we have no impression of any "connection" between a causal event and its effect; nor do we have any experience of the causal powers latent in an object.
- Nor does our own mental or physical activity hold any impression of a power or necessary connection. In moving a limb, we do not experience any connection between the will to move and the movement itself. Nor are we aware of any connection between mental events, aside from their succession.
- Absent any impression from which the idea might derive, Hume is left to conclude that it derives from some different impression, and the best candidate in the vicinity would appear to be a feeling of "expectation". That is, habitual experience of a conjunction between "cause" and "effect" produces in the mind its own habit: the habit of expecting the effect upon experience of the cause. That is, the "connection" between cause and effect in the mind amounts only to the expectation of the effect's following the cause.

- Hume's definition of causation: A "cause" is "an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second." Or, "if the first object had not been, the second never had existed."
- These definitions are notorious, in philosophy, first for not saying the same thing, but more importantly (in the first case) for identifying causation in terms of "constant conjunction." If we have no experience of a necessary connection between cause and effect, then, presumably, all there is to causation is a regularity of pairings of "cause" event and "effect".

To Kant

- The problem for Hume, however, is that we *do* seem to have a concept of causality that does not reduce to constant conjunction.
- Hume does seem to be right to say that we do not experience any "impression" of causal necessity or power.
- On the other hand, we distinguish readily, at least in thought, between event successions that are causal and those that are not. For example, I can distinguish between the thought of one ball's motion causing that of another, on the one hand, and the second ball's motion beginning of its own (or of no thing's) accord, on the other. If I lack the idea of causal power, it would seem that I could not make this distinction.
- We have then two problems deriving from the representation/reality dichotomy. For Descartes, we find no way of connecting a metaphysical concept with the empirical world. For Hume, we find no way of deriving a metaphysical concept from the empirical world. Kant will try to resolve both difficulties, by bringing representation and reality closer together.