

Class 23: April 20

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part 4, Section 6 (AW 525-532)

I. The Self

Locke argued that we could neither identify our selves with our bodies nor our souls, in a traditional sense of 'soul'.

Instead, he argued that we identify with our conscious experience, linked by memory.

Berkeley worried, though, that given Locke's constraints on our capacities to acquire beliefs, we have no sense of self.

We never sense our selves.

We sense our bodies, but they are always changing, while the self remains constant.

We have no idea of the self, which Berkeley identified with the soul, or of God.

There can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit; for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert... they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts... The words *will*, *soul*, *spirit* do not stand for different ideas or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which, being an agent, cannot be like or represented by any idea whatsoever - though it must be admitted at the same time that we have some notion of soul, spirit, and the operations of the mind, such as willing, loving, hating, inasmuch as we know or understand the meaning of those words (Berkeley, *Principles* §27, AW 452b).

Thus, Berkeley abandoned, for these special cases, his strict policy of never admitting an object that was not first in the senses.

He claims that we have notions of the self and God, even if we do not have ideas of them.

We posit the self in order to unify our experiences; we posit God as the source of all the ideas.

Esse is percipi or *percipere*; to exist is either to be perceived or to perceive.

Hume agrees with Berkeley that we have no impression, and thus no idea, of the self.

But, where Berkeley relaxed his epistemic standards and allowed for notions in addition to ideas, Hume stands his ground.

Since we have no idea of the self, we have no reason to believe in any such thing.

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 (*Treatise* I.4.6, AW 526a).

Hume's claim that the self must be precisely identical over time seems a bit too strong.

As we age, and acquire more experiences, we have different properties.

Even having lunch, or shifting our bodies slightly to the left, changes our relations to the world, without changing our ordinary conception of our selves.

Still, Hume's point is that there is no underlying, unifying object which we can call the self.

There are just perceptions.

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 (*Treatise* I.4.6, AW 526a).

The self, then, is just a loose bundle of experiences.

The experiences are joined only by the same connections among ideas that govern all of our thoughts: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.

But, those principles do not connect ideas; they merely conjoin them.

Even memory, on which Locke based his account of personal identity, merely demonstrates those conjunctions.

It can not add further connections.

And anyway, the common notion of self which we are pursuing outruns our memories: there are experiences which I call mine that I do not remember.

Memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. It will be incumbent on those who affirm that memory produces entirely our personal identity to give a reason why we can thus extend our identity beyond our memory (*Treatise* I.4.6, AW 530b).

Instead of being a paradigm of unity, as the rationalists all saw it, the self is an exemplar of diversity. Just as Berkeley argued that the apple is just a bundle of independent sense experiences, its taste independent from its roundness and its crunch, we are just a collection of various, independent experiences.

As far as we know, the world itself is just a loose collection of events, unconnected by causal laws. Everything is particular, and all the particulars are independent.

Every distinct perception which enters into the composition of the mind is a distinct existence and is different and distinguishable and separable from every other perception, either contemporary or successive (AW 529b).

Even the self is dissolved.

As Melchert points out, Hume's claim that there is no self is similar to the Buddhist view.

There is no I, beyond the experiences.

On the Hume-Buddha view, Descartes's claim that the cogito yields the existence of a thinker is too strong.

There is just thought.

Hume was not fully satisfied with his account, his destruction, of personal identity, as you can see in his Appendix.

He did not return to the topic in the *Enquiry*.

It might have been too skeptical a conclusion even for Hume.

II. Skepticism and the Problem of Induction, Redux

Hume's skepticism is centered on the problem of induction, which persists, in extended fashion, in contemporary philosophy.

We can identify three problems that might be called problems of induction.

The first might be called the weak problem of induction.

WI We have limited intelligence and experience.

There is not enough evidence to draw the conclusions that we draw.

Scientific theories are generally under-determined by the evidence.

Often there are two or more competing yet equally well-supported theories about the world.

Such theories agree on all the empirical evidence we have gathered.

Even if we presume that physical laws will be uniform and stable, we don't know which theory to use.

If we were smarter or had more time, we could solve the problem of WI by gathering more evidence.

WI is not Hume's problem of induction.

It is just a problem of limitations on evidence.

It is not really a philosophical problem.

The second problem might be called the strong problem of induction.

SI Even given all possible evidence from the past, we can not know that the laws of nature will not shift radically and unexpectedly.

SI is Hume's problem.

Despite Hume's complaints about inductive processes, we do make successful predictions.

We presume that the laws of nature will remain uniform and stable, even if that assumption is unjustified.

The third problem of induction is often called the new riddle of induction.

The new riddle gets its name from Nelson Goodman's *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*.

You know what it means for an object to be green.

Consider the property called 'grue'.

An object is grue if it is green until 1/1/2020, when it suddenly turns blue.

How can you tell if a plant is green or grue?

All evidence for its being green is also evidence for its being grue.

Green things and grue things are exactly alike until 2020.

NRI Even given that the laws of nature remain stable, we do not know which predicates are confirmed.

NRI shows that Hume's problem is not just about physical laws, but about common terms we use to describe the world, too.

For, one could construct other artificial properties, like the property of being a papod.

A papod is a piece of paper which, on 1/1/2020, turns into an Ipod.

All papods look exactly like pieces of paper right now.

There is, in principle, no way to tell them apart.

SI and NRI are among the most serious problems in philosophy, especially in the philosophy of science. Berkeley had shown that Lockean empiricist principles led to difficulties with our beliefs in an external, material world.

Hume shows that these problems infect all of science, not merely belief in matter.

Goodman shows that the problem infects even our most common uses of language.

Berkeley thinks that we can continue to speak with the vulgar and think with the learned.

Hume shows that even the most learned beliefs are unjustified.

Hume recommends a practical response to the skeptical problem.

We have no evidence for our beliefs in laws governing an external world, but we proceed as if the world exists as we perceive it.

The philosopher who seeks universal truths will be frustrated, but we can just ignore the skeptical questions.

The abstruse philosophy, being founded on a turn of mind which cannot enter into business and action, vanishes when the philosopher leaves the shade and comes into open day, nor can its principles easily retain any influence over our conduct and behavior. The feelings of our heart, the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affections, dissipate all its conclusions and reduce the profound philosopher to a mere plebeian (§I, AW 534a-b).

Berkeley decried skepticism as an immoral philosophy.

Hume denies that skepticism leads to immorality.

As we saw in the discussion of free will, Hume thinks that moral responsibility is consistent with his claims.

Hume sees skepticism as practically defeasible.

The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism*, or the excessive principles of skepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools, where it is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade and by the presence of the real objects which actuate our passions and sentiments are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke and leave the most determined skeptic in the same condition as other mortals (§XII.2, AW 597b).

Extreme skepticism is self-refuting.

The Cartesian doubt...were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as plainly it is not) would be entirely incurable and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject (§XII.1, AW 593a).

A Pyrrhonian cannot expect that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind or, if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease, and men remain in a total lethargy until the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence (§XII.2, AW 598a).

Hume's skepticism is a philosophical position, not a practical one.

We leave through the door, rather than through the window, despite the fact that we have no justification

for our actions.

Despite such claims, Hume's work has long been deemed excessively skeptical.

Some contemporary research on Hume, though, minimizes the importance of skepticism to his greater goals.

As Tlumak points out, at the beginning of his chapter on Hume, some philosophers see him as the intellectual ancestor of today's naturalists.

Instead of arguing for skepticism, we can see Hume as trying to develop a science of human nature, of psychology, using the success of physical science as a paradigm.

This view of Hume's work, while not obviously the best interpretation of his words, has been fruitful.

III. Conclusions

The empiricists of the modern era believed that they could limit the extravagant speculations of the continental rationalists by paying close attention to our epistemic capacities.

As early as Hobbes, we saw attention paid to psychological matters, especially the principles governing the connections of our ideas.

Hobbes's analogy of the water on the table was meant to illuminate the way in which our thoughts are connected.

Locke claimed that our ideas of reflection were those produced by memory, comparison, augmentation, and abstraction.

Hume claims that the connections among ideas are exhausted by the three categories of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect relations.

Philosophy of mind throughout the modern era is characterized by a representational theory, in which we apprehend only our ideas, which may or may not stand for objects external to us.

The representational theory may be contrasted with Aristotle's theory of direct perception, in which we are immediately acquainted with the external world.

For all of the moderns, our experience of the world is mediated by our ideas.

The representational theory leads to the Lockean veil of ideas; we are cut off from the external world.

The empiricists, who all agreed with Locke that the contents of the mind have to arise in sense experience, thought of ideas as pictures in the mind, like a movie in which the external world is duplicated.

But even Descartes held the representational theory.

The lasting importance of Descartes's work, for the theory of mind, is that he separated thought from sensation; our ideas need not be sense impressions.

That is the point of the chiliagon example in the Fifth Meditation, for instance: we know about the chiliagon without having anything like a clear and distinct sense idea of it.

Indeed, it is helpful to think of Descartes's criterion as clear and distinct conception, rather than perception.

Both Berkeley and Hume may be read, in retrospect, as reductio arguments on the representational theory of mind, though of course they did not think of their work in that way.

Berkeley shows that this theory of mind, coupled with our sensory apparatus, gives us no reason to believe in a material world.

Hume, as we have seen, shows that the combination gives us no reason to believe that we have knowledge of the laws of nature.

It looks as if something has gone seriously wrong, here.

What is the alternative, though?

In contemporary philosophy of mind, substantial attention has been paid to the nature of ideas, and to the language of thought.

If you are interested in such questions, you should pursue a course in the philosophy of mind, and in the philosophy of language.

But, the modern era has one last gasp.

Kant thinks that he can find his way through the haze by adopting a transcendental method of arguing.

IV. Postscript on Humean Supervenience

In the section of these notes on personal identity, and in the discussion of induction, I mentioned that according to Hume, as far as we know, the world might be completely disconnected, rather than unified by causal laws.

Questions about the nature of the laws, and the deep structure of the world, persist in contemporary philosophy.

There is a view, called Humean Supervenience (HS), defended in the twentieth century by David Lewis, on which the laws of nature are not real properties of the world.

The world is just the loose conjunction of events that is all we can know about the world.

All there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another (Lewis, 1986).

HS derives, of course, from Hume's work.

All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another, but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected* (§VII.2, AW 562b).

Hume's claim is epistemological: we experience only constant conjunction of events, not connections, and so that is all we can know about the world.

Lewis's claim is metaphysical: the world itself is just a loose connection of events.

Hume does not deny that there are causes, or necessary connections, or laws.

He just argues that we have no evidence of them.

We are ignorant of the ultimate springs and principles of nature.

Lewis's claim is that laws of nature have no metaphysical status beyond the local matters of fact to which they apply.

They are nothing more than regularities among the facts.

What the local facts are is a matter of some dispute.

Mass and position seem to be local facts, as long as we choose a frame of reference.

Motion is a relation between two local facts over time.

In contrast to HS, some philosophers defend the reality, and the governing quality, of the laws of nature. In an example from both Saul Kripke and David Armstrong, reminiscent of Newton's bucket example, we are asked to consider two possible worlds that contain only a completely homogeneous and continuous disk, or sphere.

There is no difference discernible among the parts of the sphere, even at the most fundamental level.

In one of these worlds, the sphere is spinning.
In one of these worlds, the sphere is stationary.
We can see that there are differences between the two worlds.
But there are no differences in the facts within in the world.
There are no distinct parts to discern, since the sphere is homogeneous.
So, there are no differences between any two specific points or regions in the two worlds at any point.
The local qualities are all the same in both worlds.

In order to distinguish the two spheres, we must pick out two arbitrary regions, one on each sphere, and an arbitrary reference frame for each world, and identify the two regions.
At one moment, these regions will be (by stipulation) in the same place.
At another moment, keeping the reference frame constant, the two regions will be in different places.
This procedure will allow us to differentiate the worlds.
But, notice, it requires that we be able to identify one region in one worlds over time.
It requires us to be able to differentiate parts of the sphere over time.
This sort of persistence through time is unavailable to the defender of HS.
For, there are no local qualities, temporally local qualities, that will support this difference.
Even to formulate, say, the velocity of one region, is to talk about the change in position over time.
Only a temporally persistent object can change location over time.
We need some way to identify the object that is changing over time.
And, ex hypothesi, there are no differences among any of the parts or regions in either of the worlds!

A person with a little bit of physics and calculus might suppose that one could try to differentiate between the parts of the rotating sphere and the parts of the stationary sphere using instantaneous velocity.
Or, we could use the Lorentz transformations to note that one world is contracting a bit.
That would be smart, but it would not help us to differentiate between worlds with sphere rotating in opposite directions.
Leibniz might help, here, since he would claim that two such worlds, with no discernible difference, could not possibly exist.
To use the Leibniz strategy, though, one would have to defend the principle of sufficient reason, which no one really believes any more.

Here is another example of how HS might be insufficient, from Michael Tooley.
In Tooley's world, there are 10 particles.
So, there are 55 possible interactions.
Imagine that we have studied 54 of them, and we know the laws which govern these 54.
But, suppose conditions are such that the last pair, X and Y, never interact.
Still, if X and Y did interact, there would be some result.
There is nothing in the world to determine the nature of this interaction.
Still, it does seem like there would be some result.
Intuitively, there are laws governing their interaction.
But nothing non-nomic will suit the bill.
The laws of nature do not seem to merely reduce to facts about the world.