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OXFORD WORLD’S CLASSICS

David Hume

An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Peter Millican
Most of the argument of Section XI is put in the mouth of ‘a friend who loves sceptical paradoxes’, and placed in a classical context, to enable Hume to distance himself from his controversial critique of the Design Argument for a Christian God, which when he wrote was the most respected weapon in the theist’s arsenal (cf. §5, above). Hume’s main point against that argument is that it can never prove the existence of a being with more impressive qualities (e.g. power, wisdom, or goodness) than are actually manifested in the world. So we can never argue first from the world to God, and then back from the nature of that inferred God to draw new conclusions about the world—for example that there is an afterlife in which the good will be rewarded and the evil punished.

Just as in Section X, therefore, Hume is working out the implications of basing our knowledge of the world on induction. ‘Experimental theists’ claim to provide a solid rational foundation for their belief in God, based not on speculative metaphysics, nor on special divine revelation, but on the relatively down-to-earth methods of inductive science, reasonably ‘drawing inferences from effects to causes’. Hume counters that they have aided the ascent of reason by the wings of imagination; otherwise they could not thus change their manner of inference, and argue from causes to effects; presuming, that a more perfect production than the present world would be more suitable to such perfect beings as the gods, and forgetting that they have no reason to ascribe to these celestial beings any perfection or any attribute, but what can be found in the present world. (E 11.16)

Again Hume attacks a theistic argument, and in doing so uses—and highlights—principles that are of far broader application. As well as this principle of proportionality, that we should proportion hypothesized causes to their observed effects, Section XI also re-emphasizes the principle of analogy from Section IX, that an inductive argument’s strength varies with the degree of similarity between the objects involved, so that any inference from human purposes to those

of a god is bound to be weak (E 11.25–7). Hume also hints at two other general principles, that it is problematic to draw conclusions about any supposed cause that is known only through a single manifestation (E 11.25–6), and—even more so—any supposed cause of a unique type (E 11.30).

18. Section XII: ‘Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy’

In Section XII, Hume discusses a wide array of sceptical arguments, clarifying his own finely balanced attitude to them. While acknowledging many of them to be irrefutable, he nevertheless resists, on practical rather than purely theoretical grounds, being forced by them into ‘excessive’ scepticism. This approach is typified by his short treatment of antecedent scepticism at E 12.3–4, where he contrasts the futile and self-defeating extremes of Cartesian doubt with a more moderate caution and modesty that he fully endorses. He then moves on to discuss several varieties of consequent scepticism—scepticism arising from specific considerations rather than generalized a priori distrust of our faculties—and these occupy most of Part i and all of Part ii.

Turning first to our sensory belief in the external world, Hume attributes this to a ‘blind and powerful instinct of nature’ (E 12.8), which, however, leads us to identify physical objects with the very images that appear to our minds. This identification raises obvious problems, because the perceptions of the mind are so fleeting (E 12.9); hence to maintain our instinctive belief in a durable external world, modern philosophers such as Locke adopt the theory of representative realism: postulating physical objects that are distinct from, and causes of, those perceptions. Drawing on his theory of causation, Hume now emphasizes the impossibility of establishing any such theory. If we are only ever directly acquainted with our perceptions, and never with their supposed causes, then no connexion between the two—no ‘constant conjunction’ (cf. E 7.28, 8.5)—can ever be observed. Even worse, an argument derived from Berkeley (E 12.15) suggests that the Lockean theory is not only groundless but vacuous or incoherent.

31 In the excerpt from Hume’s Dialogues (see Appendix III), Cleantus expresses this preference very clearly. It is instructive to read Section XI of the Enquiry alongside both the Dialogues and the essay ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’ (see Appendix II).

32 Descartes used extreme scepticism as a tool for sweeping away traditional views, and claimed to establish his own first principles as ‘clearly and distinctly perceived’, supposedly immune even to the most radical doubt.
For Locke's understanding of perception depends on a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, where the former (e.g. length, movement, solidity) are supposed to be in the objects themselves in a way that resembles our ideas of them, while the latter (e.g. felt hardness, temperature, colour) are not. But Hume agrees with Berkeley that our ideas of primary qualities are entirely dependent on those of secondary qualities; for example we acquire an idea of an extended area by seeing it differently coloured from its surroundings. Hence if we try to imagine an external object as independent of our perceptions, distinct from all mind-dependent qualities, then we are forced to 'bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary', and we are left only with '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).

One important upshot of this discussion is that any attempt to penetrate the essence of physical objects—so popular amongst theological metaphysicians intent on proving matter's inertness (cf. §6, above)—is doomed to failure.

Part ii of Section XII turns to scepticism about our reasoning faculties, starting with some of the notorious paradoxes of infinite divisibility. Hume describes and seems to endorse them, though in a note (E 12.20 endnote [P]) he suggests that it may be possible 'to avoid these absurdities and contradictions', by appeal to a non-abstractionist theory of general ideas (as developed more fully in Treatise 1.1.7). He then moves on to scepticism about factual reasoning, first dismissing—on practical grounds—an 'excessive' popular variant which takes our inconsistent judgements to undermine all inductive reasoning:

The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism, 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 (E 12.21)

More substantial is a philosophical variant of scepticism about induction, Hume's own argument from Section IV in summary form (E 12.22). This too can be criticized as excessive if it goes to the Pyrrhonian extreme of attempting to undermine all belief, but fortunately for our survival, human nature is too strong to make such avoidance of belief a genuine possibility. We simply cannot help forming beliefs through custom, as Hume has already explained in Section V, even though we have no rational basis for the assumption of uniformity on which such beliefs are founded.

This appeal to the unavoidability of belief can be used to dismiss total scepticism—i.e. 'undistinguished doubts' (E 12.24) about everything—but it need not imply an indiscriminate acceptance of whatever we are inclined to believe. Indeed Hume suggests that a sceptical appreciation of the weakness of our faculties, combined with a recognition of the practical inevitability of belief, can lead us to a form of undogmatic miti gated scepticism in which our doubts and beliefs are cautiously assessed and 'corrected by common sense and reflection'. It is also natural to combine this caution with a modest restriction of our enquiries to 'such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding' (E 12.25), given that even in common life, we cannot provide any solid reason for supposing our faculties to be reliable. Empirical science can comfortably be accommodated by this approach, in so far as it is simply a more systematic application of everyday inductive reasoning, that is, 'the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected'. Moreover the earlier sections of the Enquiry have already shown what such methodizing and correction involves, and how custom can ground such procedures as the explanation of phenomena by relatively simple and potentially quantifiable laws (E 4.12-13, 7.25 endnote [D], 7.29 endnote [E]), the calculation of probabilities by past frequencies (E 6.2-4, 10.3-7), the systematic search for hidden causes (E 8.13-15), the use of analogy (E 9.1, 11.24-6), proportionate inference (E 11.12-16), and so on.

The overall shape of this defence of inductive science is most concisely sketched by Philo in Hume's posthumous Dialogues concerning Natural Religion. Scepticism may be theoretically irrefutable, but even the sceptic must 'act... and live, and converse, like other men', since human nature gives him no choice. Reasonings of common life are thus vindicated, but we may well be driven further by curiosity, in which case our scientific speculations can also share in this vindication if they proceed in the same spirit, as a systematic extension of everyday inductive thinking:

[The sceptic] considers... that every one, even in common life, is constrained to have more or less of this philosophy; that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and
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reasoning; that the larger experience we acquire, and the stronger reason we are endued with, we always render our principles the more general and comprehensive; and that what we call philosophy [i.e. natural philosophy or science] is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life; and we may only expect greater stability, if not greater truth, from our philosophy, on account of its exacter and more scrupulous method of proceeding. (D 134, pp. 154–5 below)

Hume's scepticism thus leaves room for a scientific approach founded on modest inductive systematization, but the sceptical thrust remains in what is excluded. All knowledge of matter of fact beyond what we immediately perceive and remember depends on causation (E 4.4), while causal laws—whether concerning the operations of matter (E 4.6–13, 7.6–8) or mind (E 7.9–20)—are discoverable only by experience. 'If we reason a priori, any thing may appear able to produce any thing' (E 12.29). Hence rational insight into the nature of things is a hopeless fantasy, and it is impossible a priori to prove the existence of God, or indeed of anything else (E 12.13, 12.28–9).

Thus a priori demonstration is limited to the abstract realm of ideas, but only in mathematics are our ideas sufficiently precise to make demonstrative argument genuinely fruitful (E 12.27). The upshot of all this is to limit the worthwhile fields of investigation to mathematics (which is a priori but concerns only relations of ideas) and inductive empirical science (which concerns matters of fact but is uncertain and empirical). Any work that purports to transcend these limits, by establishing matters of fact with demonstrative certainty—what Immanuel Kant would later call 'synthetic a priori knowledge'—can therefore be roundly condemned, as Hume expresses in his famous concluding paragraph:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning containing quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. (E 12.34)

Note on the Text

What is now known as Hume's first Enquiry was originally published in 1748, by Andrew Millar of the Strand, London, under the title Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding. A second edition appeared in 1750, and this was reprinted in 1751 and 1753, the latter in the form of volume ii of Hume's four-volume Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects. This arrangement was retained in the third edition of 1756, at which point volume ii was the only one of the four to be reissued. The next edition of the Essays and Treatises, in 1758, combined the constituent works into a single volume, and here Hume permanently changed the title of his Philosophical Essays to An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding. In the four-volume 1760 and 1770 editions of the Essays and Treatises, the Enquiry appeared in volume iii with A Dissertation on the Passions. In the two-volume editions of 1764, 1767, 1772, and 1777, it appeared at the beginning of volume ii, followed in order by A Dissertation on the Passions, An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals, and The Natural History of Religion.

The Final 1772 and 1777 Editions

Hume took great pains over correcting his texts, and there is no doubt that the last two editions of the Enquiry that he prepared, of 1772 and 1777, are the most authoritative. The latter incorporates corrections made shortly before his death in 1776, most notably a substantial deletion from Section III (well-motivated in my view, since the deleted material distracts from, rather than contributing to, the central thrust of the work). What was for many years the standard modern edition, by Selby-Bigge and later Nidditch (Clarendon Press, 3rd edn., 1975), like the previously standard Green and Grose edition, follows the posthumous 1777 text, though with well over a thousand editorial intrusions or errors (mainly of punctuation). Tom Beauchamp's recent Clarendon critical edition (2000) is vastly superior, but he instead takes the 1772 edition as his copytext on the basis that this was 'the last edition to be seen through the press with
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 it to your own reflection to pursue the consequences of this principle. I shall just observe, that, as the antagonists of Epicurus always suppose the universe, an effect quite singular and unparalleled, to be the proof of a Deity, a cause no less singular and unparalleled; your reasonings, upon that supposition, seem, at least, to merit our attention. There is, I own, some difficulty, how we can ever return from the cause to the effect, and, reasoning from our ideas of the former, infer any alteration on the latter, or any addition to it.

**Section XI**

**Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy**

**PART I**

There is not a greater number of philosophical reasonings, displayed upon any subject, than those, which prove the existence of a Deity, and refute the fallacies of Atheists;* and yet the most religious philosophers still dispute whether any man can be so blinded as to be a speculative atheist. How shall we reconcile these contradictions? The knights-errant, who wandered about to clear the world of dragons and giants, never entertained the least doubt with regard to the existence of these monsters.

[2] The Sceptic is another enemy of religion, who naturally provokes the indignation of all divines and graver philosophers; though it is certain, that no man ever met with any such absurd creature, or conversed with a man, who had no opinion or principle concerning any subject, either of action or speculation. This begets a very natural question; What is meant by a sceptic? And how far it is possible to push these philosophical principles of doubt and uncertainty?

[3] There is a species of scepticism, antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes* and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident.* The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject.

[4] It must, however, be confessed, that this species of scepticism, when more moderate, may be understood in a very reasonable sense,
and is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving
a proper impartiality in our judgments, and weaning our mind from
all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash
opinion.* To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by
timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and
examine accurately all their consequences; though these means we
shall make both a slow and a short progress in our systems; are the only
methods; by which we can ever hope to reach truth, and attain a proper
stability and certainty in our determinations.

There is another species of scepticism, consequent to science and
enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the absolute
fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any
fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about
which they are commonly employed. Even our very senses are brought
into dispute, by a certain species of philosophers; and the maxims of
common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound
principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology. As these para-
doxical tenets (if they may be called tenets) are to be met with in some
philosophers, and the refutation of them in several, they naturally
excite our curiosity, and make us enquire into the arguments, on which
they may be founded.

I need not insist upon the more trite topics, employed by the scep-
tics in all ages, against the evidence of sense,* such as those which are
derived from the imperfection and fallaciousness of our organs, on number-
less occasions; the crooked appearance of an oar in water; the various
aspects of objects, according to their different distances; the double
images which arise from the pressing one eye; with many other appear-
ances of a like nature. These sceptical topics, indeed, are only sufficient
to prove, that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but
that we must correct their evidence by reason, and by considera-
tions, derived from the nature of the medium, the distance of the object, and
the disposition of the organ, in order to render them, within their sphere,
the proper criteria of truth and falsehood. There are other more profound
arguments against the senses, which admit not of so easy a solution.

It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct or
prepossession, 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, but would
exist, though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated.

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 pow-
erful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented
by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any sus-
picion, 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. Our presence bestows not being on it:
Our absence does not annihilate it. It preserves its existence uniform
and entire, independent of the situation of intelligent beings, who
perceive or contemplate it.

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,
without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the
mind and the object. The table, which we see, seems to diminish,
as we remove farther from it: But the real table, which exists inde-
pendent 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 exis-
tences, which we consider, when we say, this house and that tree, are
nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or represen-
tations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent.

So far, then, are we necessitated by reasoning to contradict or
depart from the primary instincts of nature, and to embrace a new
system with regard to the evidence of our senses. But here philosophy
finds herself extremely embarrassed, when she would justify this new
system, and obviate the cavils* and objections of the sceptics. She can
no longer plead the infallible and irresistible instinct of nature: For
that led us to a quite different system, which is acknowledged fallible
and even erroneous. And to justify this pretended philosophical
system, by a chain of clear and convincing argument, or even any
appearance of argument, exceeds the power of all human capacity.

By what argument can it be proved, that the perceptions of
the mind must be caused by external objects, entirely different from
them, though resembling them (if that be possible) and could not arise
either from the energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestion of some
invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us? It is acknowledged, that, in fact, many of these perceptions arise not from any thing external, as in dreams, madness, and other diseases. And nothing can be more inexplicable than the manner, in which body should so operate upon mind as ever to convey an image of itself to a substance, supposed of so different, and even contrary a nature.

[12] 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.

[13] To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit.* If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention, that, if the external world be once called in question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes.

[14] 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, may they say, 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.

[15] There is another sceptical topic* of a like nature, derived from the most profound philosophy; which might merit our attention, were it requisite to dive so deep, in order to discover arguments and reasonings, which can so little serve to any serious purpose. It is universally allowed by modern enquirers, that all the sensible qualities of objects, such as hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, &c. 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 scalene,* 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*.

[16] 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.*

PART II

[17] It may seem a very extravagant attempt of the sceptics to destroy reason by argument and ratiocination; yet is this the grand scope of all

32 See endnote [N], p. 130.
tire enquiries and disputes. They endeavour to find objections, both to our abstract reasonings, and to those which regard matter of fact and existence.

[18] The chief objection against all abstract reasonings is derived from the ideas of space and time; ideas, which, in common life and to a careless view, are very clear and intelligible, but when they pass through the scrutiny of the profound sciences (and they are the chief object of these sciences) afford principles, which seem full of absurdity and contradiction. No priestly dogmas, invented on purpose to tame and subdue the rebellious reason of mankind, ever shocked common sense more than the doctrine of the infinite divisibility of extension, with its consequences; as they are pompously displayed by all geometrical and metaphysicians, with a kind of triumph and exultation. A real quantity, infinitely less than any finite quantity, containing quantities infinitely less than itself, and so on in infinitum; this is an edifice so bold and prodigious, that it is too weighty for any pretended demonstration to support, because it shocks the clearest and most natural principles of human reason. But what renders the matter more extraordinary, is, that these seemingly absurd opinions are supported by a chain of reasoning, the clearest and most natural; nor is it possible for us to allow the premises without admitting the consequences. Nothing can be more convincing and satisfactory than all the conclusions concerning the properties of circles and triangles; and yet, when these are once received, how can we deny, that the angle of contact between a circle and its tangent is infinitely less than any rectilineal angle, that as you may encrease the diameter of the circle in infinitum, this angle of contact becomes still less, even in infinitum, and that the angle of contact between other curves and their tangents may be infinitely less than those between any circle and its tangent, and so on, in infinitum? The demonstration of these principles seems as unexceptionable as that which proves the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right ones, though the latter opinion be natural and easy, and the former big with contradiction and absurdity. Reason here seems to be thrown into a kind of amazement and suspense, which, without the suggestions of any sceptic, gives her a diffidence of herself, and of the ground on which she treads. She sees a full light, which illuminates certain places; but that light borders upon the most profound darkness. And between these she is so dazzled and confounded, that she scarcely can pronounce with certainty and assurance concerning any one object.

[19] The absurdity of these bold determinations of the abstract sciences seems to become, if possible, still more palpable with regard to time than extension. An infinite number of real parts of time, passing in succession, and exhausted one after another, appears so evident a contradiction, that no man, one should think, whose judgment is not corrupted, instead of being improved, by the sciences, would ever be able to admit of it.

[20] Yet still reason must remain restless, and unquiet, even with regard to that scepticism, to which she is driven by these seeming absurdities and contradictions. How any clear, distinct idea can contain circumstances, contradictory to itself, or to any other clear, distinct idea, is absolutely incomprehensible; and is, perhaps, as absurd as any proposition, which can be formed. So that nothing can be more sceptical, or more full of doubt and hesitation, than this scepticism itself, which arises from some of the paradoxical conclusions of geometry or the science of quantity.

[21] The sceptical objections to moral evidence, or to the reasonings concerning matter of fact, are either popular or philosophical. The popular objections are derived from the natural weakness of human understanding; the contradictory opinions, which have been entertained in different ages and nations; the variations of our judgment in sickness and health, youth and old age, prosperity and adversity; the perpetual contradiction of each particular man's opinions and sentiments; with many other topics of that kind. It is needless to insist farther on this head. These objections are but weak. For as, in common life, we reason every moment concerning fact and existence, and cannot possibly subsist, without continually employing this species of argument, any popular objections, derived from thence, must be insufficient to destroy that evidence. The great subverter of Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of scepticism, 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 sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.

[22] The sceptic, therefore, had better keep within his proper sphere, and display those philosophical objections, which arise from more profound researches.* Here he seems to have ample matter of triumph; while he justly insists, that all our evidence for any matter of fact, which lies beyond the testimony of sense or memory, is derived entirely from the relation of cause and effect; that we have no other idea of this relation than that of two objects, which have been frequently conjoined together; that we have no argument to convince us, that objects, which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise, in other instances, be conjoined in the same manner; and that nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful. While the sceptic insists upon these topics, he shews his force, or rather, indeed his own and our weakness; and seems, for the time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction. These arguments might be displayed at greater length, if any durable good or benefit to society could ever be expected to result from them.

[23] For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, What is his meaning? And what he proposes by all these curious researches? He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer. A Copernican or Ptolemaic,* who supports each his different system of astronomy, may hope to produce a conviction, which will remain constant and durable, with his audience. A Stoic or Epicurean* displays principles, which may not only be durable, but which have an effect on conduct and behaviour. But 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 any thing, 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, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. It is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.

PART III

[24] There is, indeed, a more mitigated scepticism or academical philosophy, which may be both durable and useful, and which may, in part, be the result of this Pyrrhonism,* or excessive scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection. The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments. To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy; and they think, that they can never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy. The illiterate may reflect on the disposition of the learned, who, amidst all the advantages of study and reflection, are commonly still diffident in their determinations: And if any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate...
human nature. In general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner.

[25] Another species of mitigated scepticism, which may be of advantage to mankind, and which may be the natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, is the limitation of our enquiries* to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding. The imagination of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without control into the most distant parts of space and time in order to avoid the objects, which custom has rendered too familiar to it. A correct judgment observes a contrary method, and avoiding all distant and high enquiries, confines itself to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience; leaving the more sublime topics to the embellishment of poets and orators, or to the arts of priests and politicians. To bring us to so salutary a determination, nothing can be more serviceable, than to be once thoroughly convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt, and of the impossibility, that any thing, but the strong power of natural instinct, could free us from it. Those who have a propensity to philosophy, will still continue their researches; because they reflect, that, besides the immediate pleasure attending such an occupation, philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.* But they will never be tempted to go beyond common life, so long as they consider the imperfection of those faculties which they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations. While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?

[26] This narrow limitation, indeed, of our enquiries, is, in every respect, so reasonable, that it suffices to make the slightest examination into the natural powers of the human mind, and to compare them with their objects, in order to recommend it to us. We shall then find what are the proper subjects of science and enquiry.

[27] It seems to me, that the only objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion. As the component parts of quantity and number are entirely similar,* their relations become intricate and involved; and nothing can be more curious, as well as useful, than to trace, by a variety of mediums, their equality or inequality, through their different appearances. But as all other ideas are clearly distinct and different from each other, we can never advance farther, by our utmost scrutiny, than to observe this diversity, and, by an obvious reflection, pronounce one thing not to be another. Or if there be any difficulty in these decisions, it proceeds entirely from the undetermined meaning of words, which is corrected by juster definitions. That the square of the hypotenuse* is equal to the squares of the other two sides, cannot be known, let the terms be ever so exactly defined, without a train of reasoning and enquiry. But to convince us of this proposition, that where there is no property, there can be no injustice, it is only necessary to define the terms, and explain injustice to be a violation of property. This proposition is, indeed, nothing but a more imperfect definition. It is the same case with all those pretended syllogistical reasonings, which may be found in every other branch of learning, except the sciences of quantity and number; and these may safely, I think, be pronounced the only proper objects of knowledge and demonstration.

[28] All other enquiries of men regard only matter of fact and existence; and these are evidently incapable of demonstration. Whatever is may not be. No negation of a fact can involve a contradiction. The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. The proposition, which affirms it not to be, however false, is no less conceivable and intelligible, than that which affirms it to be. The case is different with the sciences, properly so called. Every proposition, which is not true, is there confused and unintelligible. That the cube root of 64 is equal to the half of 10, is a false proposition, and can never be distinctly conceived. But that Caesar,* or the angel Gabriel,* or any being never existed, may be a false proposition, but still is perfectly conceivable, and implies no contradiction.

[29] The existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments from its cause or its effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience. If we reason à priori, any thing may appear able to produce any thing. The falling of a pebble may, for
ought we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man controul the planets in their orbits. It is only experience,* which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Such is the foundation of moral reasoning, which forms the greater part of human knowledge, and is the source of all human action and behaviour.

[30] Moral reasonings are either concerning particular or general facts. All deliberations in life regard the former; as also all disquisitions in history, chronology, geography, and astronomy.

[31] The sciences, which treat of general facts, are politics, natural philosophy, physic, chymistry, &c. where the qualities, causes and effects of a whole species of objects are enquired into.

[32] Divinity or Theology, as it proves the existence of a Deity, and the immortality of souls, is composed partly of reasonings concerning particular, partly concerning general facts. It has a foundation in reason, so far as it is supported by experience. But its best and most solid foundation is faith and divine revelation.*

[33] Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment.* Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived. Or if we reason concerning it, and endeavour to fix its standard, we regard a new fact, to wit, the general taste of mankind, or some such fact, which may be the object of reasoning and enquiry.

[34] When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames:* For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

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HUME'S ENDNOTES

[For the editorial principles applied here, please see the Note on the Text, above.]

Endnote [A] to 2.9, p. 151

It is probable that no more was meant by those, who denied innate ideas, than that all ideas were copies of our impressions; though it must be confessed, that the terms, which they employed, were not chosen with such caution, nor so exactly defined, as to prevent all mistakes about their doctrine. For what is meant by innate? If innate be equivalent to natural, then all the perceptions and ideas of the mind must be allowed to be innate or natural, in whatever sense we take the latter word, whether in opposition to what is uncommon, artificial, or miraculous. If by innate be meant, cotemporary to our birth, the dispute seems to be frivolous; nor is it worth while to enquire at what time thinking begins, whether before, at, or after our birth. Again, the word idea, seems to be commonly taken in a very loose sense, by Locke* and others; as standing for any of our perceptions, our sensations and passions, as well as thoughts. Now in this sense, I should desire to know, what can be meant by asserting, that self-love, or resentment of injuries, or the passion between the sexes is not innate?

But admitting these terms, impressions and ideas, in the sense above explained, and understanding by innate, what is original or copied from no precedent perception, then may we assert, that all our impressions are innate, and our ideas not innate.

To be ingenious, I must own it to be my opinion, that Locke was betrayed into this question by the schoolmen,* who, making use of undefined terms, draw out their disputes to a tedious length, without ever touching the point in question. A like ambiguity and circumlocution seem to run through that philosopher's reasonings on this as well as most other subjects.

Endnote [B] to 5.5, p. 328

Nothing is more usual than for writers; even, on moral, political, or physical subjects, to distinguish between reason and experience, and to suppose, that these species of argumentation are entirely different from each other. The former are taken for the mere result of our intellectual faculties, which, by considering a priori the nature of things, and examining the effects, that must follow from their operation, establish particular principles of science and philosophy. The latter are supposed to be derived entirely from sense and observation, by which we learn what has actually resulted from the operation of particular objects, and are thence able to