

Phil 104, January 18, 2007

David Hume (1711–1776, Scottish):

Student of human nature, “Newton of the mind”: Hume aims to find universal laws that govern our perceptions, beliefs, feelings, actions, just as Newton found universal laws that govern the motion of inanimate objects (e.g., apples, planets).

Skepticism: We lack adequate grounds for many of our beliefs and other attitudes. For example, we lack any justification for our beliefs about causation, external objects, and even ourselves.

Naturalism: Nevertheless, human nature is such that we cannot help but have these beliefs and attitudes in our everyday lives, i.e., when we are not reflecting philosophically, and this is not regrettable.

Notable exception: Religious beliefs and concerns (e.g., the “monkish virtue” of humility) are undermined by philosophical reflection. When we leave the study and return to the real world, other kinds of skepticism may evaporate, but skepticism about religion lingers.

The argument of II:iii:3:

The overarching idea, roughly: Our actions are not, strictly speaking, the sort of thing that can be, or fail to be, supported by reasons, i.e., justified.

¶1:

The rationalist claim: “Every rational creature, ‘tis said, [(i)] is oblig’d to regulated his actions by reason; and [(ii)] if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, ‘till it be entirely subdu’d, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle.”

Hume’s response: The rationalist claim is false, because:

- (a) “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” and
- (b) reason “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.”

¶2:

There are two kinds of reasoning:

- (1) reasoning about abstract relations of ideas, such as logic and mathematics, and
- (2) reasoning about causal relations, i.e., what sort of things have what sort of effects.

Logical and mathematical reasoning are relevant to action only insofar as they help to establish causal relations.

¶3:

- If we desire X, then we will want to know what causes X, i.e., what means there are to attaining X.

- But causal reasoning alone cannot motivate us. Reasoning to the conclusion that Y causes X will not motivate us to bring about Y *unless* we already desire X.
- Moreover, we engage in reasoning of this kind only because we already desire X and want to know how to bring it about.
- This establishes (a).

¶4:

- Reason could oppose passion only if it could generate desires of its own.
- But as we have just seen, it cannot.
- This establishes (b).
- In sum, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”

¶5:

- The conclusions of reason are supposed to represent how things are in the world.
- Thus, they *contradict* other representations that represent the world differently.
- But my desire is *not* a representation. (That is what Hume means by “original existence”: not a copy of something else.) My desire does not *say* anything about how the world is.
- So, a conclusion of reason cannot contradict a desire.

¶6:

- Since this is the case, “passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany’d* with some judgment or opinion,”
- and “even then ‘tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment.”
- This can happen in two ways:
 - i. One has a desire, because one believes that some object exists, when it does not.
 - ii. One desires some X, because one desires some Y and one believes that X is a means to Y, when in fact X is not a means to Y.
- Otherwise, passions are not contrary to reason at all, even in the loose sense.

¶7:

- Therefore, reason and passion do not conflict.
- As soon as reason reveals an error of type (i) or (ii), our passions change accordingly.

¶8:

- Why, then, have people thought that reason alone could motivate action and that reason and passion conflict?
- Because people have mistaken the “calm passions” as part of the exercise of reason, since neither involves any strong feelings.