Approaches to Moral Philosophy (2): philosophy as scepticism (*EHU* section 12)

Hume's philosophical position has often been described as a species of scepticism. Many modern commentators take this view, especially with respect to Hume's discussions of induction, belief in an external world, belief in miracles, and the argument from design. Moreover, not only did many of Hume's contemporaries judge him to be a sceptic, Hume himself described the *Treatise* as an exercise in sceptical philosophy:

> …the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit. Nor is this all. When we believe any thing of *external* existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind … [The *Treatise*] concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. (*Abstract*)

To help us get to grips with these assessments of Hume's work (including his own assessment), it is worth noting that the term "scepticism" can be used in different ways. In Hume's time, for example, the term was typically used of philosophical positions which made the following claims: (1) that we cannot be certain of anything; (2) that even our best reasoning cannot get at the truth; and (3) that we should suspend judgement rather than accept dogmatic beliefs. These days, by contrast, the term scepticism is used more generally, to tag a wide range of positions which, in various ways, question our capacity to know. The upshot of all this is that we can answer the question 'Was Hume a sceptic?', only by reference to a particular definition of scepticism. Hume might turn out to be sceptic in one sense of the term, but not a sceptic in another. This fits with the fact that, in *EHU* 12, where the issue of scepticism is discussed explicitly, Hume rejects some, but not all, brands of scepticism.

Forms of scepticism

Antecedent and consequent scepticism

Early in *EHU* 12, Hume is critical of Cartesian scepticism. Descartes launches his quest for certainty by adopting a systematically sceptical attitude towards his ordinary, mundane beliefs, and towards the reliability of the psychological faculties that deliver such beliefs. The goal is to locate some

principle/s which is/are self-evidently certain (un-doubt-able). Hume labels scepticism such as Descartes', which is adopted at the *outset* of a philosophical investigation, *antecedent* scepticism (*EHU* 12:3). Scepticism that is generated as the *outcome* of a philosophical investigation (e.g., as a result of an examination of the reliability of our perceptual faculties), Hume calls *consequent* scepticism (*EHU* 12:5). As Hume sees it, Descartes' strategy of systematic doubt constitutes an extreme, global kind of scepticism which is overly destructive and ultimately self-defeating. Hume's response to Descartes is three-pronged. First, Hume states (without presenting any evidence) that there is no 'original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing' (*EHU* 12:3). Second, he claims that it is impossible to adopt the proposed stance of global doubt. Why he thinks this will become clear soon. Finally, he argues that Cartesian scepticism is 'entirely incurable' (*EHU 12.3*). This incurability is the direct result of Descartes' recommendation that we doubt not only all doubt-able beliefs, until we arrive at some principle which is self-evidently certain, but also that we doubt the reliability of the very psychological faculties that would need to be employed, if we are to move beyond that self-evident principle in order to rebuild the world of ordinary experience.

Pyrrhonian scepticism

Later in EHU 12, Hume considers, only to reject, another extreme kind of scepticism, namely *Pyrrhonism*. This is an ancient brand of philosophical scepticism, which hails from the teachings of Pyrrho of Elis (4th-3rd centuries BC). Pyrrho (on some interpretations at least, and certainly on Hume's) recommended that we give up on the seemingly unachievable goal of discovering what is worthy of belief, and simply suspend judgement and belief in all non-evident matters. In the case of this style of scepticism, Hume's critical response is less direct. Here's what he says:

> These principles [i.e., the principles of Pyrrhonism] may flourish and triumph in the schools [the early modern European universities where scholastic philosophers taught]; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of 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. (*EHU* 12:21)

In addition, Hume observes that the consequence of adopting Pyrrhonism would be that:

> 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. [But fortunately it] is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for this 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 … (*EHU* 12:23)

So, for Hume, Pyrrhonism is *philosophically* irrefutable, but, as it turns out, we are simply incapable of suspending belief in the way Pyrrhonism advises, because our human nature, responding to the practical demands of everyday life, reimposes itself on our behaviour, thereby swamping philosophical scepticism in the process (and a good thing too, since otherwise we would be maladaptive creatures of inaction, sitting around just waiting to die!). This response to Pyrrhonism also explains why Hume thinks that it is impossible to adopt the extreme sceptical stance of Descartes' method of systematic doubt.

Moderate or mitigated scepticism

So far Hume seems to be a critic of scepticism, but, in fact, he takes his own position to be a close cousin of a more *moderate* or *mitigated* style of ancient scepticism. This is the brand of scepticism that, in the title of *EHU* 12, he identifies as the *academical philosophy*. (Hume's title, 'Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy', may be a little misleading. His aim is not to compare scepticism with a non-sceptical philosophy, but to adjudicate between different forms of scepticism.) Academical philosophy is so-called because it was a philosophical position that emerged in Plato's Academy. According to Hume, it amounts to a Pyrrhonism which has been corrected by 'common sense and reflection', and which is thereby rendered both 'durable and useful' (*EHU* 12:24). Academical sceptics hoped to avoid unsupported conjecture or dogmatism, but (unlike Pyrrhonists) they retained truth as a proper philosophical goal. They developed methods for exposing and assessing arguments, and they were happy that probabilities were a good-enough basis for making judgements. In line with academical scepticism, Hume holds that we can hope to reach the truth, if we attend to all the evidence, avoid prejudice, begin with clear and self-evident principles, advance by 'timorous and sure steps', and subject the conclusions and the consequences of our arguments to critical appraisal (*EHU* 12:4).

If we left things like this, Hume's philosophical position would appear to be no more than an expression of right-minded critical philosophy. But such an assessment of Hume would miss the true nature and extent of his scepticism. To understand Hume's position properly, we need to look harder at the structure and the results of certain specific arguments which Hume mounts in *EHU*. (This interpretation of Hume is defended by, for example, Robert Fogelin, in his paper, 'Hume's Scepticism', in David Fate Norton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*.)

The extent of Hume's scepticism

Hume's genuinely sceptical conclusions are the outcome of (what might be thought of as) a pincer movement in some of his arguments. This pincer movement is particularly obvious in his discussions

of induction and belief in an external world. Rationalism, e.g., Cartesianism, held, roughly, that belief is the product of reason (rational, intellectual thought), so sound belief is the result of the sound use of reason. But, according to Hume, rationalism is false. The source of our beliefs about so-far unobserved matters of fact (i.e., our inductive beliefs), or of our belief in an external world, cannot be reason (i.e., sound rational argument), because (a) the non-philosophical public have these beliefs, but they are not acquainted with any such arguments, and (b) there are no sound rational arguments for the beliefs in question (and so there is no rational justification for such beliefs). This argument constitutes the first part of Hume's pincer movement, which concludes that reason is not the source of the beliefs in question. Hume is, then, a sceptic *about reason*.

The second part of the pincer movement is the positive account that Hume gives of such beliefs. Consider first Hume's positive account of inductive belief:

> All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or the senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object ... This belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent (EHU 5:8).

Hume claims that the psychological mechanism responsible for induction is *custom* or *habit*. When we have experienced a constant conjunction between two types of events, say events of type A being followed by events of type B, custom leads us to form an expectation that when another instance of event-type A occurs, it will be followed by an instance of event-type B. According to Hume, this mechanism of custom has the status of a *natural instinct* (EHU 5:22).

As we shall see, Hume's positive account of belief in an external world is similar. We are 'carried, by a natural instinct' (*EHU* 12:7) to suppose the existence of an external world which is independent of our perceptions of it. So we believe in this external world not because of reason, but because of a 'hard-wired' *natural instinct* which is *irresistible*.

One's first reaction to all this may be that if our beliefs are produced not by reason, but by natural instincts, then the scepticism about reason that Hume advocates does not undermine those beliefs. But this comforting conclusion may well not be warranted. Sceptical challenges in epistemology (roughly, the philosophy of what we know and of how we know it) turn generically on the claim that our beliefs (or some subset of them) cannot be *philosophically justified*. In other words, the sceptic claims that while we may well hold certain beliefs, we can give no philosophical justification for that fact. But now if philosophical justification is the benchmark here, we would be forgiven for thinking that the innate psychological mechanisms (the irresistible natural instincts) that, according to Hume,

are causally responsible for our inductive beliefs, and for our belief in an external world, do not provide *any* kind of justification for those beliefs. On this interpretation, Hume certainly gives us an *explanation* of why we hold certain beliefs (it's the operation of natural instincts); but he does not attempt to provide a *justification* for those beliefs. In other words, the conclusion of Hume's account – that we are all saved from extreme scepticism because, in practical life, our human nature submerges our doubts – is a *sceptical* conclusion.

Hume's mitigated scepticism

Hume is clearly *not* a sceptic about all uses of reason. In its proper domain (which, roughly, is mathematics and formal logic), reason does just fine. Moreover, Hume thinks that even though *experimental reasoning* (i.e., causal/inductive inference – Hume is not consistent in his use of the term 'reasoning') is the product of a natural instinct, such reasoning still acts as a corrective to bad metaphysics. Put these two ideas together and you get the famous, ringing, final sentences of *EHU*:

> 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." (EHU 12:34)

Belief in the external world

Do our senses give us knowledge of an external world – a world of objects and events (tables, chairs, other people, football matches etc.) that is separate from and independent of our perceptions of it? Do we have any rational justification for believing in an external world? These are the kinds of sceptical questions that Hume addresses in *EHU* 12:6-16.

Traditional scepticism

In *EHU* 12:6, Hume clears the path for his own position by quickly dismissing many traditional sceptical arguments in this area (i.e., traditional philosophical arguments which purport to show that our senses do not give us knowledge of an external world). These arguments turn on the *untrustworthiness* of the senses. For example, when we visually perceive a straight stick that is partially submerged in water, it *looks as if* it is bent. A certain kind of sceptic would try to generalise from the many examples that exist of such erroneous perceptual experiences to the conclusion that we can never trust the information that our senses deliver. But what do these sorts of cases *really* show? Hume argues that all they show is that (a) we must correct the evidence of our senses through the use of *reason*, and relatedly (b) that we must appeal to the right *criteria of truth*. So although our senses

indicate that the partially submerged straight stick is bent, we can use our reason to reach the correct conclusion by calling on our knowledge of how light works and so on. Relatedly, the right criterion for judging the shape of a stick is presumably for it to be perceived in good light through a suitably uncorrupting medium such as air. Thus Hume concludes that the real sceptical challenge concerning the senses lies not in such traditional arguments, but elsewhere.

Hume's positive view (1)

Hume starts his own investigation by identifying what he takes to be the common-sense view, which is that 'the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects' (*EHU* 12:8). This is a rather peculiar locution, since it might suggest that Hume believes the common-sense position to be that external objects are nothing but images, i.e., that common-sense makes us all something like Berkeley-style immaterialists. But that isn't what Hume means. Hume's claim is simply that common-sense makes us *direct realists*. In other words, the common-sense view is that, in sense perception, we are in some kind of immediate contact with external objects.

According to Hume, this common-sense view becomes indefensible, once we engage in the 'slightest philosophy', since a moment's philosophical reflection must lead us to conclude that perception is not an 'immediate intercourse between the mind and the object' (*EHU* 12:9). What stands behind this claim is, of course, Hume's theory of perceptions (in Hume's technical sense of that term). Recall that, for Hume, *perceptions* are the mental objects that appear before or in consciousness whenever there is mental activity (reasoning, perceiving, imagining, feeling, and so on). Perceptions come in two varieties: *impressions* are those perceptions that occur in sensory experience or feeling, while *ideas* are those perceptions that occur when we are remembering, imagining, reflecting or reasoning (roughly, when we are thinking about things when the things themselves are absent). This theory has the following consequence: what is actually and directly before the mind when one perceives is *always an impression*, and *not* whatever may exist beyond that impression.

Locke's view

In this context recall Locke's view. What Hume called perceptions, Locke called ideas, and he divided the class of ideas into ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection. Locke's view was that external objects cause certain ideas of sensation (for Hume, impressions of sensation) in us, and that those ideas *represent* the objects concerned. So since, for Locke, ideas of sensation (perceptual representations) come *between* the external object and our experience of it, he is sometimes called an *indirect realist*. According to Lockean indirect realism, we can *infer* the existence of external objects and events, as the causes of sensory ideas in us.

In cashing out his indirect realist picture, Locke drew a distinction between the *primary qualities* of external objects (such as their size, shape, number, motion or rest, and solidity) and their *secondary qualities* (colours, tastes, sounds, smells, and tactile properties). The primary qualities are those properties that things actually possess, independently of being perceived; and our ideas of primary qualities are resemblances of those properties. Secondary qualities are perceiver-dependent functions of the primary qualities in causal interaction with our senses; and our ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble properties that things really possess. Officially, Locke took our knowledge of the external world to be limited to the powers of objects to cause certain ideas in us. But he thought that it was a well-supported scientific hypothesis (and thus a justified inference) that objects really possess the specific primary qualities of shape, size etc. To explain why we typically experience certain sets of qualities together, Locke ended up postulating the existence of an unknowable underlying substance in which those powers inhere

At one point, it seems that Hume is going to sign up for something like Lockean indirect realism. For example, in EHU 12:9 he states that philosophical reflection at first gives us the following picture: the 'existences, which we consider, when we say *this house* and *that tree,* are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting *copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent*' (the final emphasis is mine). However, although it is at least arguable that Hume remains an indirect realist of an unorthodox kind (see below), he thinks that Lockean indirect realism is in very deep trouble indeed.

Hume's critique of Locke

First, Hume claims that *no rational justification* can be given for the indirect realist belief in an external world. He presents three arguments for this conclusion. First (in *EHU* 12:11), he judges it to be entirely mysterious *how* the mental objects that constitute impressions of sensation could have their causal source in material objects, since the two kinds of object are so utterly distinct in character. Second, Hume stresses (*EHU* 12:12) that experience cannot settle the question. Here we need to plug in Hume's theory of causation. On Hume's theory, for the mind to arrive at the belief that there is a causal connection between external objects and impressions of sensation, it would need to experience a regular succession between external objects and their associated impressions. But the first half of such a succession could never be experienced, since the mind has direct access only to its impressions. Third (in *EHU* 12:13), Hume dismisses the kind of appeal to God made by Descartes. Descartes argued that our ordinary perceptions are veridical, most of the time, because there exists a non-deceiving God who ensures that things work like that. Hume argues that if God really did support our perceptual access to the world in this way, then there would be no explanation for perceptual errors, since God is perfectly good and therefore could not deceive us with such

errors. (So if Hume is right, Descartes has no right to the 'most of the time' that I included in the formulation of his position.) Moreover, Hume suggests that if we did find such a role for God in our system, and if we were ever to call into question the existence of the external world, then we would also have to call into question the existence of God. That, Hume thinks, is just too big a risk to run.

Having argued that there is there no rational justification for our belief in an external world, Hume then defends the even stronger claim that any such belief is in fact *contrary to reason*. His arguments here draw heavily and explicitly on those of Berkeley. First (in EHU 12:15) Hume endorses Berkeley's rejection of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. He agrees with Berkeley that the qualities which Locke identifies as the primary ones are as mind-dependent as their secondary cousins. Second (also in *EHU* 12:15), Hume follows Berkeley in concluding that the doctrine of abstraction cannot save Locke's distinction. (Notice that here he joins Berkeley in pouring scorn on Locke's abstract general idea of a triangle.) In the end, says Hume, all the indirect realist is left with is the claim that there's an unknowable something that causes perceptions in us. And that doctrine, Hume thinks, is so 'imperfect', that it simply doesn't deserve the sceptic's efforts to refute it (*EHU* 12:16).

Is Hume an immaterialist (Berkelian)?

Recall that, for Berkeley, to exist is either (a) to perceive, act or will, or (b) to be perceived. The universe according to Berkeley is devoid of matter. It consists of finite spirits (like you and me), an infinite spirit (God), and the ideas that those spirits have. External objects are simply collections of ideas. So, given the enthusiastic support that Hume gives to Berkeley's arguments against Lockean indirect realism, would we be right in thinking that Hume is an immaterialist, like Berkeley? It seems not. In what is, I think, a rather curiously worded footnote (no. 32), Hume complains that Berkeley's conclusions are 'merely sceptical', because 'they admit of no answer and produce no conviction'. (Hume might have added here: 'despite Berkeley's claim that his immaterialism is entirely consistent with common-sense'.) Whatever it is that Hume means here, there is no doubt that he takes Berkeley's view to be inadequate. So what is Hume's own position?

Hume's positive view (2)

Hume's basic thought here repeats the form of arguments that have come before. Hume suggests that whatever sceptical conclusions may be reached by rigorous philosophical examination, we are nevertheless 'carried, by a natural instinct' (*EHU* 12:7) to suppose the existence of an external world that is independent of our perceptions. In other words, we believe in an external world not because we have any rational justification for that belief, but because of a non-rational natural instinct which

is *irresistible*, but which is, in the end, 'fallible and even erroneous' (EHU 12:10). Once again, Hume can be seen to promote the role of non-rational psychological processes while downplaying that of reason.

If one compares Hume's discussion, in *EHU*, of our belief in an external world, with his discussion of our belief that there is a necessary connection between causally related events, there might seem to be something missing from the former. As part of the latter discussion, Hume provides us with a relatively elaborate psychological explanation of exactly *how* the mind comes to have the idea of necessary connection. In *EHU* there is no parallel explanation of how we come to have the belief in continuously existing objects that are independent of our minds. There is simply the aforementioned appeal to a natural instinct. In the *Treatise*, however, a parallel explanation does appear. It turns on the *coherence* and *constancy* of certain impressions, and it is extremely hard to follow. If you wish to investigate this tricky aspect of Hume's account, there's a valiant attempt to explain it in chapter 5 of Stroud's book, *Hume*.