**An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding**

*D.Hume*

May 5 - May 6, 2005

David Hume as the unsentimental sceptic, wary of induction, suspicious of cause and effect, and describing the world as a bundle of perceptions. Having never read him in the original, a caricature, be it a rerspectable one, forms.

Hume is foremost an empiricist in the tradition of Locke. Deductive knowledge by itself he dismisses as tautological, by pointing out that false statements of a purely logical nature are inconceivable to the mind, while empirical statements allow their negations to be as reasonable as the real thing. However, our ability to confer knowledge from epirical observation rests on an assumption neither provable by reasoning alone nor within our ability to learn by experience, namely the assumption that the past is a reliable guide to the future. He tries to get out of this conundrum by appealing to instinct or custom, thus nothing but the the faith in the uniformity of nature. One may also argue that we do have experiences of futures of the past, all of which have roughly been predictable, thus it stands to reason that we do expect this to continue, because the future ahead of us resembles very much the futures we have experienced. It is worthwhile to point out that Hume nowhere employs the term 'induction'.

Hume points out that we orient ourselves in the world by means of resemblance, analogy and cause and effect, the latter being the most important and interesting. All knowledge of cause and effect is based on experience, there is nothing in the cause that can lead us to predict its effect, just as there is nothing in the effect that can make us reconstruct its cause. And by dint of repeated confirmation the idea takes place in our mind that there is in fact not only a conjunction but a connexion between cause and effect, although the nature of which will remain hidden to us. We can never explain why a billiard ball hitting another sets it in motion, so to speak transfering its own momentum.

Hume is firmly embedded in the 18th century and the enlightment. To him there really is no difference between philosophy and what we now would call science, nor is there a difference in kind between what we would refer to as soft and hard science. To Hume, as no doubt to his predecessors and contemporaries, the power that keeps a body in motion is quite similar to the one of volition that makes us able to move our own limbs. Thus the ambition of the Enlighment was to provide the same kind of calculus that governed the mechanical world for the benefit of the social and political. It is typical of the enlightment thinker to speak about laws of conduct and legislation in the same breath as the laws of nature, just as theologicians thought of the latter as being set down by God and in fact animated by him in every instance and occasion.

We experience the world by the three principles refered to above validated by the faith in the uniformity of the world. Thus we can know of things of which we have no direct experience, through the principles of resemblance and analogy, and conclude facts beyond our sensory reach, through reasoning by cause and effect. And Hume argues that this stratagem is not limited to man alone, but also shared by animals, although unconsciously

and in many instances instinctively, thus unawares of the stratagems themselves, just as with the vulgata of mankind. One may here detect the embryon of evolutionary adaptation.

Like other philosophers of the Enlightment Hume is contemptous of the power of the imagination, comparing the latter to be just a reshuffling of ideas, like the construction of imaginary animals, by recombining parts of different already existing ones [1]. But there seems to be one idea, namely that of Belief, that is impervious to such manipulations. Belief is hard to define but everybody recognises it when encountered. It is Belief that cannot be factored into our fictious constructions, and thus makes fiction a faded image of the real thing. One may argue against this that many theories are in the nature of narratives, and thus fictions, and their veracity is not guided by instinctive belief. But the interesting point is that Hume singles out ideas that cannot be part of the game of imaginative recombination.

Much of what Hume writes strikes the modern reader as trite and old-fashioned. His section on miracles is an illustration of being caught up in the concerns of this age. The attitude towards miracles is basically an attitude towards testimony. One should compare the claim of the miracle to ones assessment of the witness. What stand is nost reasonable, to accept the miracolous or to doubt the testifier? Typically Hume suggests subtracting the one from the other and noting whether the result is positive or not. He also points out that the claims of miracles made on behalf of different religions, cancel each other out, as each of the claims has as its intention to invalidate all other religions and in particular their particular claims to miracle. In this way one can dismiss the whole phenomenon, without having to go into particulars.

Maybe the most interesting section is the last dealing with academic sceptics, the post-modernists of the 18th century. Hume notes with approval Descartes descent into doubt looking for the rock-bottom on which to securely lay the foundantions of all knowledge, yet he remarks sarcastically that what good does it do you, when having reached the rock-bottom, if you have divested yourself of reasoning powers. He has only contempt for Descartes positing of a Deity to endow his reasoning with authority. He does concede that modest and mitigated scepticism has a very useful function, casting our assumptions as well as reasoning in doubts, on permanent vigil against prejudice and obscurity, forcing our progress to become slow, and not vulnerable to the weaknesses brought about by haste. But a principled scepticism leads you into an impotent impasse, and typically the most radical sceptic is reduced to a more than usually guillable fool when out of his secure academical setting he is confronted with the real world.

The weaknesses of our senses and the various illusions they may be subjected to, is rather easily dealt with in a technical sense; more seriously though is to explain the relation between an external world and the sensory impressions that we are able to experience directly. Some of the qualities, like softness and color, may very well not be intrinsic but artefacts of our minds, and hence refered to as secondary, but how can we tell whether the supposedly primary qualities are different in kind. The dilemma we encounter is similar to the claim that the past is a reliable guide to the future. Hume suggests that we should trust our instinctive faith, just as animals do, of an external world independant of our thoughts and wishes. Still such considerations should instead of fruitless scepticism induce

[1] Also suggested by Diderot in his 'Rameaus Nephew'

us to acknowledge the limits of our reasoning and understanding. Pure reasoning can only be applied to quantities and numbers. Hume concludes his treatise by pointing out that whenever we encounter a book we should ask ourselves. Does this book contain reasonings on quantities and numbers, or does it contain matters of experience or fact. If neither it should be put into the flames. A motto, as good as any, of the project of enlightment to rid the world of obscurity in general and divinity in particular.

May 7, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se