

History of Philosophy

47 Hume: Do We Know What's Real?

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines **David Hume's skepticism** regarding our ability to know external reality. Hume distinguishes between the **logic of ideas** and **matters of fact**, arguing that we cannot rationally prove the existence of material objects or causal connections. Instead of certain knowledge, human understanding relies on **psychological habits** and "constant conjunctions" formed through repeated experience. These mental customs create **forceful impressions** that we identify as belief, which Hume differentiates from mere fiction or imagination. The text further explores how this framework leads Hume to view **miracles as unbelievable** and religious doctrines as products of human nature rather than logical demonstration. Ultimately, Hume presents a **mitigated skepticism**, suggesting that while reason is limited, natural instincts and custom serve as the necessary guides for human life.

Briefing Document:

David Hume: The Limits of Knowledge and the Nature of Belief

Executive Summary

David Hume's philosophy represents a transition from a "theory of knowledge" to a "theory about knowledge," primarily because he concludes that human beings possess very little of the former. Hume's epistemological framework divides all human inquiry into two categories: **Relations of Ideas** (logic and mathematics) and **Matters of Fact** (empirical reality).

While Relations of Ideas are demonstrably certain, Hume argues that Matters of Fact beyond present experience cannot be rationally proven. This is because all reasoning concerning facts relies on the principle of cause and effect, yet we have

no immediate awareness of causal "force"—only of "constant conjunctions" or uniformities. Consequently, what we call "knowledge" of the external world is actually **belief**, which Hume defines as a psychological habit induced by custom and repeated experience. This "mitigated skepticism" suggests that while we cannot rationally justify our most fundamental beliefs—such as the existence of material bodies, the self, or causal necessity—nature compels us to hold them for the sake of survival.

The Two Realms of Human Inquiry

Hume distinguishes between two types of mental objects, which dictates what can be "known" versus what can only be "believed."

Category	Definition	Characteristics	Examples
Relations of Ideas	Analytic judgments with the logical form of $A = A$.	Discoverable by the mere operation of thought; logically necessary; certain.	Mathematics (Euclidean geometry, arithmetic), definitions, tautologies.
Matters of Fact	Synthetic judgments regarding empirical reality.	Contingent; the contrary is always possible; based on experience and cause-effect.	"The sun will rise tomorrow"; "That object is a tree."

The Skeptical Challenge: The Problem of Causation

Hume's skepticism arises from a five-step analysis of how we reason about matters of fact beyond our immediate senses:

1. **Nature of Reasoning:** All reasoning about matters of fact is based on **cause-effect relations**. To know something beyond present perception, we must argue from an effect (experience) to a cause (external reality).
2. **Foundation of Cause-Effect:** The foundation of this reasoning is **experience**. We are not born knowing that fire burns; we must observe it.

3. **The Limits of Experience:** In experience, we never perceive a "causal force" or a "necessary connection." We only perceive **uniformities**—an antecedent followed by a consequent with regularity. Hume terms this "constant conjunction."
4. **The Circularity of Experience:** To reason that the future will resemble the past (induction) requires the principle of cause and effect, which itself is based on experience. This creates a circular argument.
5. **Outcome:** Rational skepticism. We have no intuitive or demonstrative knowledge of matters of fact beyond present impressions.

The Psychology of Belief: Custom and Habit

If we cannot rationally justify our beliefs, why do we hold them? Hume shifts the focus from logic to psychology.

Belief vs. Fiction

Hume distinguishes between a "belief" and a "fiction" (imagination) based on the quality of the impression:

- **Belief:** A "forceful and steady" or "vivacious" impression. It persists and commands the mind.
- **Fiction:** An imaginative construct (e.g., a "fairy giraffe with butterfly wings") that may be vivid for a moment but lacks the steady force of a belief.

Custom as the Guide of Life

Hume asserts that **Custom (or Habit)** is the principle that effects the correspondence between the course of nature and our succession of ideas.

- **Repetition:** When we see the same sequence repeatedly, we develop a psychological expectation.
- **Probability:** Hume views probability not as a statistical calculation but as a feeling. Repeated occasions reinforce mental habits, strengthening the steadiness of the impression.

- **Practical Necessity:** As Hume famously noted, "Custom is the great guide of life." It is necessary for the subsistence of the species and the regulation of conduct.

Applications of Mitigated Skepticism

Hume applies his skeptical framework to several traditional metaphysical and religious concepts, finding that they lack a rational basis but may have a psychological one.

Material Bodies and the External World

The existence of an external, physical world cannot be proven. However, because our experiences are so steady and consistent, the belief in material substance is "readily elicited" and taken for granted.

The Self and Personal Identity

Hume rejects the Cartesian view of the mind as a "substance." He observes that when he looks inward, he only finds a "succession of ideas" or a "bundle of perceptions." He finds no impression of a persistent "self," meaning personal identity is a convenient fiction rather than a known entity.

Liberty and Necessity (Free Will)

Hume acts as a "soft determinist," arguing that the debate is largely semantic:

- **Necessity:** All we know is "constant conjunction" in human behavior.
- **Liberty:** We feel "free" because we are unaware of the antecedent causes of our spontaneous initiatives.
- **The Passions:** Hume famously argues that the will is guided by **passion and emotion**, not reason. Reason does not provide moral direction; it is merely a tool.

Immortality of the Soul

Hume finds no metaphysical, moral, or physical evidence for immortality:

- **Metaphysical:** Based on the flawed concept of "substance."

- **Moral:** Requires knowledge of God's attributes, which are empirically unknown.
- **Physical:** Nature suggests everything is perishable.
- **Conclusion:** Belief in immortality is likely "wishful thinking" driven by an innate "aversion toward death."

Critique of Miracles and Religion

The Problem of Miracles

Hume defines a miracle as a "**violation of natural law.**" His critique centers not on the logical impossibility of miracles, but on their **unbelievability.**

- Belief requires repeated, uniform experience. Since a miracle is, by definition, an exception to uniformity, it can never be supported by enough evidence to outweigh our experience of the law it violates.
- Hume notes that historical witnesses are often contradictory or superstitious. He satirically concludes that "it would take a miracle to create belief in miracles."

Natural Religion

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume examines the logic of God's existence:

- **Cleanthes (Empiricist):** Argues from design (teleological). Hume counters that this leads to an "anthropomorphic" or even "vegetative" deity by analogy.
- **Demia (Mystic/Platonist):** Relies on *a priori* arguments. Hume counters that "relations of ideas" cannot establish "matters of fact."
- **Philo (Skeptic):** Argues that belief in a "first cause" is ethically neutral and makes no practical difference in human behavior.

In *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume suggests that monotheism evolved from polytheism as a result of contemplating the organized unity of nature, but notes that this abstract idea often lacks the "compelling power" of more primitive, imaginative beliefs.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: David Hume's Theory of Knowledge and Belief

This study guide explores the philosophical framework of David Hume as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the distinction between knowledge and belief, the nature of causality, and the application of Hume's skepticism to the self, the external world, and religious concepts.

Part 1: Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does Hume distinguish between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact"?
2. According to Hume, why is it impossible to prove matters of fact beyond our present experience?
3. What is the "constant conjunction," and how does it relate to our understanding of cause and effect?
4. How does Hume define "belief," and how does it differ from "fiction"?
5. Why does Hume characterize his philosophy as "mitigated skepticism" rather than absolute skepticism?
6. What is Hume's view on the nature of mathematics?
7. How does Hume explain the human concept of the "mind" or "self"?
8. In the context of "liberty and necessity," why does Hume argue the debate is largely semantic?
9. What is Hume's primary argument regarding the believability of miracles?

10. According to the text, what are the three major theories of universals, and which one does Hume represent in his view of mathematics?

Part 2: Quiz Answer Key

1. **How does Hume distinguish between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact"?** Relations of ideas are analytic judgments, such as mathematics and logic, where the form is "A equals A" and the truth is certain. Matters of fact are empirical statements about the world that are contingent and can only be known through experience and cause-effect reasoning.
2. **According to Hume, why is it impossible to prove matters of fact beyond our present experience?** Hume argues that knowing anything beyond present perception requires reasoning from effect to cause, but we have no immediate awareness of causal force. Since we only experience regularities, any attempt to reason beyond experience relies on a circular argument that assumes the very causal connections it seeks to prove.
3. **What is the "constant conjunction," and how does it relate to our understanding of cause and effect?** Constant conjunction refers to the observed uniformity where an antecedent event is regularly followed by a consequent event. Hume posits that we never actually perceive "causal power"; we only see these regularities, which then induce a psychological habit of expecting the same result in the future.
4. **How does Hume define "belief," and how does it differ from "fiction"?** Hume defines belief as a "forceful and steady" or "vivacious" impression induced by the psychological habit of experiencing regularities. It differs from fiction because, while a fiction (like a fairy giraffe) may be vivid momentarily, it lacks the persistent force and steadiness that characterize a settled belief about reality.
5. **Why does Hume characterize his philosophy as "mitigated skepticism" rather than absolute skepticism?** His skepticism is mitigated because it is limited only to matters of fact and does not extend to all knowledge. He acknowledges that we can have certain, demonstrative knowledge regarding the relations of ideas, such as in the fields of mathematics and logic.

6. **What is Hume's view on the nature of mathematics?** Hume views mathematics as a purely logical discipline concerned with the relationships between number and geometrical concepts rather than real, external entities. For Hume, mathematical entities are simply ideas or collections of similar particulars rather than abstract universals or platonic realities.
7. **How does Hume explain the human concept of the "mind" or "self"?** Hume argues that the mind is not a substantial entity or an immaterial soul, but rather a "bundle of perceptions" or a succession of ideas appearing and disappearing as if on a theater stage. He suggests there is no empirical evidence or logical basis for a persistent personal identity or "substance."
8. **In the context of "liberty and necessity," why does Hume argue the debate is largely semantic?** Hume suggests that both the "necessitarian" and the "libertarian" agree on the facts: human behavior shows regularity (uniformity) and humans feel a sense of spontaneity (liberty). The dispute is merely over whether one chooses to label these observed uniformities as "causal necessity" or simply "regularity."
9. **What is Hume's primary argument regarding the believability of miracles?** Hume defines a miracle as a violation of natural law, which he interprets as a violation of established uniformities. He argues that miracles are unbelievable because no testimony is forceful or steady enough to overcome the psychological habit formed by the repeated, uniform experience of nature's laws.
10. **According to the text, what are the three major theories of universals, and which one does Hume represent in his view of mathematics?** The three major theories are realism, conceptualism, and nominalism. Hume is a nominalist, meaning he believes that general ideas or mathematical concepts do not refer to abstract or real universals, but are merely names for collections of similar particulars.

Part 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the Source Context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Psychology of Habit:** Explain Hume's argument that "Custom is the great guide of life." How does he use psychological habits to bridge the gap between his skepticism and the practical necessity of living in the world?
2. **The Critique of Causality:** Analyze Hume's rejection of "causal power." If we cannot perceive the force exerted by a cause, how do we arrive at the idea of causation, and what are the implications for the sciences and everyday reasoning?
3. **The Theater of the Mind:** Discuss Hume's "bundle theory" of the self. Compare this view to the traditional Cartesian view of the soul as an immaterial substance, and explain why Hume finds the traditional view logically and empirically unsupportable.
4. **Miracles and Historical Evidence:** Evaluate Hume's "canons of historical evidence" as applied to miracles. Use the example of Richard Waitley's critique regarding Napoleon Bonaparte to discuss whether Hume's criteria for belief are too restrictive.
5. **Ethics and the Will:** Explore Hume's assertion that the will is guided by "passion" rather than "reason." How does this departure from traditional philosophy (like Descartes) change the understanding of moral direction and human choice?

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Axiom	A first principle or self-evident truth used as a starting point in a logical system like Euclidean geometry.
Belief	A forceful, steady, and persistent impression in the mind, typically induced by the habit of experiencing regularities.
Constant Conjunction	The empirical observation that certain events regularly follow others; the basis for the psychological habit of assuming causation.

Contingent	Referring to facts or events that are not logically necessary and could potentially be otherwise; the opposite of "necessary."
Demonstrative Knowledge	Knowledge achieved through reasoning and logical relationships, such as mathematics, where the truth is certain and analytic.
Empiricism	The philosophical stance that all knowledge is derived from experience, specifically through impressions and perceptions.
Impression	A direct, forceful, and vivacious perception of the mind, which Hume distinguishes from the less forceful "ideas" derived from them.
Matters of Fact	Factual statements about the world that are known through experience and deal with contingent, extra-mental realities.
Mitigated Skepticism	A form of skepticism that doubts our ability to know matters of fact through reason but accepts knowledge of the relations of ideas.
Nominalism	The view that universals or general ideas are not real entities but merely names used to describe collections of similar particulars.
Occasionalism	The view, rejected by Hume, that God is the only true causal power in the universe.
Relations of Ideas	Analytic judgments that are certain and logically necessary (e.g., $2+3=5$), independent of empirical observation.
Representational Theory	The theory that we are not directly aware of external reality, but only of mental perceptions (impressions and ideas) that represent reality.

- Soft Determinism** The view that while human actions follow regularities (uniformity), they can still be described in terms of liberty or spontaneity.
- Substance** A traditional metaphysical concept referring to an underlying reality or "something I know not what" that supports qualities; Hume rejects this as a confused idea.