

# The Empiricists // Spring 2016

## Handout 21

### Hume: The external world II

**CONSTANCY AND COHERENCE.** At all events, Hume locates the qualities of impressions responsible for the belief in the external world in constancy and coherence. T 1.4.2.18ff

*Example 1.* Some impressions display constancy: the impressions of my desk, of my books, of the water glass. I close my eyes, and then open them again: the glass holds the same volume of water as before. All the same, I also have evidence that these very impressions can change. I keep my eyes closed for two days. When I open them again, the volume of water has markedly diminished. But these changes occur with a certain coherence. This coherence of theirs is liable to generate the belief in the underlying body.

*Example 2.* Instead of mining the water example further, let us turn to the beautifully crafted Hume's own porter example. This passage begins with a review of available impressions: the fire, the memories, the unspecified objects within Hume's visual field. While it may be said that they inform Hume of existence of certain perceptions/objects, neither of these, however, inform him of the continued existence of those perceptions/objects. The three inferences that follow show the necessity of assuming the existence of objects that progressively expand beyond the immediate data of Hume's experience. (1) The clicking sound makes Hume assume the existence of the hitherto unperceived door. (2) The stairs have to be assumed to exist in order to explain the arrival of the porter (whom Hume perceived arriving earlier). (3) The appearance of the letter makes Hume to assume the existence of a material and social world outside the confines of the room or the building. T 1.4.2.20

All these impressions available in Hume's experience could be interpreted as contradicting the existence of external objects. For example, he was accustomed to hear the clicking noise simultaneously with observing the door. If now he hears the noise, but does not see the door, he may just as well *not* infer that the door is there.

This analysis leads Hume to remark that the ways the causal belief and the external world belief are generated are different. Even though both are grounded in customary association of ideas, the latter only provides a greater coherence to our impressions. And ultimately Hume confesses that coherence alone cannot do the job: we cannot rest the existence of the external world on the mere degree of coherence. So the job should be done by constancy. T 1.4.2.21 T 1.4.2.23

**HOW CONSTANCY WORKS.** In effect Hume claims that a certain constancy in our experiences put us in a state of contradiction. The belief in the continued existence of body is a way that the mind finds out of that contradiction. Now, what exactly is the problem presented by constancy? T 1.4.2.24

*Example 3.* Suppose I perceive an empty bottle in my room. I leave the room. Upon returning to it two days later, I again perceive the bottle that qualitatively looks the same. That is: my impressions of the bottle on the earlier occasion resemble the impressions on the present occasion. My mind is thrown into confusion. On one hand, I am aware of the interruption in my perceptions. Because of that they should appear to me numerically distinct. On the other hand, their resemblance leads me to conclude that they are 'individually the same'. To resolve the conflict I 'suppose' that these perceptions are connected by 'real existence' of which I am insensible.

The supposition of the external world is then a product of confusion. We are sometimes presented with uninterrupted sequence of similar perceptions:

AAAAAAAAAAAAA (21-1)

This is when I am staring at a bottle not turning my gaze away. But sometimes our perceptions are interrupted:

AAAABBBCCDDDDAAAAAAAAA (21-2)

My perceptions outside the room intervene. But my mind tends to regard the A-perceptions flanking the intervening perceptions in (21-2) as individually the same. What is the source of this tendency? Perhaps the general fact about our minds, namely, that whatever ideas (perceptions) put the mind in the same state will be pronounced as identical. T 1.4.2.32

**DOUBLE EXISTENCE RECONSIDERED.** Thus far we were supposed to account for the vulgar belief. The philosophical belief rests upon the doctrine of double existence. Perceptions are not logically dependent on anything else. However, as a matter of empirical fact, they are dependent—for example, on our organs. T 1.4.2.45

This is supposed to convince philosophers—who are aware of destructibility of perceptions—in the distinction between enduring objects and fleeting perceptions.

**WHY REASON IS INEPT.** To defend the doctrine of double existence, it is perhaps tempting to use inference to best explanation. Suppose we endorse the doctrine of double existence. Now we can only reason from the observed to the unobserved by means of causal relation. So we should be able to observe a causal relation (that is, constant conjunction) between perceptions and objects. However, we never observe a causal relation between perceptions and objects: all we ever observe is perceptions.

But this doctrine cannot be logically defended by reason (we have already seen why). Nor can it be a direct product of imagination. Rather, it is a secondary product of it. As far as I can see, this simply means that it can be entertained by someone who is liable to confuse (21-2) with (21-1). Philosophers, no less than the vulgar, fall prey to this confusion. T 1.4.2.47 T 1.4.2.48

#### SOME COMMENTS ON HUME'S DOCTRINE.

There is something odd about the view ascribed to the vulgar, according to which they do not distinguish between perceptions and objects. Observe that Hume begins his discussion by attributing to them quite a different view, namely, that primary and secondary qualities 'are on the same footing.' That view is different, since its defender may simply believe that, e.g., colour and taste are *in* the bodies. That is, these properties are intrinsic, rather than relational and dependent on the presence of an observer. This was, historically, the view of a very vulgar Aristotle, and this is the view addressed, as we saw, by Locke. However, it does not follow that we—in our vulgar moments having ignored the status of primary and secondary qualities—have lost the distinction between what we perceive and what really is out there. The sudden transition Hume makes in §2.31 is, I think, unsupported. T 1.4.2.31 T 1.4.2.12

Secondly, it is worth pondering the role of imagination. Hume appears to suggest that imagination operates separately from perception. We perceive and then, and also, imagine—for example, the causal relations between our perceptions. This *might* imply that it is in principle possible to perceive and not to imagine. There can be a pure, and thus less misleading, way of perceiving uninfected with 'fictions' of imagination. But one might argue, along with Kant, that pure perception so understood is a myth. We do not merely see—we necessarily see *as*, and that this is what it is to see. Sometimes this idea is put by saying that there is an essential element of generality in perception. That being said, the value of this Kantian move is unclear to me. Presumably Hume cannot introduce any modal notions into this theory and would resist any attempt of doing so.

*Remark 4.* Personally I am fairly unclear on how much gap really exists between Hume's account and the transcendental role of imagination envisaged by Kant. I suspect that if we could purify the theory of the *Critique* of any mention of apriority and necessity and let go other elements of Kant's bombastic jargon, we might end up with something very similar to Hume's view.

Thirdly, one might question the phenomenological basis of Hume's theory. Our usual meaning of 'imagination' refers to the capacity of producing images. Yet, for imagination to play an integral role in perception, it should have some other meaning: presumably no images cross my mind when I perceive this bottle. Well, I am not sure whether Hume would accept the last claim. But if he does, then he can appeal to a parallel with memory. This capacity as well displays a divergence between reproductive memory (when my memories come to me) and immediate memory (necessary for keeping track of things).

*Remark 5.* On the last point one may consult Husserl's discussion of reproduction and retention.

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