

***Enquiry*, section XII: Hume on Materialism (with some comparisons to Berkeley)**

--Hume on common/vulgar/naive/unreflective/natural materialism

- a. Hume agrees with Berkeley about the content of the common belief: we take our sensations to be the physical objects, and we believe the objects to be mind-independent. (For a bit on why Hume so interprets the common belief, see the *Treatise* passage on other side.)
- b. He agrees with Berkeley that this belief, given the content specified in (a), cannot stand up to reflection; it is, in Hume's words, "destroyed by the slightest philosophy" (104.8)
- c. Hume does not offer Berkeley's account of how/why we come to hold this belief (see section 56 of the *Principles* for Berkeley's account), but instead claims that the belief is the result of a "natural instinct." (Well, Hume offers no more account than this in the *Enquiry*. In his earlier *Treatise of Human Nature* (in sect. I, IV, 2), Hume offers a long account of how this happens that gets replaced in the *Enquiry* by those two words, "natural instinct.")

These aspects of Hume's treatment of common materialism come out in several places in Part XII of the *Enquiry*, but, to list just one, features (a) and (c) are both shown in the following, rather compact passage:

It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct or pre-possession, to repose faith in their senses; and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe, which depends not on our perception, but would exist, though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated....It seems also evident, that, when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other. (104.4)

--Hume on reflective/philosophical materialism.

- a. Hume seems to agree with Berkeley that this philosophical belief (that the real bodies are mind-independent resembling causes of our mind-dependent sensations), would need to be backed by some argument – we need some good reason to believe in the material objects posited by this theory.
- b. He agrees with Berkeley that there is no good reason for belief in these philosopher's objects, though his arguments for this conclusion, while similar to Berkeley's in some ways, are also different in other ways (compare the argument on 105.4-.7 with sections 18-20 of Berkeley's *Principles*).

[Note: Hume hints that the natural belief in matter may not stand in need of argument, or at least that a lack of justifying argument is less of a problem, or at least is less clearly a problem, for natural materialism than it is for philosophical materialism. (I take this to be hinted at by Hume's statement that, in defending philosophical materialism, philosophy "can no longer plead the infallible and irresistible instinct of nature" (105.2).) Like Berkeley, Hume's "epistemological" argument (as we're calling it) at 105.4-.7 is aimed at *philosophical* materialism. His complaint against *natural* materialism is not that there's no evidence for it, but rather that it's evident to the slightest reflection that it's wrong, since sensations can't exist mind-independently.]

- c. In Hume, unlike in Berkeley, the philosopher's system is seen as inevitable outcome of reflection on the problems inherent in the common view. We are "necessitated by reasoning...to embrace [this] new system" (105.1). So this new system is, in its own way, natural; it's the natural outcome of reflection. Hume writes, "These are the obvious dictates

of reason; and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that 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” (104.9-105.0). In Berkeley, by contrast, one gets the feeling that the philosopher’s system is just an arbitrary attempt to escape the problems -- an attempt that some philosophers just happened to come up with. In Hume, however, this system -- perhaps more accurately called “reflective” than “philosophical” -- is a natural and inevitable result of reflecting on the problems of the unreflective, instinctual belief.

d. Still, Hume agrees with Berkeley that, in the final analysis, this reflective materialism won’t stand up to scrutiny.

--Hume’s solution? Berkeley has a solution to the problem: Scrap the philosopher’s objects, keep the common person’s objects – like the common person, take the sensations to be the bodies – but give up the mind-independence of bodies. For Hume, there is no good solution. Nature is too strong for us to give up mind-independence. We could only pretend to be Berkeleyans. The common belief in matter (in the mind-independence of bodies) will force itself back on us whenever we “leave the study.” In the study, when we reflect, we naturally tend toward a different materialism, but one which we can’t hold on to for long, and which ultimately doesn’t stand up to scrutiny anyway. There’s no good solution. This seems to be another display of the “whimsical condition of mankind” (111.1). As Hume writes, summing up our whimsical predicament:

This is a topic, therefore, in which the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph, when they endeavor to introduce universal doubt into all subjects of human knowledge and inquiry. Do you follow the instincts and propensities of nature, may they say, in assenting to the veracity of sense? But these lead you to believe that the very perception or sensible image is the external object. Do you disclaim this principle, in order to embrace a more rational opinion, that the perceptions are only representations of something external? You here depart from your natural propensities and more obvious sentiments; and yet are not able to satisfy your reason, which can never find any convincing argument from experience to prove, that the perceptions are connected with any external objects. (105.8-106.2)

From Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Book I, Part IV, Section II):

[H]owever philosophers may distinguish betwixt the objects and perceptions of the senses; which they suppose co-existent and resembling; yet this is a distinction, which is not comprehended by the generality of mankind, who as they perceive only one being, can never assent to the opinion of a double existence and representation. Those very sensations, which enter by the eye or ear, are with them the true objects, nor can they readily conceive that this pen or paper, which is immediately perceiv’d, represents another, which is different from, but resembling it. (*THN* I, IV, 2, p. 202 of the 1978 OUP edition)

On the Elusiveness of the Hume/Reid Dispute: A doctor Thomas Brown, who wound up a Humean after beginning as a Reidian, is reported to have said the following in a mid-nineteenth century conversation, after it had been suggested that Hume and Reid differed more in words than in opinions:

Yes, Reid bawled out we must believe in an outward world; but added, in a whisper, we can give no reason for our belief; Hume cries out we can give no reason for such a notion; and whispers, I own we cannot get rid of it.