

**I DON'T SEE ANY
BODY:**

*Impressions Of David Hume's Belief In
External Existence*

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Introduction

Did David Hume believe in a world of physical objects? The subject of the present enquiry is the skepticism of David Hume in regard to belief in an external world. In particular, I will examine the constructive and skeptical arguments Hume offers for and against such belief, and ultimately determine whether Hume really believes such arguments (and in what sense he does or does not). In doing so, I will argue that Hume is more skeptical than he is often interpreted to be in regard to belief in an external world—I will contend that Hume ultimately concludes that all rational justification and argument regarding such belief is *unintelligible*. In other words, I take Hume to be saying that no rational arguments allegedly pertaining to an external world are ever justified, for we never have any necessary impression of them. Instead, the sole utility of rational argumentation turns out to be illuminating what is *not* necessary, or rational, about such beliefs. All we can ever reasonably say about our natural belief in the external world seems to be that such belief, no matter how natural, is *not* reasonable.

Part One: A Constructive Account Of Belief In External Existence

Before properly analyzing alleged rational justifications for belief in an external world, one must first establish what exactly belief in an external world indicates. Thus, before Hume begins his reasonable considerations of such belief, he first delineates what this belief entails and how it comes to be believed in the first place. In philosophical circles, the section of Hume's *Treatise* in which he offers this account is referred to as his constructive account of belief in an external world. In this portion of the text, Hume begins by emphasizing that belief in an external world is natural, an emphasis from which

Hume never strays, even as he makes his most damning and radical skeptical arguments against such belief.

Because this belief is natural, it is common and to be expected. Therefore, those denying any such belief, if this is possible (and I believe Hume thinks it really is possible...just not for long), arouse much more attention than do those who tritely entertain the belief as naturally expected. Moreover, what is uncommon invokes a sense of uneasiness—Hume constantly stresses the felicity with which we proceed when left to our natural instincts, as well as the discord that occurs when these are called into question. What is expected pleases us and what is unexpected makes us feel uncomfortable.

While Hume admits that, “nature has not left this [existence of body] to...choice,” thereby insinuating that this belief is, in fact, *necessary* and that “’tis vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?*”¹ (at least at this point in the text), he proceeds to ask what causes us to have such a belief and thus begins his constructive account of the common belief in the existence of body. Before I go any further, I feel it is important to note that Hume presents his constructive account with what will later turn out to be presumptive language: he gives his account of this belief in external existence presuming, as is natural, that it really is vain to ask whether bodies exist. As I hope to show, I believe it is essential to keep this fact in mind when attempting to give an accurate account of the true nature of Hume’s conclusions regarding skepticism.

Hume begins his constructive account by stressing the difference between ascribing continued existence to “objects” and deeming them distinct from “the mind.”

¹ Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature* [T] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.4.2.1.

Keeping this in mind, he wonders what produces these two opinions: 1) the senses, 2) reason (causal inference from past sense perception), or 3) the imagination? He spends a great deal of time ruling out the senses, as our sensations are both limited in duration (and are therefore not continued) and are in no way indicative of anything distinct from what they actually are (which is precisely what external existence is presumed to be). In his attempt to further confirm this verdict, Hume makes an observation that anticipates his later skeptical arguments. He differentiates between three kinds of commonly acknowledged impressions: 1) shapes, motions, etc. 2) colors, tastes, etc., and 3) pleasure and pain.² The following table prefaces some of the major distinctions that follow:

Who Associates External (continued and distinct) Existence With What Impressions³

	VULGAR	DOGMATIC PHILOSOPHERS
SHAPES AND MOVEMENTS	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
COLORS AND TASTES	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
PLEASURES AND PAINS	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>

After introducing these different kinds of impressions, Hume immediately argues that, insofar as they are actually perceived, each kind is “on the same footing,” so the differences associated with them cannot arise from the perception of them, nor reasonable

² T, 1.4.2.12.

³ I will argue that Hume himself ultimately argues that none of these impressions provide reasonable grounds for the inference of physical bodies, and that both the vulgar common folk and dogmatic philosophers are being unreasonable in treating what is always essentially the same and uniform (an impression perceived) differently (qualified as one of these three types).

inference from past perceptions of them. Thus, the judgment or determinations implicit in such a division of impressions must be imagined, and as a result Hume shifts his focus to the role that the imagination plays in the formation of this belief in continued and distinct existence.

If all impressions are by definition internal and fleeting, why are *some* also believed to be distinct and continued? First, Hume considers more vulgar and common accounts of the differentiation of impressions, which cite the involuntariness and/or the liveliness of a given impression as the source of the distinction between those impressions that do and those that do not have the added qualities of continued and distinct existence. Hume easily refutes these vulgar grounds for belief, pointing out that even impressions that are not believed to have continued and distinct existence are involuntary and often make even stronger impressions on us (e.g. pleasure and pain).

Next, Hume argues that belief in external existence is always attended by the constancy and coherence of certain impressions. We find that over time certain impressions seem to acquire a degree of constancy (unity) and coherence (unity through change), yet Hume ultimately concludes, “’tis evident, that whenever we infer the continu’d existence of the objects of sense from their coherence, and the frequency of their union, ’tis in order to bestow on the objects a greater regularity than what is observ’d in our mere perceptions.”⁴ In other words, belief in the continued existence of bodies (which results from the observation of the constancy and coherency of certain perceptions) involves more than merely the confidence acquired from customary causal inferences. Our customary impression of a necessary connection between perceptions

⁴ T, 1.4.2.21.

reflects a degree of regularity amongst their past occurrences and a reasonable expectation for their arrival in the future, but tell us nothing about what we do *not* perceive. On the other hand, the belief in the continued existence of bodies purportedly does just this—it affirms something for which we have no perception, namely the existence of what we don't perceive (any definition of bodies is for this reason negative). Consequently, as we shall see, though belief in external existence is never doubted for any significant length of time, nothing suggests such a belief is reasonable, much less true (certain and necessary).

According to Hume, belief in the external world emerges because of the following scenario. At first, one merely experiences a degree of constancy in his or her perceptions (stage one). One experiences a particular impression a multitude of times and recognizes the constancy of its appearance. Hume gives the example of perceiving the sun. Each time we perceive the sun we experience different perceptions, but, because of a resemblance between such perceptions, one feels or perceives them as if they are one and the same, constant and uninterrupted, perception. This occurs quite naturally until one reflects on this very feeling and is immediately displeased by the contradiction implied—if the resembling perceptions really are distinct and our perception of them interrupted, why does one feel as though they are constant and the same? As a result of this paradox, one is inclined to render his or her experience more coherent by attempting to disguise, “as much as possible, the interruption, or rather remove it entirely, by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible.”⁵ In doing so, one eradicates the unsettling feelings that emerge when the

⁵ T, 1.4.2.24.

interrupted nature of perception is juxtaposed with the common feeling that perception is in fact constant, by presumably rendering his or her interrupted perceptions constant *and* “coherent” (stage two). Only at this stage is external existence truly posited.

Those who do not make it to stage two simply view their interrupted perceptions of the sun as one constant and uninterrupted perception and fail to recognize the incoherent nature of doing so, all of which is natural and customary. “The persons, who entertain this opinion concerning the identity of our resembling perceptions, are in general all the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind, (that is, all of us, at one time or other) and consequently such as suppose their perceptions to be their only objects...”⁶ In examining how the interrupted appearance of perception does not imply a necessary interruption in its existence, Hume emphasizes that what is important is not whether such a conclusion is formed by the vulgar (as he deems this a matter of fact) but the manner in which it is formed. Hume points out that the vulgar view is false insofar as our interrupted perceptions are not in fact the same (or identical, or continuous), but not contradictory (inconceivable or unbelievable). As it turns out, we can (and do) imagine the continued existence of our perceptions, though such a belief never arises from reason. The implication of this is that it is possible (indeed the norm) to conceive or believe what we have no reason to conceive or believe. The fact that I have had no interrupted perceptions of uninterrupted perceptions does not prohibit me from imagining such a possibility, as evidenced by the fact that I naturally *do* precisely this.

Nevertheless, the possibility of such vulgar belief stems from no probable cause. Indeed, “very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy

⁶ T, 1.4.2.36

of that opinion.”⁷ Hence, once we begin to reasonably think about this common belief and judge the adequacy of such an opinion in lieu of our past and present experience, we easily recognize that it seems contradictory. If our perceptions are possessed of continued existence even when we are not perceiving them, then they are also clearly believed to be distinct from our perception of them. But this is tantamount to saying that our perception is distinct from our perception, which very simple reflection proves otherwise. Hume offers the example of pressing an eye with a finger and the doubling effect that this has on our perception. Though the two subsequent perceptions have the same content, only one is attributed with a distinct or independent existence. And thus, in and of themselves, our perceptions are in no way indicative of any independent existence.

According to Hume, the reasonable conclusion of such observations is that our perception does *not* continue to exist when no longer perceived, for, without any perception of a distinct existence, we have no cause for belief in any existence that is contrary to the interrupted nature of our own perception. Though the vulgar fail to recognize the unreasonable nature of their belief, philosophers do sense the lack of justification for belief in existence independent of any perception of it. Unfortunately, most philosophers do not reach the reasonable conclusion alluded to and instead introduce a superficial remedy, which Hume refers to as “double existence.” Philosophers introduce the notion of double existence in an effort to alleviate the uneasy feeling educed in reasonably assessing our vulgar and common sentiments by offering an alternative justification for continued existence, namely the notorious subject-object distinction (or, as Hume puts it, “perceptions and objects”). With this distinction, belief

⁷ T, 1.4.2.44.

in external or independent existence is made more explicit, and the tacit supposition underlining the vulgar view (that, because they believe their perceptions are continuous though they clearly are not, they presuppose the possibility of existence that we do not perceive—i.e. existence that is independent of our perception of it) is brought to light.

Hume accentuates the fact that, were these philosophers not influenced by the same vulgar belief in the continued existence of our perceptions when unperceived, they would not introduce such a distinction between perceptions and objects. He argues that, “*the latter hypothesis [double existence] has no primary recommendation either to reason or the imagination, but acquires all its influence on the imagination from the former [vulgar belief in continued existence].*”⁸ Though most philosophers proclaim precisely the opposite, the suggestion of double existence is not reasonable insofar as reason entails inferring a necessary connection between two or more perceptions, not a necessary connection between perceptions and objects of which we have no perception. Nor does this philosophical distinction derive directly from the imagination, as Hume takes pains to emphasize repeatedly. Again, were they not first convinced of the continued existence of their perceptions, they would never have imagined such a distinction in the first place.

Hume is not shy about his indignation for such superfluous and unnecessary philosophical distinctions, referring to the philosophical notion of double existence as the “monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embrac’d by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other.”⁹ On the one hand we naturally imagine that our perceptions are continuous even when

⁸ T, 1.4.2.46.

⁹ T, 1.4.2.52.

unperceived, while on the other hand we can find no rational justification for presuming an independent existence beyond that which we perceive. For a short time, philosophers are troubled by their unreasonable condition, though their uneasiness is hastily remedied with superficial distinctions that sufficiently, though for no good reason, appease both their natural feelings and their rational considerations. It doesn't take long before these philosophers rid themselves of the likes of Hume and other likeminded skeptics, "and mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions..."¹⁰

After offering constructive accounts of how both implicit (vulgar/popular) and explicit (philosophical) belief in the external world originate, Hume begins to rethink whether this belief in external existence is in fact necessary after all. Not only does he seem to renege his previous claim—that it is vain to ask whether physical objects exist or not—and ask whether such an external existence be reasonable after all, he makes a confession: "I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence."¹¹

Part Two: A Skeptical Account Of Belief In External Existence

The skeptical and dogmatical reasons are of the same kind, tho' contrary in their operation and tendency; so that where the latter is strong, it has an enemy of equal force in the former to encounter; and as their forces were at first equal, they still continue so, as long as either of them subsists; nor does one of them lose any force in the contest, without taking as much from its antagonist. 'Tis happy, therefore, that nature breaks the force of all skeptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding. Were we to trust entirely to their self-destruction, that can never take place, till they have first subverted all conviction, and have totally detstroy'd human reason.¹²

¹⁰ T, 1.4.2.53.

¹¹ T, 1.4.2.56.

¹² T, 1.4.2.12.

Skepticism calls into question the *necessity* of a certain belief; only insofar as we know something is true, and thus necessary, is there no possible occasion for doubt. It seems to me that, for Hume, “true philosophy” calls into question the necessity of the beliefs we are naturally confronted with, while every other purported causal examination merely reaffirms, without questioning the necessity of, the beliefs themselves (and is therefore no causal examination after all). Hence, insofar as a purportedly philosophical enquiry of a particular belief fails to actually enquire into the necessity of that belief, it is merely “false philosophy.” False philosophy, or dogma, merely reinforces the belief in question, without ever doubting the cause for it. In this sense, only skepticism is indicative of true philosophy (rational treatment of natural beliefs) in that it seeks a reasonable cause for popular/dogmatic beliefs, rather than simply reinforcing the original, natural feelings implicated.

Is Hume himself skeptical of external existence and, if so, in what sense? Now, that Hume offers skeptical arguments, in fact lots of them, few, if any, would argue. Instead, the decisive issue seems to be whether he actually believed them. The philosophical community offers anything but a consensus regarding Hume’s true skeptical nature. Some argue that, despite the plethora of skeptical doubts he offers pertaining to belief in physical objects, “Hume believes there are bodies,”¹³ while others stress that “the things hidden by nature are said by the Sceptics to be altogether unknowable, and by Hume to be not only unknowable but even inconceivable”¹⁴ (even given Hume’s constructive account, objects, as contrasted with perceptions, are not perceived and are thus “hidden”).

¹³ Bricke, John. Hume’s Philosophy Of Mind [H] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 20.

¹⁴ Basson, A.H. David Hume [D] (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books Ltd, 1958), p. 145.

It seems to me that the more philosophically sophisticated question to ask is whether or not Hume deemed belief in bodies *reasonable*. In the end, I think it is quite clear that Hume firmly believes no philosophical arguments (be they true or false) will allow us to suspend our belief in external existence for any extended duration. Thus, the question worth asking is what precisely Hume considers to be the true philosophical conclusion pertaining to physical objects.

Fortunately, Hume is fairly unequivocal in this regard, saying of those who reach the “just conclusion:” “they wou’d have return’d back to the situation of the vulgar, and wou’d have regarded all these disquisitions with indolence and indifference.”¹⁵ As this indicates, Hume believes that proper philosophical considerations return us back to the situation of the *vulgar*, and thus true philosophical reasoning seems to return us back to the point at which we first started: irrational, albeit natural, belief in the continued existence of our perceptions despite their discontinuous nature. Notice that Hume’s true philosophy in no way endorses any distinction between perceptions and objects (i.e. “representative realism” or the notion of double existence).

While some interpreters are inclined to attribute “some form of a representative theory of perception”¹⁶ to Hume, I am of the opinion that this could not be farther from the truth. In my opinion, it seems misleading to say that, “he raises no doubts about its intelligibility.”¹⁷ Such interpretations of Hume most likely stem from his treatment of Antient and Modern philosophy in the *Treatise* and section twelve of his *Enquiry*, as evidenced by claims like the following: “That Hume is presenting three different arguments, with correspondingly different targets and conclusions, is plain enough from

¹⁵ T, 1.4.3.9.

¹⁶ H, p. 20.

¹⁷ H, p. 23.

the paragraph in section 12, part 1, of the first *Enquiry*.”¹⁸ Not only do I think this is *not* plain enough, I think Hume makes it rather clear that he does not have three arguments in mind. The paragraph in question reads as follows:

Thus the first philosophical objection to the evidence of sense or to the opinion of external existence consists in this, that such an opinion, if rested on natural instinct, is contrary to reason, and if referred to reason is contrary to natural instinct, and at the same time carries no rational evidence with it, to convince an impartial enquirer. The second objection goes farther, and represents this opinion as contrary to reason; at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object. Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it.¹⁹

It seems to me that what Hume has in mind here does *not* reflect differences between “naïve realism” (vulgar belief), “representative realism” (Ancient philosophy), and “total skepticism” in regard to external existence (Modern philosophy), as other interpreters seem to imply, but merely the difference between naïve realism and representative realism. My interpretation of Hume has both Modern and Ancient philosophy on the same footing: both entail a form of representative realism. Each endorses the notion of double existence and in doing so both are dogmatic and false philosophy. They only differ in regard to what is perceived as having continued existence (what are deemed properties of “body”) and what does not (and are thus merely properties of “perception”). Specifically, Modern philosophers are more restrictive about what they count as qualities of bodies (i.e. they associate continued existence with fewer perceptions).

¹⁸ H, p. 10.

¹⁹ Hume, David. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [E] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.1.16.

Again, the two skeptical (or philosophical) objections relate to naïve realism and representative realism. The point of the first objection is to show that the vulgar (common and unreflective) view involves contradictory impulses of the imagination (our natural feeling and reasonable curiosity). Such a view “carries no rational evidence with it” because, as Hume pointed out in his constructive account, vulgar belief in external existence is not founded on any of our simple impressions—instead, it is a natural product of the imagination.

This skeptical objection is employed by all philosophers—dogmatic and skeptical alike. These conflicting natural tendencies make philosophers uneasy, and they seek to supplement this vulgar belief with a rational justification to assuage this discomfort. Thus, a more explicit account of belief in physical bodies is offered by way of double existence. This double existence allows dogmatic philosophers to appease both their original belief in continued existence and the demands of their rational faculty. Unfortunately, Hume considers this dogmatic version of belief to be even more troublesome than the vulgar sentiments of the common man. Though the vulgar version of belief lacks any reasonable necessity, the natural feeling that corresponds to it is necessary—no one can suspend his or her belief in the vulgar version indefinitely. The dogmatic version shares this same problem (lack of reasonable necessity) and introduces another. Hume’s treatment of Ancient philosophy is employed to demonstrate the problem representative realism shares with naïve realism. His assessment of Modern philosophy is intended to elucidate the problem that is unique to representative realism.

Contrary to the aforementioned interpretation equating Modern philosophy with total skepticism (which is presumed to have a negative connotation), Hume much prefers

Modern philosophy to Antient philosophy, though its conclusions are just as false (*and unintelligible*). He expresses an appreciation for Modern philosophy inasmuch as it “pretends to be entirely free from this defect [derivation from principles that are neither universal nor unavoidable], and to arise only from the solid, permanent, and consistent principles of the imagination.”²⁰ Hume begins his section on Modern philosophy by distinguishing between principles of the imagination that are permanent, irresistible, and universal, and those that are changeable, weak, and irregular. These latter principles, “being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition.” According to Hume, Modern philosophers detected these kinds of principles in Antient philosophy.

Ultimately, Hume appreciates their recognition of the weak nature of Antient dogma, but thinks that their own philosophy, insofar as it is nevertheless appeals to double existence (representative realism), still exudes the same fundamental problem. While they have dramatically reduced the perceptions associated with bodies, Hume shows that their distinctions are otiose and their dogmatic philosophy still susceptible to the same fundamental objection levied against Antient dogmatists.

This fundamental objection to both Modern and Antient forms of representative realism comprise the second objection alluded to in the disputed paragraph. Not only does dogma (false philosophy) lack any reasonable justification, as is the case with vulgar sentiments, but it also proves contrary to reason! The second philosophical objection shows that this purported matter, or external existence, inasmuch as it proven to be distinct from any of our actual perceptions (as Hume illustrates in the section on Modern philosophy), is merely an “unknown, inexplicable *something*.” Hence, we have no idea

²⁰ T, 1.4.4.2.

what it is they are “really” talking about. Elsewhere, in regard to dogmatic philosophy Hume says, “’tis liable to the same difficulties [as the vulgar]; and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition.”²¹

With these points in mind, I am inclined to agree with the likes of Robert J. Fogelin: “Thus, for Hume, the common belief in an external world is not based on any sort of reasoning to begin with and cannot be supported by sound reasoning after the fact.”²² When we reflect on our natural belief in the existence of physical objects, the only true conclusion we can reach is that belief in external existence, though certainly natural, has no rational justification. “What can be imagin’d more tormenting, than to seek with eagerness, what for ever flies us; and seek for it in a place, where ’tis impossible it can ever exist?”²³ If one has reached the true opinion regarding belief in external existence, one will cease to question or justify the belief despite its irrational nature.

²¹ T, 1.4.3.56.

²² [C] The Cambridge Companion To Hume, ed. by David Fate Norton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 91.

²³ T, 1.4.3.9.

Who Believes What About External Existence, And Why

	(IMPLICIT) BELIEF IN EXTERNAL EXISTENCE IS <i>NATURAL</i>	(EXPLICIT) BELIEF IN EXTERNAL EXISTENCE IS <i>RATIONAL</i>
VULGAR (NAÏVE REALISM)	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
FALSE PHILOSOPHY (REPRESENTATIVE REALISM—BOTH MODERN AND ANTIEN)	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
TRUE PHILOSOPHY (DAVID HUME AND BRAD MUSIL AND...) ²⁴	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
TOTAL, INDEFINITE SKEPTICISM (NOT POSSIBLE)	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>

²⁴ Humean parallels in the subsequent history of philosophy are extensive, though some are more widely acknowledged and discussed than others. Thinkers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger aren't typically associated with Hume, but the parallels, at least in my opinion, are striking (e.g. Nietzsche's critique of all interpretations mirrors Hume's conclusions regarding rational justifications). While they may have not been directly influenced by Hume's actual work, an indirect lineage of influence cannot be denied (e.g. Hume>Kant>Schopenhauer>Nietzsche>Heidegger). [Plato (427 B.C.)-Pyrrho (360 B.C.)-Arcesilaus (316 B.C.)-Cicero (116 B.C.)-Philo (20 B.C.)-Sextus Empiricus (2nd Century A.D.)-Hume (1711 A.D.)-Nietzsche (1844 A.D.)-Heidegger (1889 A.D.)]