

David Hume and “Radical Skepticism”

Generally regarded as the most important philosopher ever to write in English, David Hume (1711-1776) -- the last of the great triumvirate of "British empiricists" -- was also noted as an historian and essayist. A master stylist in any genre, Hume's major philosophical works -- *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), the *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), as well as the posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779) -- remain widely and deeply influential, despite their being denounced by many of his contemporaries as works of scepticism and atheism.

Quotes by David Hume in which he cannot find any rational, scientific “proof” that the principle of “cause and effect” exists. His “radical skepticim” demonstrates that for the philosophically consistent atheist, science (which presupposes “cause and effect” and the uniformity of nature) cannot lead to any knowledge about the nature of reality whatsoever:

It appears that, in single instances of the operation of bodies, we never can, by our utmost scrutiny, discover any thing but one event following another, without being able to comprehend any force or power by which the cause operates, or any connexion between it and its supposed effect. The same difficulty occurs in contemplating the operations of mind on body- where we observe the motion of the latter to follow upon the volition of the former, but are not able to observe or conceive the tie which binds together the motion and volition, or the energy by which the mind produces this effect. The authority of the will over its own faculties and ideas is not a whit more comprehensible: So that, upon the whole, there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion which is conceivable by us. All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seemed conjoined, but never connected. And as we can have no idea of any thing which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion seems to be that we have no idea of connexion or force at all, and that these words are absolutely without meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings or common life. (David Hume, 1737)

..all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect; that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience; and all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past. Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses. (Hume, 1737)

I shall venture to affirm, as a general proposition, which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasonings a priori; but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other. (Hume, 1737)

It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance. Let the course of things be allowed hitherto ever so regular; that alone, without some new argument or inference, proves not that, for the future, it will continue so. (Hume, 1737)

I say then, that, even after we have experience of the operations of cause and effect, our conclusions from that experience are not founded on (a priori) reasoning, or any process of the understanding.(Hume, 1737)

Francis Schaeffer, in *The God Who is There*, argues that the more philosophically consistent atheists are with their worldview, the less they will live in the real world. Conversely, the more they live in the real world, the less philosophically consistent they will be.

Applying this principle to Hume, we find a “point of tension” between his philosophy and the way he lived his life:

Should it be asked me whether I sincerely assent to this argument which I have been to such pains to inculcate, whether I be really one of those skeptics who hold that everything is uncertain, I should reply that neither I nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion. I dine, I play backgammon, I converse and am merry with my friends and when after three or four hours of amusement I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strange and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further. Thus the skeptic still continues to reason and believe though he asserts he cannot defend his reason by reason. (Hume)

"Among great philosophers Hume, who hung his nose as far as any over the nihilistic abyss, withdrew it sharply when he saw the psychological risks involved and he advised dilution of metaphysics by playing backgammon and making merry with his friends. The conclusion of Hume's philosophizing was indeed a radical skepticism which left no convincing logical grounds for believing anything natural was there at all and he saved his reason by refusing to take the implications of his philosophy to heart."
Kathleen Knott - Objections to Humanism