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Hume on Belief in the External World

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We believe that there exists an external world where there are flowers in their first bloom, high green trees and steep mountains, beautiful women too, political societies and the working class, bad and good actions and even ugliness. We can pick up flowers, climb trees and mountains, meet the woman of our life, improve the condition of our nation and become better in our behavior and conduct. This belief is so universal, steady, and essential to our practice that there is no way to discuss it or even to put it in a hyperbolic suspense. In this respect, Cartesian doubt is a metaphysical vagary or an epistemological joke, since there are certainties which are merely indisputable. Therefore, we do not have to prove the existence of the external world: it does exist. And the Skeptic does not have to prove that the existence of the external world cannot be proved: it would be useless.

This is why Hume directly asks the question: how do we come to believe in the existence of bodies? Whereas, when he was dealing with causality, he had first skeptically argued that there could be no rational or experimental foundation for causal relation, and then had proceeded to the study of how we make inferences from causes to effects or from effects to causes.

So plain as this question might appear, yet we must consider it with some care. And first of all, is this question relevant? Thomas Reid and others think that it is not, because this belief, being indisputable, is natural: everybody knows not only that the external world exists, but also that he unquestionably knows that. Since we do not have to prove the existence of the external world, we do not have to explain how we would come to this belief. It is a first principle of the human mind that can only be described. Of course, such a naïveté is not quite innocent, since it entails that, wherever the *why* question is irrelevant, so is the *how* question; or, in other words, that there can be no good explanation but rational and only when it is possible. Reid's commonsense argument still pertains to a disillusioned foundationalism; and one might suspect that to dismiss the *how* question and to consider the belief in the external world as an original fact is a by-road to push aside the skeptical import of any questioning of such a fact. On the contrary, in Hume's philosophy, a fact is to be taken as an effect and every effect may have a cause; it being known that to give a cause of a fact never means to give its reason.

Second, let us consider the terms of the question. Hume does not ask *what causes induce us to believe in the existence of the external world*, but *what causes induce us to believe in*

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the existence of body. For, there are several objections to the first question. Firstly, strictly speaking, we never have an experience of the world, but only of objects in the world. If every object is in the world, the world is not an object. In the *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (part 2) Philo will argue that we cannot take the part for the whole nor the whole on the model of any of its parts; the world is the elaborate system of objects that we have experienced in the past or will experience in the future, by making causal inferences. Secondly, assuming this, we might say that, when we speak of the existence of the external world, we mean that every object which is in the world has an existence external to the mind and that the world is, in some way, an original principle of being (either it has been created by God or has been existing for ever or is the result of the Big Bang, etc.). The existence of the external world would signify that our perceptions are caused in our minds by some matter which is independent from them. Now, Hume is not the first philosopher to say that such an "externality" is quite obscure: we do not perceive anything external to our perceptions and certainly not externality itself (T 1.2.6.7–9).

But, let us be immaterialists with Berkeley and come back to Descartes' hyperbolic doubt; and let us suppose that delusions and dreams would be good reasons for doubting the existence of the external world in such a way that we could not be totally certain that high trees and steep mountains do exist. But, whether there is or not an external world, we still have the ideas of these high trees and steep mountains; they are *cogitata* of our *cogitationes*. Thus, *externality* appears to imply not only the idea of independent causes of our perceptions, but also the notion of determined objects (whether they exist or not) that are distinct from their perceiving. For, I may doubt the actual existence of something, I will still have the idea of this thing as an intentional object of my thinking and, therefore, as an object distinct from my perception, my imagination or my thought. *Distinct* from the mind and *external* to the mind are two different statuses, even if, of course, there is nothing external to the mind which would not be distinct from it. The School in the middle ages and more recently Austrian and Phenomenological philosophies at length discussed whether this distinction of the intentional object could mean some kind of independence and in which sense. But Hume has cut the Gordian knot, at the start, in *Treatise* 1.2.6. By what may appear as a puzzling confusion between what Descartes, after the Schoolmen, called the formal reality and the objective reality of ideas, he claims that "there is no impression nor idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceiv'd as existent; and 'tis evident that from this consciousness the most perfect idea and assurance of *being* is deriv'd" (T 1.2.6.2). Everything perceived or conceived is an existence. Even the difference between impressions and ideas does not alter this quite strange statement, from which several consequences follow: (1) "the idea of existence is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent" (T 1.2.6.4) and to think of something and to think of it as existent are the same thing; (2) since any idea corresponds to an impression and is an existence so far as it is the copy of an impression, every impression must be in itself an existence, and there are as many existences as impressions; (3) impressions and existing objects are the same: there is no reason to distinguish between perception and object; and the same can be said about ideas: although an idea is a copy of an impression, an idea is not in itself a representation of an external body or an intentional object; (4) existence not being a distinct idea or

impression, is not a quality that could be a part of a complex idea or even some feature of simple impressions, nor could it be obtained by a distinction of reason (T 1.2.6.6; cf. T 1.1.7.17–18).

Therefore *existence*, *being*, *perception*, *object*, mean the same thing. And yet, we see high trees, we climb steep mountains, we meet beautiful women in the external world; and we can also, during winter, think of spring, or dream of climbing rocky mountains, or idealize female beauty. We do have the ideas of things existing in the external world. How do we acquire such ideas?

But, beforehand, a point must be clarified: is the existence in the external world an idea? We just have said that the idea of existence adds nothing to the idea of what is conceived as existent; that is to say, does not extend the determined content or meaning of this idea. But there are things which exist and others which do not. To exist in the external world makes a difference. Consequently, in order to correct a rather loose vocabulary from Hume, let us use the words *being* or *entity* to denote any perception or object and save the word *existence* to designate such a difference. A perception or an object *is*, but it may *exist* or not. Existence will be taken here as a modality. It is meaningless to ask whether beings or entities are external to the mind, since perception and object are the same thing, but it is very useful to ask whether this thing exists or not in the external world. There is nothing to say about the being of perceptions/objects, but there is much to say about their existence, since modalities can only be posited in belief. Now, there are two main beliefs: the belief in necessary existence, supported by causal inferences, and the belief in external existence, supported by sensible perception. Consequently, there are two main modalities: to be necessarily existent and to exist in the external world. And we could argue analogically. Whatever we may think about the psychological explanation of the idea of necessity as corresponding to the feeling of the transition of the imagination in causal inferences, let us retain that there is an "idea" of necessary existence, that this idea has something to do with the association of ideas and impressions, and that it arises in causal belief. In the same way, let us say that there can be an "idea" of external existence, this idea having something to do with the association of ideas and impressions, and arising in sensible belief. We will find out up to which point this analogy can stand.

Now, let us try to describe the sensible existence of things or bodies in the external world. It cannot mean that an object would be external to its perception, since we know that objects and perceptions are the same thing. And they will never become two different things, except among philosophers. A high tree is an impression if I am seeing it; an idea if I am thinking of it. A high tree is what it is. Neither impressions nor ideas are representative in themselves of something external; nor are they given as effects, symptoms, or signs of external causes. When we say that bodies exist outside ourselves, we say that they are outside our own body. But to say so, we must consider our own organic body as a body in space, situated relatively to others, and we have to deal with things located in space and having parts. Now, all objects are not in space (for instance, smells, tastes, which are said in space only by being assimilated to tactile or visible objects) (T 1.4.5.10). Thus we must be careful not to employ the spatial metaphor for any kinds of objects, but to refer their alleged externality to their independence from the mind, so far as this one cannot be the cause of their existence and operation. But Hume makes a further move. This independent or distinct existence

itself is to be referred to continued existence, because bodies in the external world exist independently of the mind if they enjoy a continued existence, at the very time the mind does not perceive them. Even if Hume claims that this reasoning is reciprocal, the fact that he starts with considering the continued existence of things in the world is of first importance. Many entities (or perceptions or objects) appear in spatial order (juxtaposition), all of them in temporal order (succession). In spatial order, things can be contiguously conjoined; in temporal order, they appear the one after the other. All of them are perishable beings. In order to keep them together, memory and imagination are required. This observation is the more crucial that various entities, taken one by one, cannot give the idea of time: a single entity *is*, it has no duration, since to be able to perceive its duration we should have the idea of time; but time cannot be perceived in itself, since it is perceived so far as a succession of entities is perceived. But a mere succession without duration does make up time: how are we able to join the ideas of succession and duration together and to be conscious of time?

Another problem is to be emphasized. Each entity appears and disappears successively. Each one can be said to be *one*; but none can be said to *be the same*, since, even if the following one is similar to the preceding one, they are two and the preceding one has disappeared. From the succession of two or more perceptions or objects, we cannot derive the idea of the same perception or object continuing to exist in two or more moments of time. And Hume is not Kant. An entity cannot be identified as a limit by the moment it occupies in any sensible a priori form, since there is no original perception of time: "As 'tis from the disposition of visible and tangible objects we receive the idea of space, so from the succession of ideas and impressions we form the idea of time, nor is it possible for time alone ever to make its appearance, or to be taken notice of by the mind" (T 1.2.3.7). Time is the appearance or the sensible phenomenon of successive perceptions. Thus the question of the continued existence of entities is also the question of their own identity, since, when we believe in the existence of things in the world, we believe that they remain the same when we do not perceive them, at least during some period of time. Thus, we have this alternative: either we perceive only one perception, and that does make *one*, but the idea of unity cannot be taken for the idea of identity; or we successively perceive two (or more) perceptions, but that will make *two*, even if these two perceptions are alike. "Betwixt unity and number there can be no medium" (T 1.4.2.28). The identity of things cannot be more easily perceived than their permanence or their externality, as Barry Stroud has rightly observed (1977: ch. 5).

This identity is all the more a problem, when we consider that, strictly speaking, we do not perceive a tree, but a color, a figure, a volume, a smell, etc. Of course, we say that we see a tree, *this* tree. But how does it happen that so various and different impressions or ideas are taken together as qualities or attributes belonging to this determinate tree, taken as a singular and identical existence? Locke already claimed that things which we are said to see, to touch, to hear, etc. are only collections of ideas or perceptions united by the imagination, under a single name (*Essay* II, 23, 1ff.). But Hume goes further than Locke: it is not only substantial identity that makes a problem, but as well and potentially objective or transcendental identity.

Let us now explain how the mind can acquire the notion of the continued and distinct existence of external objects. Hume successively considers whether it is the senses,

reason or the imagination, that produce such an opinion. It cannot be the senses, since they cannot make the mind perceive anything beyond what immediately appears to it: "All sensations are felt by the mind, such as they really are" (T 1.4.2.5). And they could not be presented to the mind as external to or independent of us, except by some kind of fundamental delusion which from one single sensation would derive both the external object and its subjective image; but a sensation is not representative. Not to mention that we should be ourselves obvious to our senses; which is to add one difficulty to another. And what is said about external and independent existence can be said about continued existence, since sensation should give us the perception of an existence of which there is no present sensation. Nor can it be our reason which makes us attribute distinct and continued existence to objects: in this case, only philosophers would entertain such a belief. There remains the imagination.

It is well known that in Hume's philosophy the imagination joins several perceptions together by associating them, that is to say, by moving swiftly from one to another, and that it is actuated by a constant tendency to easiness, to smoothness, as if its liveliness was to help to the restlessness of our life. For it is hard to live when the train of things is interrupted and the soul split into pieces. But the flowing of the imagination, through different and perishing instants of time, would be also a source of uneasiness, if, with the help of the memory, it did not operate mainly as a regular transition between perceptions, connecting the like with the like, suggesting inferences, modeling systems. Indeed, time itself is a principle of association, since it connects one perception to another, but the weakest one (weaker than space) since it is mere succession, and consequently a kind of temporal scattering. In the opposite, the imagination is the pacified flood of our ideas and it runs continuously and regularly. This observation may appear somewhat naïve, but one must remember that not only do we believe in the existence of the external word, but also that we live in this same external world. Anyway, at the core of this belief, there is our consciousness of time and our fragile power to get hold of it.

Hume's doctrine of time can be compared to Kant's one, in several respects. It is the sensible form of appearances, but an a posteriori form. "Five notes play'd on a flute give us the impression and idea of time; tho' time be not a sixth impression, which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses" (T 1.2.3.10). Time cannot be separated from perceptions or objects appearing in it. Now, in common experience, these objects are used to appear in the same order or in a constant order, even if we lose sight of them for a moment. This constancy will give philosophers a seeming good reason of distinguishing between perceptions and objects, since if objects are used to appear in a constant order, the contingent succession of their appearances, so they say, must be attributed to the mind. But, at the start, constancy happens when any similar series of entities appear in certain analogous spatial and temporal connections, that is to say, when resemblance between series of entities introduces a kind of repetition and acquaintance in the disorder of time. On the other hand, it may also happen that there is some change from one series to another, but this change is itself regular or at least coherent with the remainder of our experience. Thus, constancy and coherence are the main attributes of the world, when it is taken in a temporal prospect.

Hume begins with the study of coherence. The world, whether it exists externally or not, this point being not yet settled, is essentially a more or less ordered framework

in which things happen. For what do we do when we say that a body is in the world, but express the idea that, even if this body appears for the first time, it must take place in the network of the numerous and crossed sequences of phenomena with which we are acquainted by experience and knowledge? Nothing can be added to the world without being incorporated in it. Of course, we may have some quite new experiences, but if they do not fit in, to some degree, with the common or scientific world, they are a threat for life and a problem for science. The famous example given by Hume shows how the imagination can overcome the incoherencies of our experience of the world. Hume is seated in his chamber, in front of his fire. He is seeing flames playing in the chimney, he feels warm, etc. And *then* he hears a noise behind him, sees a man who gives him a letter, recognizes the hand-writing and remembers a friend who is far away. Here we have a series of perceptions and, if some of them can be connected together with the help of the memory (for instance, seeing the hand-writing and remembering the friend who is the author of the letter) others cannot (there is no immediate link between feeling warm and hearing a noise behind one's back). His present series of perceptions disagree with the other ones which make up his experience of the world; if this disagreement was not to fade away, this very quiet scene of Hume getting warm would change into a bewildering disorder. Thus, the world is a general principle of organization for any new experience. Now, an agreement can be reached and a happy life preserved only if Hume supposes that there is a door behind his back, continuing to exist whereas he is looking at the fire; that the porter opened it, crossed the room, before giving him the letter; that the friend who is far away wrote the letter, committed it to a postal service, etc. The world can keep coherent if it is supposed enjoying a continued existence. "Here then I am naturally led to regard the world, as something real and durable, and as preserving its existence, even when it is no longer present to my perception" (T 1.4.2.20).

This conclusion from the coherence of several appearances, Hume says, leads to the same effect as conclusions drawn from our causal inferences and makes the world more uniform and harmonious; but he adds that there is a great difference, so far as, in causal inferences, from similar series of phenomena, the necessary existence of an absent object is posited – an absent object that existed in the past as an impression – whereas, in the present argument, the principle of coherence has the mind compare an irregular series with other series which are regular, but made up with objects enjoying a continued and independent existence – an existence of which we have no experience at all. In Berkeley's words, we cannot compare our interrupted perceptions with objects that would exist permanently and independently in the world, since the only content of our mind is our own perceptions. The idea of a coherent world is a fiction contrived by the imagination in order to soothe the disorder of our own experience.

This first argument is too weak to support the whole frame of a permanent and independent world. Besides the coherence of the appearances of mundane objects, we must consider their constancy. I look around at my room, I shut my eyes and when I open them again, my room, with all its furniture, looks the same, that is to say, the new set of perceptions in my mind perfectly resembles the previous one; and I say that I am staying in the same room which continued to exist when my eyes were shut. To explain how the mind can draw such a conclusion, Hume builds up a remarkable

argument which comes again several times (it is summed up in 1.4.2.35–6 and note) and is still at work, in a way, in the chapter devoted to personal identity. First, let us present it and then fix its successive stages.

We know that all perceptions or objects are in themselves different, distinguishable and separable entities or existences. We also know that the imagination is a tendency to a smooth and easy transition and feels uncomfortable when its ideas or principles contradict one another; and that it obtains more regularity or uniformity by the means of association. Now there are two kinds of association: the association of ideas and the association of passions or tendencies, both proceeding here by resemblance. At last, the imagination creates fictions; and all the successive fictions it invents ends at a philosophical one: our perceptions *represent* objects which are identical with themselves and exist permanently and independently in the external word.

Consider a perception or an object. It is a determined being, an entity or an appearance (take the word you like). If you say that it is lasting some time, you say more, since you suggest that it is still the same in two different instants of time. You cannot confer duration to it without giving it an identity. But you cannot derive this identity from its original being. "One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity" (T 1.4.2.26). Nor can you obtain it by considering two moments of time, since, in this case, you have two distinct and separable ideas or two different beings, even if the imagination can proceed from one to the other upon the account of the most exact resemblance. Thus, either you consider one perception and you have no consciousness of time; and having no consciousness of time, you do not have any idea of duration nor any means to confer a temporal identity to the considered entity; or you consider several instants of time and, indeed, you have the idea of succession, but not of duration; you have the ideas of two different perceptions or objects, but not of an identical and permanent one. How can one single entity be the same with itself in a certain elapsing period of time, that is to say, under two or more appearances (or beings)? To overcome this formal contradiction, the imagination seeks for some way between unity and number – precisely, the possibility for an entity to keep the same in time. And, while considering only one perception, it supposes a succession of time. Now, this first fiction is the result of the bringing together of two dispositions of the imagination (T 1.4.2.29). Let us consider any two moments of time. We may survey them at the very same instant and they give us the idea of number: we perceive that they are two and accordingly the given object must be multiplied by two, in order to be conceived at once as existent in these two different points of time. There are two views compared to each other in a single instant. We may also conceive the first moment, with its object, and then, without interrupting our surveying the object, we imagine afterwards a supposed change of time. The idea of identity arises from these two points of view taken together: the object is two and one or, rather, less than two and more than one; and time is both succession and duration. By this very simple but also quite astonishing argument (as it happens very often in Hume's philosophy), the imagination is installed at the core of our consciousness of time and our perception of objects. Thus, by a kind of reciprocation, several objects give the impression of time; the mere idea (or fiction) of time gives the idea of a single object keeping identical.

Nevertheless, in our sensible belief in the existence of bodies in the external word, we begin with two or more perceptions or appearances which, however similar, are

different in number and occupy several instants of time: they are "broken and interrupted." In the preceding fiction, one object appears to be the same in a supposed variation of time; the imagination deals with a difference that must be inserted into pure unity; here, the problem is inverse: how out of two to make one? The difference of the perceived objects is real; it is the unity or the identity of the object that will be fictitious. The imagination is the easy transition from one perception to another and the more these perceptions are similar, the more the transition is easier, but not so easy that the real difference could be forgotten (in this case, we would have an internal relation from one term to the other). In a word, any relation is external and this externality cannot be overcome. But, what the imagination cannot do by converting two objects into one, it can do by changing its own disposition. A series of resembling objects puts the mind in the same condition as it is when considering an invariable object in a supposed variation of time. And the same attracts the same. "We may establish it for a general rule, that whatever ideas place the mind in the same disposition or in similar tones, are very apt to be confounded" (T 1.4.2.32). It is easy to confound an easy disposition with another one.

Let us observe where we are at this point, since, in these rather meandering details, Hume is aiming at explaining how the mind comes to believe in the continued and, consequently, external existence of things in the world. Previously, identity was only invariableness in a supposed variation of time; now, it is the numerical identity (assimilated to the precedent one) of two or more appearances or objects. And this last one is more than a fiction; it is an illusion, that is to say, an incipient belief. The imagination operates to its own profit, though it is a manifest contradiction to say that two are only one and the same and what is perishing keeps identical. This contradiction is an objection for philosophers who will solve it by saying that there are two (or more) *perceptions* for one identical *object*; but it can be endured and managed by common belief which has nothing to do with logical coherence, without such a philosophical device. However, the practical rule of the imagination being easiness, a contradiction, so far it is perceived, can make life uneasy and unpleasant. And this is the case, since there is a contrariety between what the imagination perceives (several perceptions/objects) and what it does, while muddling up these several entities into one. It cannot yield up the opinion of identity since it would be to sacrifice its own tendency and it is like a river: you can throw obstacles in its way and divert it, but you will never stop its flow. But it can work out as many suppositions as are needed: succession being contrary to identity, it can trump up the idea of a continued existence. We will accordingly allow that a perception can be absent without being annihilated and then come back to the mind, without being different. Thus, the only way out is to attribute a continued existence to our elapsing perceptions and to invest them with the modality of a permanent identity. We believe that perceptions or objects (still the same thing at the present stage of the argument) continue to exist even if we do not perceive them, and that all of them taken together make up the constant world where we are living.

A supposition is a supposition, not a belief, all the more, in the present case, that the fictitious aspect of this new fiction cannot be deleted. This fiction is added to the two previous ones; and the more the imagination invents new solutions, the more these solutions are philosophically untenable. But common sense does not go so far and feels

more comfortable with steady and reliable beliefs than with skeptical doubts. Belief consists in nothing but the vivacity of an idea, and we know that an idea is used to acquire this vivacity by its relation to some present impression. This relation causes a smooth passage from the impression to the connected idea. And one might conclude that in the present case resemblance has the same influence as causation. But we cannot be as confident as Hume, even if he introduces the operation of the memory. For, though our memory presents us with a vast number of similar instances and gives us a propensity to consider these interrupted perceptions as the same and fictitiously to take them as an identical object, the further step, from numerical identity to continued existence, cannot be so easily explained. This is so, even though the first one entails the second: indeed, sensible belief goes beyond relation. Resemblance, in itself, carries the mind from the similar to the similar, that is to say from one term to another one, connected by their similarity; let us allow that it also has the power to carry the mind from the same to the same; but in the belief in the continued existence of identical objects, it carries it from one modality of existing to another one or, in our own words, from being as an entity to existing as an object. Now, firstly, a modality is just a modality, not a thing; secondly, a continued existence cannot be given nor tested nor settled in any way. Sensible belief is, so to speak, a totally blind belief, a point emphasized by J. M. Costa (1988) who gives a solution, drawn from abstract ideas, which is more ingenious than perfectly convincing.

The last step is easily taken. Since objects enjoy a continued existence, whereas perceptions are broken and interrupted, they are distinct from these perceptions and independent of the mind; and thus they belong to the external world, taken as a distinct principle of being, whereas perceptions belong to the internal world. Or, to speak more exactly concerning common belief, the same entities are taken at one time as permanent objects, at another time as perishing perceptions. Besides, in our idea of the world, causal belief and sensible belief are coordinated, since an object cannot be independent from the mind if it is not apt to take place into the causal network which makes the substance of the world.

This quite singular doctrine might appear extravagant. Two of its features should be underlined. At first, its logical frame: each further step is the logical condition of the preceding one, as if human nature, though naturally prompted, followed a rational regress. In other words, this "natural history" of sensible belief is somewhat analytical, the progress in the successive effects being a regress in the formal conditions of the problem. You may feel indignant with such an outrageous proceeding and object that it is unworthy of an honest philosopher. But the reason would be that you do not take the second feature into account. This natural history is the history of imagination, not of reason; Hume does not try to justify our belief, but explain how it arises. If you are angry with him, I suspect that you secretly entertain the idea that human nature is essentially rational. Is it? "'Tis certain that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence. 'Tis also certain, that this very perception or object is suppos'd to have a continued uninterrupted being, and neither to be annihilated by our absence, nor to be brought into existence by our presence" (T 1.4.2.38). I look out of the window; I see a couple of hopping blackbirds on the grass; I shut my eyes

nd open them again; I see a couple of hopping blackbirds and I say: "Hey, there is a couple of hopping blackbirds!" You may object that a blackbird as a perception is not the same thing as a blackbird as a winged creature existing in the world and you may add that the blackbird as a perception represents the blackbird as a real being. But the common sense will stand firm in maintaining that there is only one couple of blackbirds. And you certainly agree with your fellow-creatures, at least if you are monist and not dualist (see Flage 1990: ch. VI).

Of course, Hume, as much as any philosopher, readily observes that "a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion" (T 1.4.2.44). This opinion of a continued existence entailing the opinion of an independent existence, our perceptions must be considered as independent, and this is a contradiction that a philosopher as shrewd as Berkeley cannot overcome (it is not contradictory only if, the continued existence being taken as *granted*, one examines whether independent objects can momentarily appear to the mind: see Cook 1968). Philosophers follow the profession of solving contradictions. And their usual device is to introduce some distinction or to make clear and precise what is obscure and confused. Human nature, they say, is mistaken when it surrenders to imagination; or, rather, since it will not be easily allowed that nature is really mistaken, they tell that common sense frames its beliefs in an erroneous way that can be corrected by giving the true philosophical explanation. Nature is potentially, if not actually, rational and philosophy will only straighten up what, given to itself, is a mere and somewhat erroneous tendency. Since the same entities cannot at the same time enjoy a perishing or interrupted existence and a continued one, to be both dependent and independent, the easiest thing to do is to stick to the distinction between perceptions and objects and, instead of upholding a double existence for the same thing, argue that the two existences imply that there are two kinds of things, internal and external, each of them having an existence of their own. Philosophers' specific discovery is the distinction between being and appearing: things existing in the external world produce perceptions of the mind, where they appear in an interrupted way, without losing their permanent identity. To exist means to exist in an external world. The external world, taken as an ontological principle, is philosophers' great argument.

In the last paragraphs of section 2 and in section 3 and 4 of this fourth part of *Treatise* 1, where he enquires into the metaphysical foundation of this argument, Hume both refutes the idea that the contradiction would be solved by the theory of representation and shows that this system, having no rational strength, is only one more belief, not a common but a philosophical belief where the imagination is triumphant. "However philosophical this new system may be esteem'd, I assert that 'tis only a palliative remedy, and that it contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself" (T 1.4.2.46). Thus the natural history of sensible belief goes further than the producing of natural belief, up to philosophical belief. Of course, the lesson is hard to take: what philosophers call *reason* is, concerning this question, only an unnecessary belief.

It would be too long to enter into a detailed analysis, but let us characterize the basic argument and suggest the general import of this damaging doctrine.

Our experience gives us only our perceptions-objects and does not acquaint us with anything such as the double existence of perceptions *and* objects. And it is impossible

to infer the existence of bodies from their appearances to the mind, since any causal inference can carry us from one thing to another one inside the system of our experience, but not from a perception to an object or from the whole system to the external world. Therefore, the double existence doctrine is merely speculative, although it can operate in a philosophical mind as an undeniable belief. And every belief, even those of the philosophical kind, must and can be explained. Now, reason cannot produce this belief, since (to say it in these words) Berkeley has shown that it cannot be proved by any argument (not to mention Descartes, who has no other argument than God's veracity). Thus, the philosophical system "must derive all its authority from the vulgar system; since it has no original authority of its own" (T 1.4.2.49). If philosophers were thoroughly rational, they should conclude that the belief in an external and independent existence and, consequently, in a continuous existence, is contradictory, and suspend it; but, no Skeptic being so foolish as to take such a step, they fall under a new contradiction between common belief (our perceptions are our objects) and a critical reflection which easily proves that the same entity cannot be both a perception and an object. And the same spring as previously, the same tendency to easiness, operates in philosophers' minds: the formal distinction between perception and object, between appearance and existence, pleases both their reason, in allowing that our perceptions are interrupted, and their imagination, in saving the common belief in objects endowed with continuous existence. And they hasten to add that the objects resemble the perceptions. But it is easy to notice that they do nothing but use their favorite device, i.e., change a contradiction into a distinction. It would not be a pitiful trick, if they were able to determine the relation between perceptions and objects and lay the foundation of the existence of the external world.

Here, it should be noticed that Hume, while skeptically chasing after any pretended solution, is gradually sketching a general history of philosophical systems, as if he could under this question sum up past, present, and, we may add, future philosophy. And he does this by complicating the initial problem. Till now, we have talked about perceptions and objects rather loosely, for we do not have to pay attention to the difference between simple and complex impressions (or ideas) and we have ignored the fact that the original content of perception is not *the* tree or *the* mountain, but a color, a figure, a smell, a certain hardness, etc., that is to say, various qualities. And it is a question how we can say that we see *the* tree or climb *the* mountain, by joining these qualities together. This way, the question of identity can be more exactly settled and we will observe that, being determined in their degrees of quality and quantity, each of the various entities (qualities) is numerically one but not identical to itself and that objects alone are supposed to be identical to themselves, in the stream of their different qualities, and to enjoy a continued and external existence.

The simplest and the grossest way to deal with this brain-racking problem is provided by ancient philosophy, which gives a metaphysical answer going from externality to identity. The external world exists; it is the general set of all things that have the principle of their being in themselves, i.e., that are substances. By definition, substances enjoy a permanent existence and, so far, are identical to themselves. Concerning their qualities, one must distinguish between their essence, by which they are what they are, and their accidents, which can be destroyed without entailing their own destruction. As to perception, these substances send forth species which are like

their predicates and impress the human mind. Of course, there are many problems at stake and the most important was already at the core of Aristotle's ontology (*Metaphysics*, book Z). Substance (at least sensible substance) is both matter and form, the undetermined (and nevertheless simple) substrate and the determining and general essence. How can a determining essence qualify an undetermined subject, so that an individual being can be accounted for? What is inhesion? By pushing forwards this problem, one easily comes to the idea that, when trying to solve the substrate question, Aristotle went the wrong way and that, contrary to his metaphysical naïveté, we should go from identity to externality. And Hume, on the same ground as previously, explains how metaphysicians have been able to reach such an assumption and entertain a belief that, in this regard, is not naïve at all. Indeed, Locke had made a part of the job in his critique of the idea of substance (*Essay* II, 23): the human mind has no idea of substance except as a collection of various ideas, the two difficulties being how to change a collection into one and simple being and to determine it by such or such predicates. But, concerning the first question, Locke rather awkwardly stands in midstream: he takes a step towards the Kantian notion of transcendental objectivity and nevertheless claims that substance is a fiction, relying upon language. Concerning the second question, he makes the most of the well-known distinction between the primary and the secondary qualities, in harmony with the requirements of modern science, but, obviously, still in the trouble of justifying such a distinction. Hume rushes into this breach: the imagination, running fast from one idea to another, when they are regularly conjoined, piles and mixes them up, takes one for another and arrives at the belief that two (or more), however dissimilar, are one, which is the definition of identity. The resulting identical object is supposed to survive the flow of ideas or predicates thanks to the philosophical fiction of substance. Thus, philosophical belief is obtained in the same way as common belief and rests on it. "The imagination is apt to feign something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls a *substance*, or *original and first matter*" (T 1.4.3.4).

A substance subsisting in itself, that is to say by being such or such, this metaphysical belief adds to the identity problem the simplicity problem: not only two must become one, but also the compound must become simple; and this is another contradiction. Ancient philosophy, in a way, operated like common sense, by confusing different and various perceptions. Modern philosophy sagaciously draws back from this embarrassment, claims that phenomena, internal appearances, and external beings must be distinguished, adds that phenomena are perceptions and external beings are objects continuing to exist and that perceptions are various and different and objects alone identical. And it comes to this problem: how is the understanding able to determine objects not only by their formal identity (the reason why they can be distinguished from perceptions), but also by real attributes? Locke's philosophy tries to find out an answer by analyzing phenomena: there are perceptions that are essentially variable, produced in the mind by some unknown quality in the object, and others that are permanent (all the attributes required by modern science) and which can be taken as determinations of an object, since not only they are produced in the mind by the external thing, but they are (or supposed to be) the internal image of one of its attributes. Obviously the basic problem is still the same and Hume only needs to prove

that the distinction between secondary and primary qualities does not stand up. A mechanical explanation of the external world needs the ideas of motion and body; but what is a body? How are we to determine a body? By its extension in space, but extension requires solidity. What is solidity? Two bodies are solid when they cannot penetrate each other. But it is a vicious circle, since the definition of solidity requires the idea of body. In a word, the idea of body (that is to say, the metaphysical remainder essential to modern science) is a mere fiction. Newtonian science has taken a great step towards the knowledge of the external world by rising up to general principles and using mathematics, but at a very high cost: its basic concepts are mere fictions. Modern science requires modern philosophy, but modern philosophy does nothing more than common belief, plus several philosophical problems.

The following moment of the story would be the Kantian philosophy: it is impossible to attribute to any object a metaphysical or even a physical determination; any object is a transcendental object (= X) and the only question is to explain how the understanding can synthesize various perceptions under the unity of a priori concepts (categories) the correlate of which is the transcendental object. Externality (understood in an empirical realism) derives from identity and identity from objectivity (understood in a transcendental idealism), and objectivity proceeds from the synthetical function of concept. One might guess Hume's answer: "This is an excellent way of putting the matter philosophically." Kant is much more lucid than Locke. But to characterize the problem is not to solve it: what is a transcendental object?

Hume's positive doctrine of common belief in the existence of objects and of the external world might itself appear fictitious; but it depends on the science of human nature to prove that it is experimentally false and to correct it. His naturalistic doctrine of philosophical belief in the double existence of perceptions and ideas might appear unacceptable to philosophers: so much the worse for philosophers! It is obvious that his skeptical critique is formidable: it is for the best of philosophy! His whole analysis appears quite uncommon by this strange mixture of naturalism and skepticism and, accordingly, uneasy for our common way of thinking. This might be the reason why Hume dropped it in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, only alluding to it, in section 12, part 1, by recalling the basic contradiction between nature and reason, belief and logic: nature knows how to curve philosophy into a mitigated and amiable skepticism.

See also 4 "Hume and the Origin of Our Ideas of Space and Time"; 5 "Hume on the Relation of Cause and Effect"; 6 "Inductive Inference in Hume's Philosophy"

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