Hume on Skepticism (1748)

1. **Skepticism:** Hume reiterates pretty much every skeptical thesis that preceded him:

   **Empiricism:** There are no innate ideas, and all knowledge is derived from experience. Hume writes, “all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.” *(He calls our direct perceptions ‘impressions’ and reserves the term ‘idea’ for weaker recollections of them; e.g., in memory or imagination.)*

   **Primary-secondary quality distinction:** All agree that secondary qualities are merely in the perceiver, and not in the objects – for instance, because they change relative to the perceiver without any change occurring in the object. But, this is also true of primary qualities (e.g., the size and shape of a table change as I move). Therefore, we do not actually directly perceive primary qualities either.

   **Matter as an underlying “thing”:** If we try to conceive of the underlying THING (or ‘substratum’) that is matter—i.e., the thing that HAS the properties such as color, size, shape, etc.—by stripping all of those qualities away from the object, we find that there is nothing intelligible left to conceive of.

   **Representationalism:** If all knowledge is derived from experience, and we only ever experience things “inside the head” (i.e., inner, mental representations), then we can never have knowledge about things in “external” reality. (Again, he reiterates, that we’d never be able to COMPARE our mental representations with the things in reality, because, by definition, the things in reality are not ideas, and therefore just are not the kinds of things that can be perceived.) He writes,

   “it is universally allowed by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion. ... Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are derived from something antecedently present to the mind, it follows that it is impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions.” *(Treatise, I.II.6)*

   **Thanks Berkeley!** Hume says we really have Berkeley to thank for driving us this far. And, hilariously, Berkeley actually put forward all of his theses as a way to REFUTE skepticism! *(Consider: If there ARE NO external, material objects, then we don’t have to worry about our ideas not corresponding to the “real” objects!)* Hume writes,
“most of the writings of that very ingenious author [Berkeley] form the best lessons of skepticism ... He professes, however, in his title-page (and undoubtedly with great truth) to have composed his book against the skeptics ... But that all his arguments, though otherwise intended, are in reality merely skeptical, appears from this, that they admit of no answer and produce no conviction. Their only effect is to cause that momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion which is the result of skepticism.” (Inquiry, XII.1n)

2. No Solution to Skepticism: Is there any good solution to skepticism?

God?: Both Descartes and Berkeley made use of God in their refutations of skepticism:

*Descartes:* Surely there IS an external world, since God would not let us be deceived.  
*Berkeley:* There IS uniformity and regularity in reality, and things (including you) do NOT disappear whenever we aren’t perceiving them, because GOD perceives ALL.

But, Hume thinks this is absurd. If God had any sort of obligation toward the (in)fallibility of our perceptions, then we would NEVER be deceived. But, everyone admits that we’re at least SOMETIMES deceived.

Furthermore, if it’s possible that our understanding is systemically deceived (and it IS possible), then how in the heck can we “prove” the existence of God? Such a proof would require the use of the very understanding whose reliability has been called into question! *(Especially if it is possible even that we could even be deceived about whether, e.g., 2+2=4. Though, it is worth noting that even Hume doesn’t go this far.)*

Skepticism is Unrefutable: In the end, Hume endorses skepticism. He writes,

“By what argument can it be proved that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects entirely different from them, though resembling them (if that be possible) and could not arise either from the energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestion of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us?” (Inquiry, XII.1)

Elsewhere,

“This skeptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady which can never be radically cured ...” (Treatise, I.IV.2)
Looking forward: We can see in Hume and Berkeley the seeds of phenomenology— the philosophical movement which rejected objectivity, and sought instead to restrict all inquiry merely to our own inner, subjective worlds. The relevant question is not, What is the NATURE or ESSENCE of X?, but rather, How do I FEEL about X? Hume writes,

“As long as we confine our speculations to the appearances of objects to our senses, without entering into [lengthy discussions] concerning their real nature and operations, we are safe from all difficulties and can never be embarrassed by any question. ... If we carry our inquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the senses, I am afraid that most of our conclusions will be full of skepticism and uncertainty.” (Treatise, I.II.5n)

We also see the seeds of logical positivism—the movement which rejected as meaningless any area of study which is not (at least in principle) empirically verifiable. For instance, consider this passage from Hume:

“When we run over libraries ...what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume ... let us ask: Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Then, commit it to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.” (Inquiry, XII.3)

He’s basically rejecting metaphysics: Is it math? Is it science? No and no? Then get rid of it!

3. Hume’s “Solution” to Skepticism: Philosophy seems to be utterly at odds with common sense. So, we have two options:

(1) Philosophy wins. We ignore intuition; remain agnostic about the external world.
(2) Intuition/habit wins. We ignore reason; we place belief in an external world.

Neither option is very inviting. Though a philosopher himself, Hume actually thinks that we CAN’T HELP but go with option (2). Our inclination to believe in external objects is SO STRONG, we just can’t help ourselves. He says that such a judgement is “unavoidable”, and comes just as naturally as breathing and feeling. (Treatise, I.IV.1)

Furthermore, all reasoning PRE-SUPPOSES external objects. He writes, "But it is in vain to ask: Whether there be body or not? That is a point which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.” (Treatise, 1.4.2)

Thus, Hume ultimately “solves” external world skepticism by ignoring it completely. There is no other cure for skepticism, he says. Hume ignores it, and—I’m willing to bet—so do you every day, the moment your leave my classroom. He writes,
“For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. I can only observe what is commonly done; which is that this difficulty is seldom or never thought of; and even where it has once been present to the mind, is quickly forgot, and leaves but a small impression behind it.” (Treatise, I.IV.7)

“Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them, and take it for granted, whatever may be the reader’s opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world ...” (Treatise, I.IV.2)

4. The Missing Shade of Blue: A Thought Experiment: For fun, I’ve also included a brief excerpt which challenges the empiricist notion that **ALL ideas are ultimately derived from experience**—i.e., we’re incapable of generating ANY new ones from scratch.

First, Hume notes that every single shade must have a distinct simple idea associated with it, independent of the rest. Therefore, we can ONLY acquire an idea of a color if we’ve had a prior sensation of that particular color. Now, consider the counter-example:

**The Missing Shade of Blue**  There is someone who has seen every shade of blue except one. Now, the entire spectrum of blue colors is laid out before her, save the one she has never seen before. She notices the gap in the spectrum. Would this person be capable of picturing the missing shade in her mind?

Hume thinks it obvious that she WOULD be able to picture the missing shade. There are three possible responses to the thought experiment:

(1) Accept that she could know the missing shade as a SIMPLE idea. (So, NOT all simple ideas are acquired via experiences of them; i.e., **empiricism is false**.)
(2) Accept that she could know the missing shade as a COMPLEX idea – namely, by combining the two ideas derived from the neighboring shades. (So, NOT every shade of every color has a distinct and independent simple idea associated with it.)
(3) Deny that she could know the missing shade. (Contrary to our intuitions.)

Strangely, Hume seems to accept option (1), even though this is the ONLY one of the three options that refutes his empirical thesis. *(What do you think the right answer is?)*