

Hume versus Descartes on the basis of belief and knowledge

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

Hume and Descartes both have differing methodologies and theories regarding the arrival at belief and knowledge. Because Descartes is a rationalist, and Hume an empiricist, they believe that knowledge can be gleaned a priori and a posteriori, respectively. Descartes believes that knowledge is rooted in reason, intuition, and deduction, whereas Hume believes that belief is rooted in sensory experience by way of causal relations, custom or habit, matters of fact and relations of ideas. Hume would disagree with many of Descartes' assertions, arguing that sense experience is fundamental and more useful in arriving at truth more than reason will ever be, given the mind's propensity towards adherence to custom or habit. I posit that Hume's conception of gaining knowledge about the world is much more comprehensive and intuitive, given his invocation of psychological "common sense" concepts, the emphasis he places on nature and habit, and the articulated importance of the utility of sense experience. In the contents of this essay, I will provide a presentation of Descartes' conception of the attainment of truth, belief, and knowledge, followed by Hume's conceptions. I will contrast the two and offer criticisms and rebuttals on Hume's behalf. Lastly, I will defend Hume's philosophy of knowledge, arguing that its relevance to the world of empiricism and epistemology renders it a more comprehensive and sensical philosophy than Descartes'.

Descartes' instructions regarding the attainment of truth and knowledge are found in Rules 2, 3 and 8 in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Descartes believes that in order to attain truth, "we should concern ourselves only with those objects of which our minds appear to be adequate in gaining their certain and indubitable knowledge" (Rule 2, *Rules*, p.3). He argues that we should not concern ourselves with the study of what we cannot know with certainty. This

means rejecting ideas and beliefs that can be doubted. In addition, he says that mathematics -- (arithmetic and geometry) are the only disciplines worth pursuing, since they do not create uncertainty or erroneousness. In addition, arrival at knowledge implies the use of experience or deduction, the former of which could prove deceptive, and latter of which results in freedom from error when carried out by the intellect. Rule 3 states that in the arrival of truth "...we should investigate, not what others have thought nor what we ourselves conjecture, but what we can intuit clearly and evidently or deduce with certainty, since scientific knowledge is acquired by no other means" (Rule 3, *Rules*, p. 5). Looking to the works of previous thinkers should not be done when excavating truth -- rather, intuition and deduction are the principal ways in which knowledge should be sought. In *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, Descartes in Meditation Four credits the nature of the intellect to a notion of a perfect Creator -- one who endows humans with a likewise perfect mental faculty for reasoning. As a result, freedom from error rests on the individual will and the capacity to render judgments, in relation to the intellect. Making errors arises from willing incorrect judgments. Truth and the avoidance of error are arrived at through the correct judgment of the will, so the will must be executed properly to attain knowledge.

Hume's view of the basis of human belief and knowledge is rooted in empiricist thought. His ideas regarding the arrival at human belief and knowledge are diametrically opposed to that of Descartes, since he does not believe that human reason to be the most useful way of gleaning information about the world. Hume argues that there are two types of claims that we use to gain understanding: relations of ideas, and matters of fact. Relations of ideas involve intuitive or deductive understandings of relations between concepts. They are true by virtue of reasoning and are either intuitively or demonstratively certain -- they cannot be contradicted and are a priori. Matters of fact are based in sensory experience and can be proven true or false without

contradiction, such as the possibility that the sun will rise tomorrow -- “We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind” (*Enquiry for Human Understanding*, Sect IV, pp.15-16). Matters of fact do not allow us to truly know things with certainty -- if this is true, how can we know anything about the world? Hume asks the question, “What is the nature of that evidence, which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory?” (*Enquiry*, Sect IV, p. 16). Hume believes that ideas regarding matters of fact are caused by the principle of Cause and Effect, wherein “by means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses” (*Enquiry*, Sect IV, p.16). It is through causal relationships that we are able to observe patterns in the working world and apply them to our understanding of it. This knowledge is arrived at through experience, where objects are conjoined with other objects to produce a causal relation. Past experiences help us to get a better view of knowledge and belief -- using reasoning and understanding the relation between the ideas of cause and effect are not enough. There is no good way to prove the movement between a thing and its effects -- we can use neither demonstration and deduction, nor an appeal to experience to determine certainty, and there is no formal way to prove the foundation for and the rational legitimacy of cause and effect --

“For all inferences from experience suppose...that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities. If there be any suspicion, that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. 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” (*Enquiry*, Sect IV, p. 24). Thus, we cannot use mere rational evidence to determine such a relation. Hume proposes the idea of Custom or Habit in Section V, arguing that belief in matters of fact (and knowledge of the

world as a whole) is developed through a propensity of the mind which anticipates events -- events following one another, and experience thereby provides a reliable understanding of life --

“Suppose again, that he has acquired more experience, and has lived so long in the world as to have observed similar objects or events to be constantly conjoined together; what is the consequence of this experience? He immediately infers the existence of one object from the appearance of the other. Yet he has not, by all his experience, acquired any idea or knowledge of the secret power, by which the one object produces the other; nor is it, by any process of reasoning, he is engaged to draw this inference. But still he finds himself determined to draw it” (*Enquiry*, Sect IV, pp. 27-28).

It is human nature to be compelled to draw inferences based around this notion of causality. We are not aware of this instinct which compels us forth, yet the result is all the same. We can survey all the circles in the world and draw conclusions about all of them, but we cannot deduce that “having seen only one body move after being impelled by another...that every other body will move after a like impulse” (*Enquiry*, Sect IV, p. 28). Inference from experience is produced by adherence to custom, rather than reason. This is how Hume believes we make sense of the world without engaging in a priori reasoning.

Hume and Descartes have very different views about the attainment of truth. Hume’s notion of the basis of belief and knowledge of the world consists in the idea of habit or custom governing matters of fact -- ideas which are formed through sensory experience which help us to determine causal relations between properties. Descartes believes in intuition and deduction and a priori reasoning as the only valid form arriving at clear and distinct truths and ideas.

Nevertheless, Hume would have objections to Descartes’ philosophies of metaphysics and epistemology. In Rule 2 of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes believes that we mustn’t study that which we cannot clearly and distinctly understand. For Descartes, certainty is of principal importance in arriving at knowledge about the world. Hume would not agree with this sentiment, arguing that the mechanism by which we come to understandings of the world is unconscious, operating outside of awareness. Because we are not aware of this process, we

cannot rationally justify the conclusions we reach, since intuition and deduction are conscious processes taking place in the immaterial mind, according to Descartes. In addition to this, Hume does not believe that we ought to direct our attention to things that we can understand with certainty. His version of empiricist philosophy expresses the existence of epistemological ambiguity, acknowledging the idea that humans may not anticipate events with certainty through the examination of causal relations. We can rely on our past experiences to determine potential outcomes, but they are not sufficient in guaranteeing truth and certainty. But, this is not to say that it is not useful -- Hume would argue that there is much greater utility in utilizing our sense experience, induction, and habit or custom to arrive at conclusions. Laying the groundwork for the discipline of psychology, Hume does not believe that the only worthy fields of study are arithmetic and geometry -- it can be said that, with the emphasis he places on the instinctual, unconscious mechanisms by which we operate, a human (and even animal) psychology is at work. Though we do not have the faculties to investigate this mechanical process, it is worth acknowledging in the pursuit of a so-called "truth" of human life and understanding, which is a confused and convoluted notion in itself. Rejecting ideas that doubt can be cast upon isn't very practically useful -- we do not necessarily know whether the sun will rise tomorrow, but it would surely help to investigate this idea, or at least establish a probability due to matters of custom. Hume's philosophy seems to lie more in the realm of the practical, rather than the abstract. In addition to this, Descartes believes that we mustn't rely on previous works or conjecture, "but what we can intuit clearly and evidently or deduce with certainty, since scientific knowledge is acquired by no other means" (Rule 3, *Rules*, p. 5). In response to this, Hume would say that assurance outside of rationalism is what we use in order to arrive at understandings, due to the mind's propensity to rely on custom or habit. I do not believe that Hume would agree with the

idea that scientific knowledge is only comprised of clear intuitions and certain deductions. He even hints at the existence of observational/empirical sciences, such as with “bird[s], with such exactness, the art of incubation, and the whole economy and order of its nursery” relying on the need for unconscious instincts in the sustainment of existence -- not intuitions or deductions (Enquiry, Sect IX, p.72). In addition, reliance on a non-rational, uninformed, heuristical conjecture is fundamental for experiential learning -- we may not be able to relate the ideas of fire causing pain when we are not yet confronted with them, or we may not know whether the sun will rise tomorrow, but we come to realize and expect it from experience, according to Hume. Lastly, in Meditation Four, Descartes credits a perfect God with the endowment of a perfect intellect which would not deceive. It is up to the individual will to make correct judgments with the use of the intellect. Hume’s emphasis on the experiential would maybe make him denounce Descartes’ conception of divinity altogether, since sensory experience in relation to the divine isn’t guaranteed. In addition, the idea of a perfect intellect that is endowed by God would be contested by Hume. According to Hume, unconscious mechanisms of custom and habit help humans to arrive at understandings of matters of fact. But, we do not know with certainty whether such causal relations are grounded in certainty -- so, the “human intellect” or the unconscious propensity of the mind is inherently fallacious and lacking. We do not have the faculties to determine outcomes of causal relationships, or investigate this process -- thereby contradicting the idea that God endowed us with perfect mental faculties. Hume would maybe say that this view places too much faith in God and too much a burden on the individual, perhaps articulating the idea that the (sometimes fruitless) examination of our own faculties is necessary in cultivating understandings of the world. Belief can fail us, and this is not necessarily because

of the misguidance of the will, but rather our own short-sightedness and imperfect mental capabilities and sensory experiences.

Hume's view regarding how we arrive at human belief and knowledge of the world is more sensible, topical, and foundational. In his discussion of custom or habit, he seems to be getting at the idea of classical conditioning -- a topic that is central to the development of behaviorist psychology. By examining causal influences and ascribing them to mechanisms by which mental faculties operate, Hume is engaging in a sort of proto-psychology. Because the empirical sciences are foundational for the development of social sciences, Hume recognizes the importance of sense experience for the cultivation of belief and understanding, albeit it cannot always make us arrive at certainties. Hume's approach to epistemology is much less rigid in presentation and teaching than that of Descartes, who has a rather dogmatic way of approaching the task of attaining truth. For one, Descartes attributes his faculty of intellect by placing undue faith in a Creator who would never deceive. There are definite problems with this, being that this proposition has groundings in that which cannot be known for certain -- with Descartes acknowledging this, as he conjures up the possibility of the existence of an evil being who is out to deceive. Much of what Hume is saying is spot-on and applicable to the real world, and having the knowledge he had of the psychology of instinct and habit, his philosophy is rendered all the more plausible. His approach is intuitive, since he argues that we can use past experiences to potentially determine outcomes. Induction is far more intuitive of a concept than deduction, where in the latter, we somehow create a framework for an idea, observe, and confirm or deny it. Children are not born with pre-existing ideas of how to engage with the world, they learn through observation or are already endowed with instinct. But the tenets of rationalism articulate the opposite idea. Clear and distinct understandings of ideas leave no room for ambiguity,

however, ambiguity exists in most areas of life. Instead of not bothering with these concepts, it is better to accept their uncertainty and be motivated to dig deeper not for the purpose of arriving at some grand narrative of human understanding, but rather for the sake of building knowledge regarding that which is shrouded in mystery. Many scientific discoveries are achieved as a result.

Descartes and Hume differ in the manner in which they most ideally arrive at knowledge. With each thinker having considerable influence on opposing schools of philosophical thought, epistemological and metaphysical discourse has been molded by their assertions. Hume's notions regarding relations of ideas, matters of fact, and the influence of habit or custom allow for a much more intuitive and fluid understanding of how we arrive at knowledge, widening the schism between empiricist and rationalist thought. Some questions for further inquiry would be: How much of the field of psychology was influenced by Hume? Being that he is an empiricist, how would this affect his conception of God? And, can we ever truly rely on our sense experiences in the creation of belief and knowledge?