The Empirical Skepticism of David Hume

Dustin M. Sigsbee

In this paper I will be discussing Hume’s theory of perception as found in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. I will be advocating for a very specific interpretation of Hume on this issue. My claim is that Hume endorses a form of empirical skepticism, while not committing himself to any particular theory of perception. I believe this for two general reasons. First, Hume explicitly rejects direct realism in the section “Of scepticism with regard to the senses”. Second, he provides arguments which clearly show that he is neither an indirect realist nor a phenomenalist.

**Theories of Perception: Direct Realism, Indirect Realism, and Phenomenalism**

In order to make clear the issues, I begin by defining three theories of perception: “direct realism”, “indirect realism”, and “phenomenalism”. Lack of clarity on these theories has been the main stumbling block in the process of analyzing Hume’s argument in this section.

The interpretation that most, if not all, Hume scholars reject is the interpretation of Hume as a direct realist. Direct realism is the view that “we directly experience external material objects, without the mediation of either sense-data or adverbial contents.”¹ This view is called, by Hume, the view of the “vulgar” or the non-philosopher. It entails that objects and perceptions are actually one and the same thing; we do not actually mean anything different when we use the term *perception* as opposed to *object*. Hume puts the matter this way: “there is only a single existence, which I shall call indifferently object or perception … understanding by both of them what any common man means by a hat, or shoe, or stone, or any other perception, convey’d to him by his senses.”²

In contrast, representative or indirect realism, holds “that we are indirectly aware of ordinary objects: that is, aware of them by being aware of sense-data.”³ The term “sense-data” can just be thought of as the information obtained through the senses. In Hume’s characterization, this theory of perception distinguishes between two different entities: perceptions and objects. Unlike direct realism, we actually do mean something numerically different when we use either of these terms. By perceptions, we mean something like the input gained through the senses or available through reflections on our own minds. By objects, we mean something causing perceptions that are external to us.⁴ In “Of scepticism with regard to the senses”, Hume often used the terms “sensations”, “impressions”, as well as “perception” for the input of the senses. Hume refers to this theory as the theory of “double existence and representation” (THN p. 202).

The last viewpoint which is relevant in discussing Hume’s theory of perception is phenomenalism. The conceptions of phenomenalism that I will be using in this paper are that of George Berkeley in “A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge” and Laurence Bonjour in “Epistemological Problems of Perception”. According to Berkeley’s conception of phenomenalism an *object* is a collection of sense-data and these sense-data, in the form of perceptions, are the only things

---

³ Crane, “The Problem of Perception”
⁴ A perception can include any experience gained though the senses: vision, taste, touch, etc. An example of a perception could include the taste experienced from biting into an apple. While an object is that which causes the perception, in this case the apple.
that we are aware of. Bonjour defines phenomenalism as “the view that physical objects are reducible or definable in terms of...experience.”

Bonjour tells us that “According to the phenomenalist, to believe that a material or physical object of a certain sort exists is just to believe that sense-data of various sorts have been experienced, are being experienced, will be experienced, and/or would be experienced under certain specifiable conditions.”

The phenomenalist view is both similar to and different from direct realism. It is similar in that it makes no distinction between objects and perceptions. It is different in that existence is not only constituted by actually perceiving, but it is also constituted conditionally through hypothetically perceiving. On this point Berkeley writes “The table I write on exists, that is I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it” (TCHK p.447). Here we see that existence for the phenomenalist is conditional on someone or something actually perceiving, but a hypothetical perceiver is also sufficient to constitute existence.

As we can see there are very interesting differences between these differing theories, but now that we have a proper understanding of them in place we can begin with Hume’s work.

“Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses”

Now that we are starting into Hume’s work it is important to make clear what Hume means when he uses the terms “skeptic” or “skepticism”. In the section entitled “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” Hume opens by saying “Thus the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho’ he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho’ he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity” (THN p.187). Here we can see that what Hume means by skepticism is two pronged. The first prong is our inability to justify through reason any argument concerning the existence of body. The second is that despite our inability to justify such arguments we do still assent to their conclusions, at least in this specific case. This is not due to our wanting to assent to the conclusion (that there is body), but instead, as Hume puts it “Nature has not left this to his [the skeptic’s] choice” (THN p.187). According to Hume we have a sort of predisposition to believe in external bodies due to nature, even if we cannot reason our way towards proving their existence.

It is important here to note that there is a difference in being aware of something and assenting to something. The difference is that we may well believe in something, but not be directly aware of that something in the sense of its presenting itself to us through the senses. This kind of distinction is highly visible in most religious activity: i.e. while a certain deity or another may not directly present itself to us

---

5 Berkeley, George. "A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge." Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources. Ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009. Print. (pg. 447) “Thus, for example, a certain color, taste, smell, figure, and consistency having been observed to go together are accounted one distinct thing and signified b the name apple.”


7 Bonjour. “Epistemological Problems of Perception”

8 It is important to note that Hume never explicitly discusses this theory but that Hume scholars have interpreted Hume as holding such a position.


10 “Body” is something external and independent of us and could easily be interchangeable with the term “object”.

11 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature.” (S.B. pg. 183) “Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light...than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sunshine.”
we still assent to its existence. This is exactly the position that Hume endorses in the case of external body: while Hume *assents* to the existence of external bodies he argues against our being *aware* of such things. Passages in which Hume discusses our not being aware of external objects will be discussed shortly.

So, how exactly are we aware of things, according to Hume? Hume classifies all things that come to us through the senses, or are internally present, such as ideas and passions, as perceptions. On this topic Hume says “…that nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions; and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination” (THN p.456). “Perceptions” are broken down further into the categories of “ideas” and “impressions”. Under the term “impression” Hume means “…all our sensations, passions, and emotions…” (THN p.1). This is a far-reaching term, essentially meaning anything that comes to the mind. For Hume the term “impressions” includes all perceptions, except for those perceptions called “ideas”. An idea is different because we are not passive in experiencing them. Instead ideas are created through contemplation, which involves the use of impressions we receive.

At this point we already have enough to argue that Hume ought not be interpreted as a phenomenalist. Hume told us during his discussion on skepticism that we must assent to the existence of body even though we cannot pretend to maintain its veracity with any philosophical argument. So, if Hume could provide an argument for the existence of body he would not have told us that instead we must just *assent* to such a principle. Surely Hume had read Berkeley and understood well the sort of phenomenalist picture drawn by Berkeley. If Hume were a phenomenalist and had read Berkeley (as he surely had) then he would not tell the reader that the skeptic cannot pretend or claim to maintain that objects exist by any philosophical argument due to the persuasive argument given by Berkeley for exactly such an existence.

Secondly, if Hume were a phenomenalist with objects and perceptions being the same to him why would he go through so much trouble defining perceptions only to leave out that they constitute what we call object? In fact Hume provides some characteristics of body that show us he is not taking the phenomenalist position. He says on the topic of body “Under this last head I comprehend their situation as well as relations, their external position as well as the independence of their existence and operations” (THN p.188 Hume’s italics). In this passage Hume characterizes body as something external and independent of us (or rather our mind). If ideas and sense-perceptions are characterized as something internal and mind-dependent and Hume characterizes body as external and mind-independent, then it is easy to see that Hume is not holding a phenomenalist account of perception – i.e. that object and perception are the same thing. Hume made this distinction because he is not a phenomenalist.

After the short discussion on skepticism Hume immediately moves on to the main focus of this section. He asks *“What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?”* continuing on to say “but ‘tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?*”(THN p.187-Hume’s italics) As I just mentioned Hume tells us that even the skeptic “must assent” to that principle. Hume breaks the question of how we come to believe in the existence of body into two distinct, but inter-related questions. The first question is how we “come to attribute a continu’d existence to objects”; the second is “why we suppose them to have an existence distinct from the mind and perception” (THN p.188). Hume tells us that these two

---

12 Hume, “*Treatise of Human Nature*” (S.B. pg. 1) “All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call Impressions and Ideas.”

13 In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume dedicates a footnote to Berkeley and acknowledges that “the writings of that very ingenious author form the best lessons of scepticism, which are to be found either among the ancient or modern philosophers…”
questions are inter-related because if such an object continued to exist while not being perceived then we can consider it to have a distinct existence from the mind and perception. This is because Hume believes perception to be anything that comes to the mind - effectively making perception mind dependent.

At this point Hume tells us that there are three different possible answers to the question of how we come to believe in a continued, distinct, external object: the senses, reason, and the imagination (THN p.188). We will consider them in their respective order.

*The Senses*

“To begin with the senses, ‘tis evident these faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of continu’d existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses. For this is a contradiction in terms, and supposes that the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceas’d all manner of operation” (THN 188). Suppose you are looking at something, say a wall, but you get distracted and look away. When you look away from the wall you are no longer receiving any sense-perception of the wall and so if we are to limit ourselves only to sense-perception we cannot assign continued existence to the wall because we no longer have a sense-perception of it. In fact, Hume reiterates this idea towards the end of the section on senses. He tells us that the senses cannot operate in a manner exceeding the manner in which they actually operate.

At this point let us address an objection that the indirect realist raises. Hume tells the involved reader in a section prior to this one that “We may observe, that tis universally allow’d 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” (THN p.67). This passage seems to advocate for an indirect realist interpretation of Hume’s theory due to the claim that we “know” of external objects through our perceptions. However, I argue that Hume is either speaking of the term “know” in a loose sense (such as, ‘we come to the concept of’) or when he says “..external objects become known to us…” he means that we naturally generate the *concept* of external objects through our experience with our perceptions. I will explain why.

Hume rejects the claim that our senses can provide us with confirmation of a distinct external object saying, “That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something distinct, or independent, and external, is evident, because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of anything beyond” (THN p.189). This statement hinges on Hume’s rejection of direct realism and, in my opinion, indirect realism. If direct or indirect realism were true we would be aware of external objects through our sense-perceptions in some manner or another, but here Hume rejects the notion that we are aware of anything but our perceptions. One could argue that we could come to the *idea* of external and independent body through sense-data, reason, and the imagination and from this *idea* we become aware of such body. But surely being aware of the *idea* of something does not constitute being aware of that *actual* thing, even if we believe that actual thing to actually exist. A good example of this is found in religious contemplation. We can surely come to the idea of some god and we may or may not believe it to actually exist, but being aware of our idea of that thing does not bring us any awareness of the actual thing (if it were to exist). This is why even if sense-data could bring us to the *idea* of something (external body), that alone does not constitute being aware of the thing itself.

In light of this discussion I believe Hume was not speaking of his own theory when he said “…external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion.” Hume was speaking in the general sense indicated earlier. It is evident that Hume does not think we can know of external objects from merely our sense-perceptions due to the overwhelming amount of times that Hume
mentions that we cannot draw such connections between objects and perceptions. In one such instance Hume remarks of the senses, “If our senses, therefore, suggest any idea of distinct existences (objects), they must convey those impressions as those very existences, by a kind of fallacy and illusion.” As we will soon see he makes a similar argument while discussing reason as the source of our idea of external and independent body.

Reason

The next possibility that Hume discusses is that we derive the idea of a continued, distinct existence from reason. This idea Hume covers rather quickly. His first argument against our deriving this idea from reason is that while philosophers have developed many arguments concerning reason’s role in convincing non-philosophers, or “the vulgar”, of a continued, distinct existence it cannot be these arguments that actually convince non-philosophers of that proposition. On this point Hume says “…’tis obvious these arguments are known but to very few, and that ‘tis not by them, that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induc’d to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others” (THN p.193).

At this point Hume makes another observation of the direct realist theory of perception and, subsequently, an argument against him being interpreted as a direct realist by saying the position of the vulgar, that of direct realism, is contrary to that of philosophy, which “…informs us, that every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind…” (THN p.193). Hume has said multiple times that he believes we only have access to perceptions and we cannot make the move from perception to object, such as the direct realist does. Hume continues to argue that if we did call our sense-perceptions and their accompanying external objects one and the same thing we would not be able to reason from the existence of one to the existence of the other due to these two concepts now “sharing” an identity.

In this section Hume tells us again that we cannot make the move from perception to that of external object. On this topic Hume says “Even after we distinguish our perceptions from our objects, ‘twill appear presently, that we are still incapable of reasoning from the existence of one to that of the other: So that upon the whole our reason neither does, nor is it possible it ever shou’d, upon any supposition, give us the assurance of the continu’d and distinct existence of body” (THN p. 193). Here again we see both that Hume does not think that we can establish the existence of external body from that of perception and that Hume believes the two to be distinctly different, opposite the phenomenalist position. The impossibility of drawing a causal argument to the existence of external bodies from the existence of perceptions will be discussed shortly in the following section “Hume’s Critique of Direct and Indirect Realism” (see pg. 18).

Imagination

In this section we find out that Hume believes the imagination to be the “creator” of the notion of external, independent body. This is important for a few reasons. The first reason this is important is because by identifying imagination as the origin of the notion of external, independent body we see that Hume believes reason (and the senses) to be limited in their capacities. The second reason this is

---

14 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 189)
15 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature.” (S.B. pg. 193) “…as long as we take our perceptions and objects to be the same, we can never infer the existence of the one from that of the other, nor form any argument from the relation of cause and effect; which is the only one that can assure us of matter of fact.”
16 “imag-i-na-tion.” Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. 9th ed. 1990. 600. Print. “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality”
important is because this distinction undercuts the interpretation of Hume as an indirect realist. Those
directly aware of external objects through our sense-data, but previously Hume had denied any such
understanding. We now see that it is not the senses, but imagination which Hume believes to give us the
notion of external, independent objects. I will only explain briefly how Hume believes the imagination
to give rise to this notion.

Hume begins by looking at the differences between those impressions that we assign distinct and
continued existence to and those that we do not. Hume claims that some perceptions come to us with a
superior force than others and perhaps this is what causes our idea of distinct and continued existence.
This idea is quickly dismissed though. Hume’s reason for rejecting this position is couched in the idea
that pain is one such impression that presents itself with greater force than others, but we do not attribute
pain a distinct and continued existence. We do not believe pain to be something that is mind-
dependent or something that exists outside of us when not being experienced. In other words, we
experience pain very strongly, but once it has passed we do not continue to believe it exists somewhere
outside of us. Pain is mind-dependent and we believe this to be, so the fact that something comes to us
with force is no reason to believe that this provides the idea of something distinct and continued.

Constancy and Coherence

Hume turns to his two concepts of constancy and coherence. Instead of superior force, like that
of pain, it is a sort of constancy or regularity in impressions that makes us attribute to them a continued
existence. This idea is something that we use every day, for instance: when you arrive back home or
walk past a familiar landmark you attribute to it a continued existence because the perception of that
object has had constancy or, in other words, has been perceived as something constant. The landmark
and your house have consistently presented themselves in a certain order, which enables us to ascribe
constancy to these perceptions. Those impressions that we do not ascribe a distinct, continued existence
do not have constancy, such impressions include pain, which does not present itself as something
constant or orderly.

Hume does admit that constancy is not perfect. An instance of this is fire; while there is a
certain order to a fire it does in fact change its position and qualities from moment to moment. Due to
this imperfection Hume brings in another term, coherence. By coherence Hume simply means that our
perceptions and their underlying external objects conform to certain relations, such as a mountain
eroding or a fire burning out. These perceptions do alter, but only in a certain regular way. Hume
concludes that constancy and coherence are the two concepts that enable us to derive our opinion of the
distinct and continued existence of bodies.

How Constancy Provides Us with the Idea of Distinct, External Bodies

This section of the Treatise is presented the conclusion first and was followed by Hume’s
premises. Hume concludes that due to the fact that we are accustomed to certain constancy in our
perceptions we then regard them not as interrupted perceptions, but instead as the same. Due to this

18 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 195) “Bodies often change their position and qualities, and after a little
absence or interruption may become hardly knowable.”
19 Before moving on to this point Hume discusses the explanatory power of assuming that un-perceived objects really do exist
with the example of a porter walking up a flight of un-observed (by Hume) stairs. This allows Hume to introduce what
Wright has called the “mental inertia principle”. For a discussion of this principle see Wright, “Hume’s A Treatise of Human
attribution of “sameness” Hume argues that our minds attempt to remove the interruption by positing a real existence.\(^{20}\) Hume briefly mentions the role of memory in giving this belief a sort of foundation before moving on to his premises, which I will only cover briefly.

**The Principle of Identity or Individuation**

Hume begins by examining whether the idea of identity can be conveyed by any single thing or several things. He says that observation of an individual object is not sufficient to give us the idea of identity because “in that proposition, an object is the same with itself”\(^ {21}\) and this gives us the idea of unity, not identity. Hume does not think that a multiple number of objects can relay the idea of identity either. The reason for this conclusion is that when the mind is presented with several things it pronounces those things to be distinct, thus producing the idea of number. An example of such a principle can be seen when similar items present themselves, such as a package of pencils, but are not identical.

Due to *number* and *unity* not being able to give us the idea of identity Hume goes searching for an intermediary term and comes up with “time.”\(^ {22}\) Hume seems to say, that supposing the existence of duration allows us to use this concept as a reference to compare past and current perceptions. According to Hume we develop this view due to the fact that it allows us to make these comparisons without interruption or recourse to the idea of unity or number.

**Attribution of Identity to Interrupted Perceptions**

Hume begins this section by examining how the “vulgar” would apply the notion of identity to interrupted perceptions. Hume sums this position up by saying that due to constancy most perceptions do not appear different after interruption. This constancy prevents the vulgar from identifying these different perceptions as actually different.\(^ {23}\) However, there are times in which the interruption would be too noticeable, and Hume thinks that the vulgar are involved in a kind of contradiction. For, if the interrupted perception of, say, a building seen yesterday was seen again today the vulgar would pronounce their perception of the building the same as yesterday, but strictly speaking this is not so. This mistaken pronunciation of sameness causes the vulgar to attribute identity to something interrupted.

**Attribution of Continued Existence to this Identity**

Hume begins where he left off, with the idea of contradiction. He tells us that contradiction makes the mind uneasy and due to this uneasiness the mind tries to seek relief by rejecting one of the principles in conflict. The principle that we give up is that of interruption in exchange for the idea of identity and continued existence.\(^ {24}\) Sometimes the interruptions between perceptions are so long and

\(^{20}\) Hume, “*Treatise of Human Nature*” (S.B. pg. 199) “we 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.”

\(^{21}\) Hume, “*Treatise of Human Nature*” (S.B. pg. 200)

\(^{22}\) Hume, “*Treatise of Human Nature*” (S.B. pg. 200) “To remove this difficulty, let us have recourse to the idea of time or duration.”

\(^{23}\) Hume, “*Treatise of Human Nature*” (S.B. pg. 204) Hume’s emphasis. “We find by experience, that there is such a constancy in almost all the impressions of the senses, that their interruptions produces no alteration on them, and hinders them not from returning the same in appearance and in situation as at their first existence.”

\(^{24}\) Hume, “*Treatise of Human Nature*” (S.B. pg. 206) “But as the smooth passage of our thought along our resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them an identity, we can never without reluctance yield up that opinion. We must, therefore,
noticeable that we cannot help but distinguish them. At this point we have to complete the same act of reconciliation due to the fact that we are holding the perception or object to have an identity and also to notice interruptions with that perception’s presentation, but this time in a manner that rejects neither principle. This reconciliation, Hume says, must have recourse to additional principles.

Hume observes that most of us think of perception in the same manner as the direct realist. We believe that our perceptions and the object are one and the same. We also believe that this one thing has a continued and uninterrupted being, even when not being perceived. For Hume this raises two questions: 1) “How we can satisfy ourselves in supposing a perception to be absent from the mind without being annihilated” and 2) “After what manner we conceive an object to become present to the mind, without some new creation of a perception or image…”

In order to answer the first question Hume gives us an operational definition of the term “mind”. According to Hume a mind is merely a collection of perceptions held together through certain relations. Hume says that once we establish this definition it is easy to see that we can “break off” a perception from its relations in order to suppose a perception which is absent from the mind to not have been annihilated. Hume claims that the same answer can be used for the second question as well. Each question is very similar in nature and Hume claims that if a perception can be supposed to exist without being perceived than so can an object. This short exploration allows Hume to conclude that “The supposition of the continu’d existence of sensible objects or perceptions involves no contradiction”

The “Force and Vivacity of Conception”

Hume continues to say that when we ascribe identity to some object or perception we attempt to get rid of the interruption by feigning a continued existence which reconciles interruptions in perceptions with the constancy of certain perceptions. This is all fine, Hume says, but we are not merely feigning a continued existence, we instead believe in such an existence. Hume thinks that this belief requires an idea to have a certain amount of vivacity, which is acquired through a relation to an impression. Hume also believes that impressions have the most natural vivacity of all our perceptions, which can be connected to related ideas.

These several principles allow Hume to conclude that whatever relation impressions and ideas have flow so seamlessly that they cause the mind to both dismiss the change in perception and retain most of the vivacity of the original perception. It is due to this continued vivacity that we come to believe that these perceptions, which we consider to have a certain amount of constancy and acknowledge to be interrupted or presenting themselves at different durations of time, are the same. It is turn to the other side, and suppose that our perceptions are no longer interrupted, but preserve a continu’d as well as invariable existence, and are by that means entirely the same.”

26 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 207) “is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and supos’d, tho’ falsely, to be endow’d with a perfect simplicity and identity.”
27 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 208)
28 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 208) “When the exact resemblance of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them an identity, we may remove the seeming interruption by feigning a continu’d being, which may fill those intervals, and preserve a perfect and entire identity to our perceptions.”
29 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 208) “It has been prov’d already, that belief in general consists in nothing, but the vivacity of an idea; and that an idea may acquire this vivacity by its relation to some present impression”
30 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 208) “Impressions are naturally the most vivid perceptions of the mind; and this quality is in part convey’d by the relation to every connected idea.”
31 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 208) “The relation causes a smooth passage from the impression to the idea, and even gives a propensity to that passage. The mind falls so easily from the one perception to the other, that it scarce perceives the change, but retains the second a considerable share of vivacity of the first.”
then from this attribution of identity that we need the justifying principle of continued existence. Hume concludes this section of the Treatise by saying that the feigning of a continued existence, along with a retained vivacity of impressions, induces within us a natural tendency to believe in such a continued existence. The significance of this point is that Hume concludes that we create this idea of a continued existence through a fiction of the mind.

**Hume’s Critique of Direct and Indirect Realism**

Directly following Hume’s summary of his four principles he seems to be raising an objection to what he had just said, saying: “But tho’ we are led after this manner, by the natural propensity of the imagination, to ascribe a continu’d existence to those sensible objects or perceptions, which we find to resemble each other in their interrupted appearance; yet a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion” (THN p.210).

We find out that Hume is really speaking of perceptions and bodies as an interchangeable term (direct realism). Hume goes on to say “But when we compare experiments, and reason a little upon them, we quickly perceive that the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience” (THN p.210). Here we can see that Hume is giving an account of why we should not accept the argument that our perceptions have an independent and external existence, not the objects underlying them.

This self-provided objection launches Hume into an account of various experiments, including his “double-existence” experiment. This experiment involves pressing on one’s eye. After pressing on one eye or the other we notice a “double-image”, but we do not attribute this new image a continued existence. This experiment is meant to show that “…all our perceptions are dependent on our organs…” (THN p.211). From this and other instances Hume draws the conclusion that we cannot assent to the idea that our perceptions have an independent and external existence. This conclusion of Hume’s helps solidify the position that he is not a direct realist.

Hume tells us that when other philosophers run into this problem they change their system in order to differentiate between perceptions and objects. Here we can see that Hume had been talking about a direct realist view and not the indirect realist view. Hume quickly raises another issue. He says that this new system (indirect realism) incurs the same problems as the previous system (direct realism) and is merely a “palliative remedy”.

Indirect realism, according to Hume, gains all of its force from the imagination of the previous system. This conclusion is reached through a series of reasoning based on two propositions that Hume claims are housed within his assessment that this new system gains all of its force from the imagination of the former system. The first proposition is “that this philosophical hypothesis has no primary

---

32 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 208-9) “This resemblance gives us a propension to consider these interrupted perceptions as the same; and also a propension to connect them by a continu’d existence, in order to justify this identity, and to avoid the contradiction, in which the interrupted appearance of these perceptions seems necessarily to involve us.”

33 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 209) “Here we have a propensity to feign the continu’d existence of all sensible objects; and as this propensity arises from some lively impressions of the memory, it bestows a vivacity on that fiction; or in other words, makes us believe the continu’d existence of body.”

34 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 211) “they change their system, and distinguish, (as we shall do for the future) betwixt perceptions and objects, of which the former are supposed to be interrupted, and perishing, and different at every different return; the latter to be uninterrupted, and to preserve a continu’d existence and identity.”

35 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 211) “But 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.”

36 Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 211) “The latter hypothesis has no primary recommendation either to reason or the imagination, but acquires all its influence on the imagination of the former.”
recommendation, either to reason or the imagination” (THN p.212). In order to prove this hypothesis Hume begins with reason. He says that in order to draw a connection between objects and perceptions we would first have to be aware of objects, which we are not. The reason Hume holds that we cannot infer that the external objects are the cause of our perceptions is that causal inferences must be based on past observations of both the cause and the effect, and in this case we only have access to the effect.  

The next object of discussion is imagination. Hume only says that the imagination cannot be involved in generating the belief in an external body, without providing any reason for such a conclusion. He continues on to say that if anyone could show how the imagination could be involved in this process he would retract his statement.  

The second proposition, “…that the philosophical system acquires all its influence on the imagination from the vulgar one…” seems to follow, for Hume, due to his having already established that this system has no primary recommendation to the reason or imagination on its own. Hume quickly lays out the vulgar system and how it establishes the idea of a continued existence. He says that upon a little reflection we realize that our perceptions do not have a continued existence, but instead are internal and dependent. Instead of rejecting the notion of a continued existence philosophers change the system, but this raises issues.  

This new system is both pleasing to reason, due to its allowance that perceptions are interrupted and dependent, and imagination, due to is attribution of continued existence. This system Hume describes as a “…monstrous offspring of two principles [imagination and reason]…” which we “…elude by a new fiction…”43 This new fiction is that of two existences: our perceptions and the objects of our perceptions. Each existence has its own property: perceptions are interrupted and objects continue.  

Here are Hume’s own comments on the indirect realist system:  

“… to our philosophical one, ‘tis liable to the same difficulties; and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition …’tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions. What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falsehood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?”(THN p. 217-218).

Wright, who supports the argument of Hume being an indirect realist, takes this critique towards the end of the section as Hume presenting his view on how indirect realism relies on the imagination,
saying: “Hume then proceeds with his skeptical critique of this philosophical system, not, it must be stressed, on grounds of its falsity…but rather on grounds that it cannot be independently verified by reason and, it relies on imagination to generate the basic belief in continued and independent existence.”\footnote{Wright, Hume’s A Treatise… (pg. 152)} In this sense I agree with Wright; Hume is presenting this critique of the indirect realist system in order to show the limits of reason in establishing this argument. This is one of the basic points of Hume’s skepticism – to show the limits of reason.

On the limitations of reason Hume tells us “‘Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in this manner”\footnote{Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 218)}. It is skepticism that we expose them farther to and if we want to free ourselves from such skepticism only inattention and carelessness will work in our favor.\footnote{Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (S.B. pg. 218) “Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy.”}

Conclusion

A position of empirical skepticism is what Hume endorses in “Of scepticism with regard to the senses”. In this section Hume is obviously arguing against the direct realist theory of perception. We see this especially when Hume denies that perceptions are mind-independent. The interpretation of Hume as an indirect realist is also doubtful. While Hume discusses the indirect realist theory of perception at some length he is not doing so in order to endorse the system, rather he is only presenting it in order to critique it and show its foundation in reason and imagination. Also, while Hume undoubtedly assumed the existence of body in the progress of his argument he made clear that we cannot argue our way to proving the existence of such objects. The last position Hume is interpreted as holding, phenomenalism, ought to be rejected due to Hume’s knowledge of the phenomenal account given by Berkeley coupled with his assertion that we cannot defend the existence of body by any means of reason. If Hume was a phenomenalist and meant by “body” what Berkeley meant by “body” he would not have troubled himself with either making this assertion or defining “perceptions” in the manner that he did. Through all of this it seems obvious to me that Hume endorses a position of empirical skepticism, while not committing himself to any particular theory of perception.
Bibliography


