

HUME - FIRST PRINCIPLES

One of the basic failures of Rationalism, according to most empiricists, is that it place far too much confidence in the power of intuition to know the real natures of actually existing things. Descartes claimed it was perfectly certain that no physical thing could have thoughts, ideas, feelings or even consciousness. And, he said, it is self-evident that no thinking being can have any physical properties. Nothing, he said, is known to us better than our own nature as thinking beings. Inferential knowledge of physical things is obtainable. But it must be based on a foundation of intuitive knowledge of subjective facts about ourselves as thinking beings because these are the most intuitively certain facts concerning actually existing things.

But why couldn't a thinking being have some properties it knew nothing about? Just because we know we think and are thinking things, how can we certain that we know all the essential properties of things that think? Just because a person may have a rough, general idea of what sort of substance gold is and can pick out pieces of gold whenever he/she comes across them, does that mean that this person knows the real nature of gold? Not necessarily. Consider the example of water. You may have a good enough idea of what features water normally appears to have that you never, in fact, identify something as water that *isn't* water. Does that mean that you know the real nature of water? Of course not. People have been (almost always) correctly identifying water for hundreds of thousands of years before knowing the real nature of water is H₂O. Hydrogen has always been an essential feature of water but no one knew this about it even though they had acquired great skill in identifying water based on its appearances.

Descartes simply assumes that there couldn't be anything in his nature as a thinking being that was not apparent to him insofar as he knows that he does think.

So, why couldn't he have some essential properties that are physical properties without knowing that he has them? How can intuition be trusted to always give us the whole truth?

Descartes can only deal with this question by maintaining that physical properties are just logically incompatible with being a thinker and that this logical incompatibility is just as clear and distinct as it is in the proposition that no squares have curved sides. But *is* a physical property like being located in a certain region of the brain logically incompatible with being a thought? Is this incompatibility clear and distinct? Self-evident?

David Hume agreed with another great empiricist, John Locke, who argued that our ideas of actually existing substances "do not reach far enough" for us to intuitively know the real essences of substances. If this is true of material substances like gold, why should it not be true of thinking substances, i.e. ourselves? The real natures of material substances can be known only by **experimental investigation**, and the work of great scientists like Newton and Boyle should be our examples of how to proceed in such investigations, according to both Locke and Hume.

Hume, then, took this line of thought one step farther and proposed that knowledge could not be put on firm foundations without an experimental investigation of human nature. We must study the actual workings of our minds, the nature and origin of our ideas in order to determine how far our ideas reach and what are the extents and limits of human knowledge.

When the doctrine of innate ideas is rejected and the mind is investigated experimentally, beginning with *what it appears to contain*, Hume says that we find that its contents (**Perceptions**) are of two general types: **Impressions** and **Ideas**.

These two types of perceptions are different in certain ways. We find one type are *the most forceful and lively*. These are the **impressions**. The other type are the *weakest and faintest*. These are the **ideas**. But we also notice that impressions and ideas are not completely different kinds of things. They are different in their *degrees* of force and liveliness. Otherwise, they are *exactly similar*. The other thing we notice, Hume says, is that we never find an idea that does not *correspond* to some prior impression. Also, we never find an idea that was not *derived and copied* from a prior impression or an impression that *was* derived and copied from an idea.

But, is Hume right about this rule on impressions and ideas? Does every idea correspond to some prior impression? What about ideas of griffins, centaurs, unicorns, mermaids, etc? Many people may have acquired such ideas by seeing pictures or movies of such creatures. But what about the creators of the stories on which these pictures or movies are based? In order to make a picture or write, or even think up, a story about such things, must they not first have had ideas of such things? If they never actually observed such things (had the impressions) how could they have or acquire such ideas?

Hume's answer is quite simple. People are capable of constructing such ideas out of the *parts* of impression-based ideas they already had. The reason this can be done, he says, is that many of our ideas are *complex*, which means, they have parts which can be distinguished and separated, transposed and recombined in novel ways that do not correspond to any prior impression. That is how fictional stories can be invented and the power by which our minds can do this is called **Imagination**. Hume calls any idea which is constructed by the imagination "*fictitious*". He uses this term in the same way that Descartes used "factitious", something made by the mind.

And it turns out that not all ideas are complex. There are some ideas in which there are *no* parts that can be distinguished and separated. Hume calls these *simple* ideas qualities, particular shades of color, types of .

Examples of these are ideas of specific sensible sound, flavor and fragrance. Now these are examples of what Descartes called simple ideas *of sense*. He and Hume both say that simple ideas of sense are not innate. But Descartes said there are also other simple ideas which are *not* ideas of sense and which could not have been constructed by the imagination. The ideas of Substance, Causation, Power, Truth and Necessity are examples. Descartes says that, since they could not have been constructed and could not have been acquired from sense-experience, these must be innate in our minds.

Like Locke, Hume was completely opposed to the claim that there are innate ideas. He was convinced that there are no simple ideas which cannot be traced back to some prior simple impression. An important piece of evidence for this claim, he says, is that people who are born without certain sensory powers do not have the ideas associated with those powers. People born blind, for example, have no ideas of color or of seeing.

Like Locke, Hume says we ought, therefore, to investigate and find out whether people really have the sorts of simple ideas that Descartes says they have and whether they are innate. The essence of Hume's project is to construct a theory of how human minds work and to explicitly reject (with reasons) the claim that some ideas are innate. If this theory turns out to provide good explanations of how all ideas actually present in our minds come to be there, then there will be no support left for the belief in innate ideas. Furthermore, if the empiricist approach guards against the sort of dogmatic stance concerning the real natures of substances that Rationalism seems prone to, that will be an advantage for Empiricism, not a weakness.

In this regard, the most important test any theory of knowledge must meet, according to Hume, is whether it can account for what he called "the beliefs of common life".

Roughly, these are the most basic beliefs about what kinds of things actually exist and how things generally happen. The reason Hume chose this as the crucial test of a philosophical theory of knowledge is that it is these beliefs on which the actual conduct of everyday life and reasoning depend.

What needs to be explained is how we come to have the beliefs of common life and how these beliefs work for us even though they also do not prevent us from making some errors. For Descartes, these beliefs are no better than groundless prejudice or sheer superstition until they are systematically examined by the method of doubt, subjected to the technique of making ideas clear and distinct and put into logical order.

Until that is done, our ordinary beliefs ought not to be considered worthy of the confidence of a rational person, according to Descartes. Of course, this means that, throughout its history, nearly the whole human race has been operating with beliefs without which they could not function in daily life even though these beliefs have little or no logical justification for them. Hume thinks that Descartes and other rationalists were subjecting our ordinary beliefs of common life to the wrong sorts of standards of justification. The history of the human race shows that they work amazingly well. Doesn't that fact justify them in some sense? If we could show how people acquire their ordinary beliefs and explain how the very way in which they are acquired makes them highly successful, would that not be, perhaps, the only sort of justification that can be or needs to be given for them?

The first point to note is that, if we had simple innate ideas of substance and causation, for example, then we would not have acquired these ideas and there could be no natural account of their origin. But, if we *can* give a natural account of their origin, we would have shown that there is no good reason to believe these ideas are simple or that they are innate.

What is peculiar about these "special" ideas is that, if they are simple, *they do not correspond to any simple impression* . There are complex impressions and complex ideas of apples, stones, liquids, animals, etc. But there is no specific simple and separable impression of something named by the term "substance". Locke realized this point but did not see its importance. Berkeley saw its importance and thought it refuted Locke's Philosophy.

The same point can be made about all of Descartes's other so-called innate ideas: Causation, Power, Necessity, God, etc. We find, Hume says, that all other ideas which cannot be traced back to impressions are complex and "fictitious", i.e. they are the work of the Imagination. So, if a philosopher maintained that these philosophically special terms stand for simple ideas but we find that they cannot be traced to any simple impression, *we would be justified in doubting whether these philosophical terms had any meaning whatever*. Here we see how Hume's empiricism goes beyond Locke's. In part, he was inspired by Berkeley's critique of technical abstract ideas in Philosophy.

One important part of Hume's project, is to present a theory of ideas according to which ideas are the basic elements of everything we can *think*, just as physical science tries to analyze all the kinds of physical substances into the basic elements of which all physical substances are composed.

Besides distinguishing between simple and complex ideas, Hume also distinguished two kinds of complex ideas: **Ideas of Particular Substances** and **Objects of Reason and Inquiry**. Examples of the first type of complex idea are ideas of stones, animals, or trees. Examples of objects of reason and inquiry are the proposition that *stones are heavy*; the proposition that *all animals can fly*; the proposition that *no trees grow in Antarctica*.

The main difference between these two types of complex ideas is that ideas of substances either do or do not refer to actually existing things but such ideas by themselves do not constitute *something that is either true or false*. That property of being either true or false does belong to objects of reason and inquiry. They are the components of reasoning and they are what we are inquiring about when we want to know whether something is true or false.

Hume further distinguishes between two types of Object of reason and inquiry (also called Propositions). **Relations of ideas** and **Matters of Fact and Existence**.

Relations of ideas he defines as "Every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain" ... "Propositions which are discoverable by a mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe" "Of this kind are the sciences of arithmetic, algebra and geometry"

Matters of Fact and Existence he defines as "Propositions not ascertained by intuition or demonstration ... whose contraries are "conceived with the same facility and distinctness as if ever so conformable to reality" Their contraries "imply no contradiction". All reasoning concerning matters of fact, he says, is founded on the relation of cause and effect.

We will soon see why this last point is so important for Hume.

Descartes and other rationalists constantly hold up the examples of the Mathematical sciences to show that some things are universally and necessarily true and that they are things which can either be known non-inferentially by intuition or inferentially by demonstration (deductive reasoning). Hume calls these things relations of ideas. He accepts the rationalist claim that they can be known with certainty, but he provides a different account of the sort of knowledge they give us. The true ones are true in a way quite different from the way matters of fact are true.

These propositions (of arithmetic, algebra and geometry) are either true or false *simply because the relations of the ideas composing them*. Their truth or falsehood is not a matter of whether they correspond to what actually exists in the world.

Our thinking about numbers and figures is not of the same sort as our thinking about stones, trees, etc. Suppose one is thinking that *all chiliagons have more sides than triangles*. These propositions would be quite certainly true even if there were no such things in the actual world as chiliagons. It is true simply because of the logical relations between the *idea* of a chiliagon and the *idea* of a triangle.

By contrast, *All polar bears are vegetarians*, if it were true, would not be true simply because of the logical relations of the ideas *polar bear* and *vegetarian*. Whether it is true or not true depends entirely on something outside our ideas. No mere operation of thought can determine its truth-value.

When a proposition can be discovered to be true independently of whether it corresponds to what does or does not exist in the actual world, Philosophers commonly describe this as a case of **a priori knowledge**.

When a proposition cannot be discovered to be true or false except by comparing it with what the actual world is like, Philosophers commonly describe this as a case of **a posteriori knowledge**.

One type of proposition can be known a priori because of the sort of formal structure the proposition has. The Philosopher Immanuel Kant (late 18th century German Philosopher) followed Leibniz on this point and maintained that even the simplest propositions have a formal structure. Even the simplest propositions have a grammatical subject term and a predicate term. Like Leibniz, Kant maintained that either the predicate concept is contained in the subject-concept or it is not contained in the subject-concept.

For example, in "All sisters are female" the predicate concept *female* is already contained in the subject-concept *sister*. But in "All sisters quarrel", the predicate concept *quarreler* is not contained in *sister*.

When the predicate-concept is contained in the subject-concept, the proposition is said to be **analytically true** because its truth can be discovered merely by analysing the subject-concept.

In "All sisters are female", the predicate concept simply repeats part of what is already contained in the subject. What it says about sisters does not exceed what one says simply by describing them as sisters. Notice that, "All unicorns have horns" is also analytically true for exactly the same reason even though, presumably, *there are no such things* as unicorns. Because of their formal structure alone, analytic propositions cannot be false no matter whether the things they are about exist or not. Kant maintained that, when an analytic proposition is denied, a contradiction results. If, for example, one has the proposition "It is not the case that all sisters are female", the logical result of this would be "Some sisters are not female" and this would imply "Some female siblings are not females". This would be a contradiction. For this reason, it is pointless to ask whether analytic propositions correspond to things in the actual world because *they will be true no matter what does or does not actually exist*. All analytic propositions then, can be known *a priori*.

If a proposition is not analytic, if the predicate-concept adds something different from what is contained in the subject-concept, it is **synthetic** in its formal structure. If so, it will not result in a contradiction to deny the proposition. For example, if one starts with "It is not the case that all sisters quarrel" the logical result of this would be "Some sisters do not quarrel" and this, with the subject analyzed, implies "Some female siblings do not quarrel". But there is no contradiction in this last statement.

The analytic/synthetic distinction concerns the formal structures of propositions. The a priori/a posteriori distinction concerns the conditions under which a proposition can be known; that is, whether its truth-value must be determined by comparing it with reality or whether it can be determined independently of comparing it with conditions in the actual world.

What we can tell about the connections of some of these categories is that, if a proposition is **analytic** then it can be known **a priori**; and, if a proposition can only be known **a posteriori**, it must be **synthetic**. If Descartes and Hume had been familiar with Kant's terminology, they would have both agreed about these two connections. Kant thought the most important issue was over what he called **synthetic a priori** propositions.

Descartes would have agreed that many propositions that can be known a priori are synthetic (had he been familiar with Kant's definition of this term). For example, that a cause must have at least as much reality as its effect. What about Hume? It has been a common interpretation of Hume that he recognized no a priori knowledge except of analytic propositions, and that his only test for whether something is known a priori is that a contradiction results if it is denied. There is no question that Hume recognized this as one test of whether something is known a priori. But it is clear that Hume would have classified this sort of knowledge as inferential knowledge ("demonstrable truth"). Hume also recognizes some instances of a priori knowledge as noninferential and intuitive, particularly where the relations of ideas are those of resemblance or degrees in quality.

Some examples of such propositions are *Scarlet resembles vermillion* and *Middle-E is higher in pitch than middle-C*. Hume would say that the contraries of these are "absurd" or "repugnant", but not that they result in contradictions. So, there is no good reason to suppose that Hume rejected the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge. The common interpretation of Hume on this point is mistaken.

Hume and Descartes are actually closer on the subject of a priori knowledge than is usually recognized. Both recognize intuitive a priori knowledge. Their differences appear over the issue of *which* things are known a priori by intuition.

They are in close agreement on whether we have certain knowledge in *Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry*. We have both inferential and non-inferential knowledge in these areas and having it does not depend on whether anything exists outside one's own ideas. Descartes argued that we can also obtain inferential knowledge of what there is and what those things are like that are outside of our ideas. First and foremost, he thought, we may know that God exists. This means applying what he thought was some of our innate knowledge about causal relationships in order to prove that God exists. Hume denies that we have any innate knowledge, let alone innate knowledge of causal relationships. Here is where Descartes and Hume are in sharp disagreement. Descartes thought some causal relationships were known intuitively and a priori. If we may put Kant's terminology into Hume's mouth, would Hume admit that any proposition of the form "B is caused by A" can be known a priori either because they are analytic or because they are intuitive? Hume's answer is NO.

Propositions stating causal relationships have a special position in Hume's theory of knowledge. They are involved in our beliefs concerning matters of fact and existence. This covers any proposition that does not meet the criteria of a relation of ideas. They cannot be known by a mere operation of thought. They cannot be demonstrated and their opposites are neither absurd, nor inconceivable nor repugnant. All the "beliefs of common life" are matters of fact. If such propositions can be known then, Hume argues, it is not by means of Reason but either by means of **Observation, Memory or Experimental inference**.

There is a centrally important point, according to Hume, about all matters of fact which *do not* depict causal relationships. Any claim to know such a proposition presupposes that one does know about some causal connections. Everyone thinks they know many matters of fact. For example, that *a man walked along the beach I am viewing*, that *the sun will rise tomorrow*, that *this book is made of paper*. In fact, however, the only way to justify such knowledge-claims is to assume that one has knowledge of various sorts of causal connection. For example, that *the patterns I see in the sand were made by the action of a human foot*; that *the Earth's rotational motion will cause it to turn toward the sun within the next 24 hours*; that *the material of which this book is composed is derived from plants*, etc.

The key question, then, for Hume is how are causal relationships known?

Hume thinks he has already shown that our claims to know causal connections cannot be justified by means of *Reason* (intuition or deduction). Propositions like

Sugar dissolves in water

Heating water to a temperature of 100 C. causes water to boil

A sharp knife will cut paper

explicitly depict causal relations between types of events. They don't just say that *sometimes or often* A causes B. They say that any event of type A causes an event of type B, whether they occur in the past, present or future, and no matter how many times they occur. The claim, therefore, extends over all of the past, over all of the future and over every place in the universe. No amount of observation can non-inferentially justify a claim of this unrestricted generality.

But what about causal statements that are not general but are about some particular events, e.g.

The scratching of this match against this surface caused it to ignite

Why couldn't one non-inferentially know that this proposition is true just by observing what happens to the match? Hume argues that all we can directly observe is the occurrence of particular events and their qualities. When we do actually observe something we ought to be able to say what sense we used in the observing. If we observe color, we used vision. If we observed sound, we used hearing. If we ever observe causation as a relation between events, what sense would we be using to observe it? Causation is not an observable relation between events.

We may be *judging* that the scratching of the match caused it to ignite at the moment just after it ignites, but this judgement is not *itself* an observation, even if one makes it at the same time as one observes the motion of the match. So, the question obviously is *what justifies the judgement?* We had better not say "our knowledge that scratching matches causes them to ignite". Because then we would have to explain how we know this causal principle.

Hume says that it may often seem as if we are directly observing causal connections between particular events but all that we are really doing is making snap judgements that they are causally connected while we observe them and we make these judgements because of previously acquired *beliefs* about general causal connections.

There is another point that Hume makes about the claim that we may directly observe causal connectedness between events. If we say that this can be directly observed, we are maintaining that causal connectedness is just as *directly apparent to our senses* as color, sound, odor, warmth, etc

But if causal connectedness were directly apparent as these qualities are and it is directly presented to our observation as these qualities are, *how could we ever FAIL to observe it whenever we observe two causally connected events?* Wouldn't the progress of science in human history have moved much faster than it has if causal connectedness were something directly apparent to observation?

Again, sometimes two events occur in close proximity but they are not causally related. In spite of that, some observers sometimes mistakenly judge them to be causally connected. A prankster may succeed in making a naive observer think that he can move a small piece of paper just by putting his finger close to it when in fact what the prankster is doing is lightly blowing on the piece of paper as the observer stares very hard at the paper.

Now suppose the observer swears in amazement that he directly observed someone move a piece of paper just by moving his finger toward it. Of course he observed no such thing. But is there any relation present in the awareness of the person watching the movements of the match that is not given to the awareness of the person watching the piece of paper? Hume would say no. Connection is not something observed. It is something one *believes in*. and this belief affects the way we interpret our experiences.

Since memories are no better justified than the observationally based beliefs of which they are records, memory is of no particular use in justifying beliefs in causal connections.

Only one potential source of justification is left: Experimental Inference.

This is a form of inference which proceeds from premisses recording observed things and events to conclusions about things that have not been observed. It is also a form of inference that claims to establish *probability* rather than certainty for its conclusions.

That is the main difference between experimental (inductive) inference and demonstrative (deductive) inference. So, even the best experimental reasoning provides a weaker type of justification than valid deductive reasoning from known premisses. Even the strongest experimental reasoning does not involve the claim that it *could not* have true premisses and a false conclusion.

Still, such reasoning, seems to be an excellent source of justification for many beliefs. May it not be capable of providing enough justification for us to know some matters of fact?

In the case of trying to justify our belief in general causal connections by experimental inference, we must start from premisses which are derived from observation but Hume thinks he has shown that none of these premisses can assert causal connections since no such connections can be directly observed. All that the premisses can do is to assert the *conjunction* of events. For example, that this match was scratched at this time and it ignited immediately afterward.

Somehow, an experimental inference would have to have premisses which really supported a conclusion asserting a causal connection between all events of particular types.

But a single instance of observed conjunction between two events of those types would not provide any significant support for such a conclusion. The inference would have to have many premisses and the conjunction between types of events reported in those premisses would have to be constant because if there were any reported, cases in which the one type of event occurred but the other apparently did not we would have reason to doubt causal connection between them and the support apparently provided by all the other premisses would become subject to question. Suppose that we have an ideal situation: a large number of premisses reporting a constant conjunction of events. The basic problem with using experimental inference for this purpose is that all it can do is project degrees of probability for particular events.

Given that half of all observed As have been Bs we may be tempted to project that the probability that the next observed A will be a B is .5. Given that all observed As have been Bs we may be tempted to project that the probability that the next A will be a B is nearly certain. But there are two difficulties with this.

(1) *This method of rationally calculating probabilities works only in cases where the size and composition of the population is precisely known.* For example, If I know in advance that I have ten coins in my right pocket and I know that five of them are dimes and the other five are pennies, I can project the probability that I will retrieve a dime from my pocket is .5. But in situations where the size of the total population is unknown, the size of the observed sample of As may be tiny in comparison to the total number of As, past, present and future. If the number of unobserved As that existed in the past is potentially unlimited and the number of unobserved As that will exist in the future is potentially unlimited, there is absolutely no rational way of projecting any degree of probability for the conclusion that the next A will be a B. Unfortunately, this is the situation in which we find ourselves in the real world. Even if our evidence is perfect, that every observed A has been found to be a B, there is no *rational* way to assign any prior probability to the conclusion that the next observed A will be a B because we have no way of knowing how many As there are, have been or will be.

(2) The use of experimental reasoning to justify causal claims of unrestricted generality breaks down completely because (a) the total size of the target population is unknown and potentially unlimited and (b) *causal claims involve the idea of a necessary connection of events* whereas the premises of the inference only report what does in fact occur, not what *must* occur.

Only by using an additional assumption beyond premises recording constant conjunctions of events can one rationally assign any probability to the conclusion that the next A will be a B. This assumption would be that *the future will be like the past*. Or, the assumption could be stated as *Nature operates in a uniform fashion*. But, Hume asked, are these propositions relations of ideas or matters of fact?

They are not relations of ideas since there is no contradiction or absurdity in the proposition that the future will not be like the past or that nature does not operate in a uniform fashion. They are matters of fact and the only way to justify them would be by means of experimental inference. But we have already seen that no experimental inference can be valid without assuming some causal principle. It would be circular reasoning to employ claims of causal connection in an inference aimed at justifying our beliefs in causal connections. Since all of the beliefs of common life depend on beliefs in causal connections, therefore, none of them can be justified.

Hume employs skeptical tactics to argue that the most basic beliefs of common life cannot be rationally justified. He does this by criticising the main assumption of rationalism that some causal relationships and some particular matters of fact and existence can be known intuitively a priori. Neither observation, memory nor reason are capable of justifying these beliefs. Even a principle like Descartes' that all activities are activities of substances is questionable. If we have no innate idea of substance, how could this principle be known? It might be said that we acquire the ideas of activity and substance from experience, from receiving impressions of active substances? But do we have such impressions?

Hume's answer is no. Our only impressions are of particular events and their qualities. In observing sugar one observes the presence of whiteness, sweetness, granularity, etc. Is there something besides these qualities that is named by the word "substance" ? If so, do we have an impression of this something? Hume's answer is no.

Yet our idea of sugar is not simply an idea of a collection of qualities. It is an idea of something which has these qualities; and a something which is capable of undergoing various changes. We do have an idea of substance, but it is not an idea of something distinct from the qualities united in the idea. It is an idea of those qualities as forming a unity and *as* having various causal properties. But it is the imagination which constructs that unity and which invents the idea of causal power. Our very lives, therefore, are utterly dependent on our non-rational faculties: imagination, instinct, custom and habit. The Rationalist tradition in Philosophy is drastically mistaken about the ideas it argued were innate ideas of Reason. The same natural instincts by which we breathe and feel move us to form the ideas of substance and causation.

If the justification of our beliefs required what rationalists claimed it required, none of our beliefs in matters of fact could be justified *and the effects of philosophical skepticism would utterly destroy all assurance and conviction*. Anyone exposed to skeptical challenges to common sense beliefs would be quite unable to make any decisions, choices or undertake any action no matter how important it was to anyone's interests.

It is, therefore, a highly significant fact that skeptical philosophy has no such effect. It can only, as Hume says, produce a temporary amazement and perplexity which has no power to affect our most basic beliefs. Skeptical reflections may baffle us and we may have no rational way of refuting them. But, as soon as we stop thinking about philosophical problems, our basic beliefs are still present, undamaged and immediately take over philosophers' thinking and actions the same as they do people who have never entertained any philosophical doubts about the possibility of knowledge in their whole lives. This is how nature preserves us, Hume says. Our nature is too strong for skeptical philosophy to have any real influence on us. Anyone who says they are a practicing skeptic cannot possibly be serious and this can be proved by observing what they do rather than listening to them discuss philosophy.

But Hume's critique of skepticism goes even farther than this. Even the hypothetical method of doubt that Descartes employed as a tool for purely philosophical purposes ought to be rejected as empty pretense, according to Hume.

Descartes claims that we can at least conceive how we might be dreaming now or that we might have no body and there might be no external world of bodies at all and that I myself might be the only thing in existence in spite of all the ideas which seem to represent bodies, including one in particular that I believe to be my own body. Hume says that such a pretense is utterly fantastic. It is not in our power, he says, to even seriously ask whether there are bodies. That, he says, is a point which we must take for granted in all of our reasonings ---even though we have no way of rationally justifying our belief in the existence of bodies. Such basic beliefs as the belief in the existence of reality outside our own ideas or in causal connections is a matter of instinct and habit which we share with other animals. It is not formed rationally, cannot be rationally justified and is so strong that we cannot even entertain any possibility of their falsehood. We could not live without relying on them. If they cannot be rationally justified, then we must acknowledge that there are strict limits to what Reason can do. The beliefs of common life are a source of justification for beliefs in philosophy, science, law, government, etc. They constitute a kind of foundation for them. But they are not themselves non-inferentially known or true a priori, or intuitively self-evident as rationalists would demand for the elements of a foundation of knowledge.

