A Short Essay on Hume's Philosophy, Its Essence and Implications

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Abstract

What is the greatest *achievement* in philosophy? It is the highest level of skepticism in questioning the fundamental assumptions of human thinking. This is represented in Hume's Treatise of Human Nature. Although Hume's fundamental method is radical skepticism and is thus the best representation of philosophical thinking, Hume's conclusions banish philosophy as a senseless activity. Therefore, Hume's Treatise is both a welcome and a farewell to philosophy; it is the only true philosophy in the pure sense of the term. Efforts made by subsequent thinkers can all be explained under the shadow of the Treatise; they are thus inferior to the Treatise. Humean method does not allow the possibility of any positive philosophical system as it questions reason and empiricism. Hume shows us that in classical philosophy targeting fundamental topics (i.e., subject-object distinction, foundations of ethics), either we should keep silent or we are doomed to nonsense.

- Philosophy is an intellectual game. Most philosophers accept many assumptions and this renders their entire systems as only an interesting fairy tale. Among few books that can be considered a decent philosophical investigation that did not take any assumption for granted is the Book I of Hume's Treatise (Hume, 1738/2004). In it, Hume tried to investigate and justify human's only tool in every philosophy, reason. He ended up with the conclusion that all along the way, he was already using the reason to justify reason! In that direction, instead of defending reason, the reason subverts itself.

- The only philosophy worthy of reading is Book I of Hume's Treatise, which nullifies not only reason, but any attempt to establish a philosophical system of unshakable assumptions. It annihilates philosophy, in the professional sense. If not coming to the same conclusions as that of Hume, other philosophical writings are, if taken seriously, pointless intellectual confusions, or if not taken seriously, stories interesting to some people.

- Think of a child who is playing with his toys. Among his toys are a solid black box and two cubes; one red and one blue. While he is playing with his cubes, he puts both cubes on the black box and it starts making sound and lights. He then removes the objects from the black box and it stops. Amazed by his black box, he wants to understand what is making his black box to start. After a few seconds, he puts the red cube on the black box and it does not start. He removes the red cube and puts the blue cube on the black box and it starts. He, like every other logical human being, concludes that the blue cube is making his black box start, both in the first trial and now. After only three steps the child tends to think that the blue cube is *causing* the black box to make the sound and lights. The poor child does not know that his black

box is being controlled from outside of his room and it is the operator, not the blue cube, which causes the black box to start.[1]

- This example, which is an instance of logical inference by the child, shows that the problem of naïve belief is not merely restricted to inductive causality, but it can equally be applied to logical causality. When studied in depth, Hume's problem is with every causal relation that we tend to establish from observation, whether inductive or logical. Imagine we stopped the experiment in the second step. In this case, at first both cubes made the black box start and then they were removed and in the second step, the red cube could not start the black box. At this step, the child would tend to think that it is probably the blue cube that causes the machine to start, *even though the blue cube, as the supposed cause, was never alone tested on the black box and was never alone followed by its effect*. This is not induction.

- Unlike Russell's (1945) idea that "Hume's skepticism rests entirely upon his rejection of the principle of induction", it seems that even non-inductive cases of causality can be doubted on the same principle. I think Hume wanted to give us *an example*, namely inductive causality, of our deficiency in investigating our own understanding. We can think of many such examples for non-inductive cases.

- Accepting Hume's conclusion would remain no philosophy. In fact, the conclusion that he reached can be directed to two opposite directions. The first is that we are condemned to use self-refuting reason in all investigations in philosophy, and because of its inherent deficiencies, the reason does not lead us anywhere in philosophy. The second is that, because the justification of philosophical systems is reduced to believing in premises, every philosophy with whatever assumption can be justified. The second direction of Hume's conclusion was more appealing to subsequent philosophers.

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[1] This example is derived from an experimental device designed by Gopnik and Sobel (2000).

- The highest level of abstraction in philosophy is reached by Hume. He, unlike most other thinkers, did not want to blindly accept any assumption. But he could not escape from his innermost natural assumption: reason (including causal, logical, and inductive thinking). If he could, he would have gone into a higher and more abstract level. But this is vain. Where does this abstraction of abstractions go? Infinity?

- When we begin thinking, we are doomed to reason: causal, inductive, and logical thinking. But what did I just say? How did I come to this conclusion? By thinking of how I and other people think, or namely by accepting introspection and induction. I blindly accepted introspection and induction. Am I justified in doing so? I am only *inclined* to do so.

- I think it was Hume, not Rousseau, who proved heart superior to reason, for before any thinking, the subject of thinking is chosen by heart (i.e., emotion, passion, unreason, etc.), and inside and in every step of thinking, it is the unquestionable acceptance of our reason by heart which leads our causal beliefs. Heart and reason are no longer in the same level and in two opposite sides. It is all heart. Where is reason?

- Let us think of Kant's (1787/1929) glorious philosophy, Critique of Pure Reason. I call it glorious because I enjoy most parts of it as a beautiful story. But what is it all about? Defining and delineating human understanding and knowledge? It seems that Kant did not realize that he himself was a human. It seems impossible—at least if we must accept reason—for an understanding to investigate and set limits for the understanding. One could ask Kant: *what* do you think you are? Super-human? God?

- Kant's conclusion: our understanding is limited to the world of phenomena and we can never reach noumena, at least by reason. It looks a beautiful story, but a simple contradiction. Kant seems to be able to take off his eyeglasses of reason sometimes,

telling us: human being only sees through such-and-such eyeglasses of reason! The proof for the existence of the world of noumena: morality. Indeed, an amusing story!

- *The world* is not what it seems to be, goes Kant. The important question of a layman: what is *it* then? In the entire grandiloquent system of his philosophy, Kant does not bother to investigate this inevitable question and goes on to expound *how* the world is not what it seems to be. In response to this question his only answer is: noumena, or the world-in-itself.

- Hume proved that the reason cannot justify itself. From Hume's conclusion, Kant diverted philosophy to distinguish between the world of appearances and the "real" world.

- Imagine we built a robot with some rules to bring us water from the fridge. We know it is impossible for the robot to do tasks and ask questions that are not in some way programmed in it. But one day the robot comes to us and asks: "why should I do this every time you ask me? Why am I programmed this way? I think some rules inside my memory are faulty"; questions that are impossible to be learned by the robot from its internal programs. Or imagine a rabbit comes up to us and asks us: "I think we rabbits are missing something. Why are not we able to multiply number?" Kant's philosophy is as unsound as these questions.

- As Hume concluded, Kant's philosophy, just like the rest of philosophy, an agreeable way of passing the time to some people and temperaments. The biggest unspoken assumption of Kant is that while we are inside our understanding, we are able to put the understanding as the subject of our inquiry, setting limits for it.

- Russell (1945) writes: "Hume's philosophy … represents the bankruptcy of eighteenth century reasonableness." If we think of philosophy as a field dealing with fundamental questioning of assumptions in epistemology, morality, phenomenology,

or any other abstract investigation, we can clearly see that Hume's conclusions show the bankruptcy of philosophy in general, and not just "eighteenth century reasonableness".

- After Hume we are faced with two options in philosophy: false reason or no reason. False reason is what is often happening in philosophical arguments. By Hume's reason-based skepticism, those arguments that try to be rational by providing evidence and remaining logical do not have any reasonable precedence over unsupported claims and rhetoric. The difference between reason and unreason would only lie in whether some people *believe* an argument. What a proof!

- What Nietzsche (1886, 1990) conceived as "perspectivism" can directly be drawn from Hume's conclusions. If we appeal to commonsense, every argumentation, even outside philosophy, can be consistent with respect to its assumptions that are argued to be rooted in culture, biology, and other factors. We cannot go beyond assumptions and that is when we only have *faith* in them. Which set of assumptions to accept? What gauge or standard is over there for us to measure the truth of assumptions? A set of assumptions might merely be more appealing than others by a group of people. Philosophy faces a dead-end when it comes to assumptions, but its goal is the investigation of assumptions.

- We cannot help but to accept assumptions. For many people this acceptance is unconscious, and some people are conscious that they accepting assumptions. By accepting assumptions we are being dogmatic. In commonsense, dogma is any set of claims and beliefs that are not necessarily supported by evidence. But we have every reason to doubt and reject evidence, at least in philosophy. Again, we are left with different systems that are, in their entirety, dogmatic. Which one to choose? What are *our* assumptions? Those more appealing to our heart—or our biology as Nietzsche puts it.

- Every system of philosophy is self-refuting. Russell accused Hume that his skepticism was not sincere because even Hume could not maintain it in practice. But the question for Russell is: is it possible to maintain it in practice? Hume, like any other human, did not have more than two choices: false reason and faith, or no reason and silence. If he wanted to continue to write, he must have chosen the false reason. This might have been the reason that he did not write on fundamental issues of philosophy for the rest of his life.

- If you consider what I have so far written and if you accept my interpretations, you have every reason to dismiss my claims, just like Hume's philosophy. My claims, if we are being reasonable, are another set of dogma which I have accepted by heart and are shared between me and people with my view in this swathe of philosophy. That is lunacy.

- After Hume's irrefutable conclusions, philosophers are faced with either silence or nonsense. Of those that have chosen silence, we know nothing indeed. All that we know from philosophers who are dealing with abstract questions are the works inside the sludge of nonsense—whether they were aware this, like Nietzsche, or not, like Kant.

- Nonsense is more obvious in philosophy than elsewhere because philosophy claims to question the assumptions while philosophers cannot free themselves of their own assumptions.

- "Progress" in philosophy is nothing but excitements for those who made the progress in the direction of some faith.

- The greatest impact of Hume: relegating reason to just another faith. Hume showed the limit of reason to the people who considered reason as a panacea for all problems.

- Fundamental questions in philosophy, just like religion and morality, are among those that we must either remain silent or talk nonsense.

- Similar to the mind-body problem or laws governing human thinking, issues concerning the foundations of mathematics and the meaning of probability are instances of the lofty subjects of philosophy that can only waste a thinker's time. We can imagine and enjoy this imagination that, for example: probability theory is an attempt to measure human doubt and not the world's uncertainty, and it only exists in the mind and not in the world. Like Kant's philosophy, such imagination can be fascinating, but that does not provide the reason for its veracity. We accept mathematics, like science, just because it works. And when pragmatism become the value, there would remain no philosophy.

- There will always be inquisitive people who tend to ask fundamental questions about assumptions, premises, and axioms. After some time, they may either leave their questioning altogether, or create a nonsensical and imaginary world of their own. As Hume said, for skeptics and people who ask these questions, "Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy." If we try to escape the pain, we should entirely depend on Hume's remedy. We should believe, take a side, and be irrational regarding fundamental issues than to remain in a nauseating state of doubt and confusion.

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