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Independent Study – Epistemology  
Discussion Paper #3

### Question #3

Matters of fact are statements that can be made about the world, based on observation, and cannot be contradicted through reason. The only way to prove a statement regarding a matter of fact false is by observing that it is false. For instance, if I claim that the shirt I am wearing is green, the only way to prove my statement false is by observing that I am in fact wearing a white shirt.

The “regularity of nature” that Hume describes is the idea that we believe the future will resemble the past. This is how we make predictions regarding the future. However, Hume says that we have no reason to believe that what we think will happen actually will happen, but that we’re going to do it anyway because nature has taught us that way. We are, as Hume explains, creatures of habit.

According to Hume, the only way we can predict what will happen in the future comes from our experiences of the past. But this ends up being a circular argument because, in the past, the future has always resembled the past. So, we predict that the future will resemble the past, as it did in the past. We use the method of induction to try to predict what will happen if a certain action is followed. Hume claims that we have no good reason to use induction because it is not a valid method, for the same reason one can’t say the future will resemble the past. However, he asserts that we do use induction and make inferences based on prior experience because what we perceive as the regularity of nature has taught us it is prudent to do so. Using this, we usually are able to make accurate predictions about the future and matters of facts. But we do not “know” that our predictions will be true, we only know that, in the past, our predictions have been accurate.

One example would be a weather forecast. Meteorologists use math and science that are based on past experiences with weather patterns in order to accurately predict future weather patterns and threats. They are not always correct. For instance, last Saturday, meteorologists predicted rain and cooler temperatures all day. Instead, it was sunny and (relatively) warm until evening.

Another example: at the intersection of Lettis Highway and Southside Rt. 23, there is a traffic light. When coming from the direction of Hannaford to make a left onto Lettis Highway, I have observed a pattern: if the light to turn left is red but the light to go straight ahead (or to the right) is green, then I “know” that the next phase of the light will allow the traffic to my right to go next. After them, the traffic to my left. And after them, the light for me to turn left will turn green, along with the light to go straight. Every morning and evening I have observed this pattern so much so that I rely on it to make a prediction as to how long I have left to wait in traffic (since I am incredibly impatient.) This morning, I made a prediction that, since the traffic to my left already had the green light, my light would be the next to turn green. It turned out that I was correct. I have no good reason to believe that this will be the case, though. (In fact, sometimes the light skips the left turn and proceeds to only turn green for the traffic going straight—I have yet to figure out why, but I’m working on it.)

We cannot know whether our perception of the regularity of nature is true because it relies on induction and induction, in turn, relies on the “uniformity principle”—the idea that the future will resemble the past. This is a problem because the argument for the uniformity principle involves circular reasoning: experience leads us to conclude that cause and effect exist; induction is based on the idea of cause and effect; in order to use induction, one must assume that the future will resemble the past, which assumes the uniformity principle.

The implication for not knowing whether the regularity of nature actually exists is that we can make no claims about what will be the case for certain. We can claim that we *might* correctly predict what will happen, but we do not truly know. This makes every claim about the future a guess. Hume discusses probability in regards to making claims about the future, but argues that probability is just our inability to accurately take into account every variable that could affect an outcome.

#### Question #4

Hume claims that there can be no knowledge of the miraculous or the divine. He does not claim that there are no miracles or a supreme being, only that we can have no knowledge of either. His reason for this is that the evidence supporting the “fact” that a miracle occurred will always be less than the evidence denying the “fact” that a miracle occurred.

The first argument against the testimony of people who “witness” miracles is that there could never be enough people of such credibility to warrant believing their testimony. The reason is that all of the evidence favoring nature will always be more plentiful and have more weight than the “eyewitness testimony” of any number of people.

The second argument is that people may exaggerate, embellish, or outright lie about what they may have experienced due to the “passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles.”<sup>1</sup> Because people enjoy tall-tales and the people telling them get enjoyment out of the attention they receive, these people may be more willing to claim that an event happened that did not really occur.

Hume’s third argument is that these so-called “miracles” are more prevalent among uncivilized peoples, due to their limited knowledge about science and reason. He uses the example of Alexander, a false prophet who deceived the ignorant people of Paphlagonia, to illustrate this.

By showing a “miracle” to these people, who did not know any better, and thus spread the word of a “prophet,” he became famous until he was shown to be a fraud.<sup>2</sup> Hume points out that, if Alexander had promoted his “miracle” among scientists and philosophers, he would never have had the success he did.

The fourth argument uses religious miracles as examples: if one religion says a miracle occurred, but another religion denies it, they cancel each other out. If each religion purports that a miracle occurred which invalidates each other’s religious miracles, one is left with no miracles at all.

The argument that Hume uses to cover all of these is that we *experience* miracles, but it is also experience that provides us with the laws of nature. He claims that, since they both derive from experience, whichever is the stronger of the two should be considered correct. In every case, nature would win out over miracles.

Hume also asserts that we cannot support miracles by ascribing them to God because:

“...it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation and obliges us to compare the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable.”<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to say that the miracles of the bible should not be considered as the word of God but rather as a collection of testimonies (of miracles) by men, and as such, should not be believed. He does not, however, disown religion: he instead claims that religion is founded on faith, not reason.

Hume claims that it is acceptable to claim that there is a God based upon our experience of the world, but that it is not acceptable to use the idea of God to determine other, unrelated, things. He uses the example of a footprint in the sand: if we see one footprint, we conclude that there was a person to create it, and also that there were other footprints even if they have disappeared (we know this because, as Hume points out, "...man is a being whom we know by experience, whose...designs we are acquainted with...")<sup>4</sup> The only way we can attribute anything to God is what we experience, but we cannot then claim that God has any attributes other than what we have experienced. Not only this, but he points out that human beings, who are finite, are so complex, we can't fully understand them, so how can we attempt to understand an infinite being?

I have to agree with Hume in almost all of this. My only objection is to the first argument he brings up in regard to miracles: how can he say that there could never be enough credible witnesses to "prove" a miracle? Could it ever be the case that a miracle is so widely accepted and promoted as truth that, after a while, it is no longer considered a miracle at all? Could a miracle ever be accepted as a law of nature?

As for the second argument, it is well known that people who are encouraged by attention and popularity will exaggerate stories in order to make them attractive. Think of the stereotypical "uncle" or "friend" who tells the story every (insert holiday) about how he once caught a fish that was "that big"—and every year, the fish gets bigger and bigger. The same could be said for people who claim to have witnessed miraculous events. Sometimes, the more often a story gets told, the more "miraculous" the event becomes.

Hume's third argument regarding uncivilized people may be true. Superstitious, uneducated people tend to designate supernatural causes to unexpected or frightening events in

order to try to rationalize them. People such as these do not recognize the actual causes of these kinds of events, and out of fear or surprise, try to find explanations.

I agree with the argument that religious miracles cannot be the basis for a foundation of belief: if my religion's miracles contradict another religion's miracles, neither of them can be correct. If neither are correct, then there are no religious miracles, and so cannot be a basis for those religions.

I also agree with Hume's claim that reason cannot lead us to knowledge regarding a divine being; rather, one has to believe it on faith. As Hume says, we base our beliefs and what we believe to be knowledge on our experiences, and our experiences can tell us nothing about anything other than the things which we have experienced. On the same thread, we cannot know anything about a "supernatural" world—we only have experience of this—natural—world, so how can we determine what a "supernatural" world would resemble? (Also, the term "supernatural" means "beyond nature" or "unnatural." If "nature" is taken as "everything in the world," then how can there be anything that is "unnatural"?)

#### Question #5

Antecedent skepticism is the method Descartes uses in the *Meditations*: doubt everything it is possible to doubt until one finds something indubitable. This skepticism "demands some firm starting point before any reasoning can begin."<sup>6</sup> Consequent skepticism is used by Hume in order to doubt our everyday beliefs regarding the world and ourselves. (Instead of trying to find a starting point, he tries to find a rational basis for what we already believe.) Hume claims that Descartes' method of doubt (antecedent skepticism) cannot lead us to knowledge because 1) he does not believe that there is any "first principle" and 2) even if there was a "first principle," we

could never have knowledge of anything beyond that because reason can still be doubted beyond the “first principle.” He suggests, instead, a “moderate” version of Descartes’ skepticism:

“...when more moderate, [antecedent skepticism] may be understood in a very reasonable sense and is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments and weaning our mind from all those prejudices which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, we should use antecedent skepticism to constantly question what we believe we know in order to prevent ourselves from making errors in our reasoning.

Hume argues that extreme consequent skepticism fares no better than antecedent skepticism: if we doubt our senses (which gain information from experience,) then we cannot base anything on experience. However, it is the information we have from experience that helps us survive in the world. Hume claims that, even though we have no rational justification for believing that experience can tell us anything about the world, we base all of our actions, decisions, judgments, etc, on our experiences. In effect, consequent skepticism is useless.

Pyrrhonism is defined by Hume as an “excessive” skepticism, “recommending suspension of judgment on all things...”<sup>7</sup> Hume claims that it is common in theory but that, once put into practice, “[it vanishes] like smoke and [leaves] the most determined skeptic in the same condition as other mortals.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, theoretically, pyrrhonism is useful for debate, but it has no place among everyday life, since one cannot live his or her life constantly believing that nothing is certain. (For example, a pyrrhonist would have to suspend his or her judgment on the laws of physics and claim that we cannot know that when we step out the front door in the morning that

we're not going to float away.) Hume claims that pyrrhonism cannot be useful because if it were actively practiced, "all discourse, all action would immediately cease and men would remain in a total lethargy until the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence."<sup>9</sup>

Instead of pyrrhonism, Hume advocates a "mitigated" skepticism where one counters his or her beliefs with "common sense and reflection."<sup>10</sup> He admits that, even though we have no reason to believe what we believe, we will believe it and continue to believe it if it helps us get by in the world. He suggests that we take into account the limitations of our mental abilities and really consider whether or not we really "know" something that we claim to know.

Foundationalism tries to respond to this by saying that we can rationally derive causes from things we experience. For instance, when it comes to an external world, Descartes claims that, if there is a god and god is not a demon deceiver, then whatever I perceive is as I perceive it. I perceive an external world, therefore, there is an external world. Descartes also claims that, because I can conceive of myself as existing, I can conceive of other people as existing. Hume rejects this because he says experience (which includes our perceptions) can be faulty—i.e. dreaming, madness, etc. He also doesn't see how Descartes can claim that the nature of god can be known rationally since 1) Descartes' "first principle" does not free reason from doubt and 2) our experiences (of god or anything else) can only tell us about what we experienced—we cannot depend on those experiences to tell us anything else regarding the nature of god.

I don't see how Hume's mitigated skepticism can serve a basis for knowledge of matters of fact because, as he says, our experiences cannot tell us anything about the world other than what we have experienced. Because of this, we cannot know for certain what will happen in the future, we can only make predictions on what has occurred in the past.

If Hume is correct that the only way we can have “knowledge” of a supreme being is through experience and that experience can not give us knowledge, then his mitigated skepticism also cannot function as a basis for knowledge regarding whether or not god exists. He also points out that humans are extremely complex—even today, with all of our advanced science, we’re still working on understanding how a human body functions, what the motives of a human mind are, what exactly goes on in the brain, etc. How can we possibly pretend to be able to understand an infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing being when we ourselves are much less complex?

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