Hume on Causation

HUME'S SCEPTICISM

Hume's Fork
Scottish philosopher David Hume (see Famous Philosopher File #3 p.66) is famous for his sceptical arguments about induction (see Topic 4 of this Chapter) as well as for his doubts about causation and whether knowledge of the external world could be possible.

Hume proposed a test for knowledge, which has fascinated philosophers ever since. Hume said there are two kinds of truth: 'matters of fact' (true from experience) and 'relations of ideas' (true by reason). Any belief that can't be proved either of these ways is without justification. This test is known as Hume's Fork.

So, using Hume's Fork, we should ask: 'Is this a matter of fact, to be defended by appeal to experience or experiment?' or: 'Is this a truth of reason, demonstrated by a calculation of mathematics or logic?' If the answer is neither, the proposition cannot be justified.

HUME'S FORK

For a statement to be considered true, it must be either:

- A truth of reason (a priori, necessary, analytic): e.g. '3+2=5'
  OR

- A truth from experience (a posteriori, contingent, empirical, synthetic):
  e.g. 'There are sharks in Australian waters.'

DO

Using Hume's Fork, analyse the following:

1. All the interior angles of a triangle add to 180 degrees.
2. God exists.
3. Stubbing one's toe is painful.
4. Water boils at 100 degrees celcius.
5. A kilogram of rocks and a kilogram of feathers weigh the same.
6. Life has meaning.
7. Slavery is wrong.
8. I exist.
9. 'All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds... relations of ideas and matters of fact.' (David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding)
10. Everything that happens has a cause.
Hume's Scepticism about Causation
What about number 10 in the exercise above? The principle of universal causality says that everything that happens has a cause, and is one of the fundamental laws of physics. So what happens when we apply the test of reason to this case? Is there a logical proof by which we can argue that things must necessarily have a cause? We might know that when one moving billiard ball collides with another, the second one moves, but that refers to experience rather than logical necessity. Of course we might argue that we have certain knowledge of particular causes: fire will burn us, and we will drown in water if unable to swim. But Hume makes the point that these are not *a priori* truths; our ancestors could not have known *prior to experience* that fire would burn them or that they could drown in water – they would have had to learn these things through harsh experience. But still, these experiences only prove *particular cases* of cause and effect; they don’t prove a rule that ‘everything has a cause’.

Let’s look at this another way. You watch a footballer kick a ball. You see his foot touch the ball. The ball moves between the goalposts. But does the footballer’s foot *cause* the ball to move? How can you be certain of this? Couldn’t these events – the foot’s kicking and the ball’s movements – be coincidental rather than causal in their relationship? Hume argued that because we don’t perceive a *necessary connection* between a cause and its effect, and sense perception is the only way we know about the external world, we do not have any rational basis for believing that that causation exists in the external world. Hume thought that causation was a human projection rather than a truth about nature.

And thus Hume reaches a skeptical conclusion about what we usually consider to be one of the fundamental principles of our world: causation turns out not to be justifiable through either experience or reason.

Hume’s Scepticism about the External World
Hume’s doubts about the external world follow a similar line of argument. Is our belief in the external world a matter of logic? No, because we can imagine what it would be like if the world didn’t exist and we can imagine ourselves to be dreaming, as Descartes suggested, or in a computer simulation, as in *The Matrix*. Is it a matter of experience? No. All your so-called experiences of the external world could have been delusions. You can pinch yourself, but it doesn’t mean you will wake up from a dream. You could be in the Matrix.

If we accept Hume’s theory that any knowledge must be proved by either reason or experience to be true, it is possible that our experience exists but the physical world does not, and that we cannot access any experience within this world by which we can tell that this is not so.

Hence Hume’s scepticism is of the relative kind. He admits that reason and experience can give us certainty about many things. But several of the things we take for granted as fundamentals of our existence – including causation and the existence of the external world – do not pass Hume’s sceptical test, and, by his reasoning, should not be considered truths.

from Robinson McCarthy, Lenny and Symes, Anna, *Philosophy: A Student Text for VCE Units 1&2*, David Barlow, 2010