

**Philosophy**

**Knowledge and Doubt (Higher)**

**Additional Support**

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## Note to teachers

Commentators often discuss the biographical background of the philosopher being studied and the intellectual setting which they are coming from before discussing their text. However, as the focus of the Higher course is the texts of the *Meditations* and *An* *Enquiry Concerning* *Human Understanding*, these notes will begin with the texts. Teachers, lecturers and assessors who wish to introduce the context will find an abundance of resources documenting René Descartes’ and David Hume’s life and works in the textbooks and websites suggested under the additional reading for the course.

These notes will provide a summary of the content of each section of the texts required in the Higher course and, after each summary, there will be a section with some analysis and evaluation of the meaning of the content. In analysing and evaluating the text there will be reference to common points of discussion made by other philosophers commenting on Descartes’ and Hume’s writing. Once again, there is a wealth of discussion in books, articles and websites where teachers, lecturers and assessors may research these points further, but candidates studying the Higher course should focus on understanding the content and engaging with the themes, challenges and outcomes of the writing rather than on any one commentator’s interpretation of it.

## Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1 in which the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body are demonstrated.

It is worth mentioning the full title of the *Meditations*. People often leave out the fact that they are *Meditations on* ***First Philosophy***, yet this can be an important part of understanding Descartes’ aims and intentions in writing them. ‘First philosophy’ is another name given to metaphysics, or the study of being in its most fundamental sense, and so, whilst the *Meditations* is often considered as an epistemological text, this is not to be separated from Descartes’ aims to help the reader understand the nature of God, the mind or soul, and this is inextricable from his project. It is also worth recognising that in writing the *Meditations* as he did, Descartes is trying to take the reader on a philosophical journey. Consequently, he claims to doubt things which we might imagine he did not actually doubt at the point of writing, and he also claims to believe things which he later discards in the process of meditating. It is, therefore, important to make a distinction between what Descartes ultimately believes and takes to be true, and what he suggests to be the case as part of the process of meditating.

## *Meditation 1* – Summary of content

### *Meditation 1* – What can be called into doubt

Descartes begins his meditations recognising that in his early childhood he had gained many beliefs that may be open to doubt. Upon these beliefs, other beliefs have then been formed and as a result his whole system could be considered untrustworthy. He argues that as a once-in-a-lifetime project he should attempt to cast aside all his previously held beliefs and begin again from scratch. He states his purpose for doing this is to ‘establish anything at all in the sciences that [is] stable and likely to last’.

### Descartes’ strategy

Descartes uses an analogy here to explain his approach. He describes demolishing all his beliefs and starting again from the foundations. If we consider a building which is unstable, with rotting foundations, the only way to form a perfectly secure structure which can be completely relied upon to be safe, would be to destroy the original building and begin again from secure foundations. This would be much more secure and safe than trying bit by bit to replace faulty brickwork and rotting materials. In the same way, Descartes is seeking to find absolutely certain knowledge that can be completely trusted and which would enable him to establish a firm and permanent foundation in the sciences. Therefore, he is suggesting he destroys all his previously trusted beliefs and begins anew with secure and trusted beliefs that can be built upon to create a firm structure. His approach involves two aspects:

1. He is going to ‘withhold his assent’ from any belief that is not completely certain or ‘indubitable’. What this means is that he will not accept as true anything that he is able to doubt even a little bit.
2. Instead of looking at each individual piece of knowledge bit by bit (which would be completely impossible), he will consider the basic principles upon which all his beliefs are based. This links with his analogy of the building — Descartes is not going to replace the building brick by brick, but attack the foundations, to demolish the structure and begin again.

To put this approach in place Descartes has two parts to his process:

### Part one: The unreliability of the senses

Descartes begins his strategy by recognising one of the first principles upon which much of his knowledge is founded. He points out that many of the beliefs he has taken to be completely reliable come from his sense experience. Whilst this has been the case, he also considers the fact that his senses have been shown to deceive him. For this reason, he suggests it might be wise not to trust in them completely. In the next paragraph Descartes gives examples of the kinds of things our senses deceive us about; these are things that are very hard to perceive, or that are very far away. Descartes’ argument could be presented like this:

P1: My senses have deceived me in the past.

P2: It is wise not to have complete trust in something that has previously deceived you.

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C: I should not have complete trust in my senses.

It is worth noting that Descartes’ conclusion is not that the senses are absolutely untrustworthy at this point, but rather that he should not have **complete** trust in his senses.

### The difficulty of doubting some sense information

This is highlighted by the fact that Descartes goes on to make clear that there are still many beliefs gained from sense experience that he finds impossible to doubt. He gives the example of himself sitting by the fire in his dressing gown. From this we can see that Descartes does, at this stage, seem to think many such beliefs from our senses can be taken as trustworthy. To emphasise this point, he claims that he would be as insane as someone who believed their head was made of earthenware or that they were entirely made of glass to doubt such kinds of beliefs gained from our senses. Descartes is not proposing that we should doubt our sanity and consider that we might be mad. Rather he is comparing someone who would doubt the reliability of such beliefs based on sense experience with a person who is deranged and believes they are made of glass and such like. In this way he is dismissing the possibility that all sense experience should be completely doubted. The person undertaking the meditations is considered to be a sane meditator.

### The dream argument

Having just dismissed the doubts regarding most sense experience, Descartes then moves on to a more extreme concern. He realises that, when he is asleep, his dreams are in many ways like the waking delusions of a madman. Indeed, his dreams can contain many unusual and bizarre occurrences, some even more improbable than those of someone who was delusional. Perhaps more importantly, there are some dreams that are so completely like everyday life that this poses a real problem. Most people will have had dreams of very mundane everyday tasks; of getting up out of bed, showering, dressing, eating breakfast etc. We may even wake up to be most disappointed to find we have to go through the whole process of getting ready for the day ahead once more. Descartes points out that his waking experience seems very distinct, perhaps ‘vivid’ is the right word here, and so perhaps this could give him reason to be certain of his wakefulness. However, he then questions this when remembering that he has thought very similar thoughts in his sleep, and thus he supposes that there are no clear signs by which it is possible to tell when you are awake rather than asleep. His argument could be presented as follows:

P1: There are no certain signs that distinguish my waking life from being asleep and dreaming.

P2: If there are no certain signs that distinguish my waking life from being asleep and dreaming, then it is possible that I am not awake right now but rather dreaming I am awake.

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C: It is possible that I am not awake right now but rather dreaming I am awake.

Even dreams have content and seem to be constructed from resources that are real.

So, what can Descartes draw from this consideration? If it is possible he could be dreaming now, then the things his senses seem to be telling him about the immediate world may not be true; he may not be in his dressing gown, he may not be sitting by the fire, he may not be moving his arms and fingers to write, indeed he may not even have a body of any sort at all. However, there may be some things that we can still be sure about even if we are dreaming. Descartes describes an analogy of a painter who creates his picture using ideas of things he has gained elsewhere, or at the very least uses colours that are real to represent his images. In this way, Descartes argues that, if he is dreaming, there must at least be some things that his dreams are based upon that are still real.

### Things that might survive the dream argument

Descartes supposes that certain concepts that make up our dreaming experience remain real even if we are dreaming. These are like the colours that the painter must use to create their paintings. These concepts include matter or physical substance (as Descartes puts it ‘corporeal nature in general’), extension, shape, quantity and size, time and place.

### Provisional conclusion

From this, Descartes comes to conclude that subjects like physics, astronomy and medicine, which depend on studying concepts which could be drawn together using our imagination as part of our dreams, cannot be reliable. These ideas may be the product of our dreams and so we cannot trust in them. However, we may be able to put our faith in subjects which deal with the concepts which survive the dream argument in their most basic form. Descartes gives the examples of geometry and arithmetic as being possibly trustworthy: arithmetic dealing solely with numbers, which is one of the concepts which Descartes supposes survives the dream argument, and geometry, which deals with numbers and shapes. He then emphasises his point with the exclamation that, ‘whether I am awake or asleep two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides’. So even if he **is** dreaming Descartes supposes that there are still some basic truths that he cannot doubt.

### The deceiving God argument

Having come to this provisional conclusion, Descartes continues his meditation to consider the idea he has of God. He claims to have a belief in an all-powerful God who made him. In considering this idea Descartes realises that it is possible that an all-powerful God could make it seem to him as though there were such things as sky, earth, size, shape etc, when in fact there were no such things. He asks:

‘How do I know that God has not brought it about that I too go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square?’

Therefore, if there is an all-powerful God, even the basic principles that held firm after the dream argument could now be uncertain.

### Problems with the counter objection that God wouldn’t do that

Descartes considers the possibility that deception might be seen to be inconsistent with the concept of a supremely good God. However, he rejects this idea because he argues that, if we think such complete deception is inconsistent with the goodness of God, then we should also consider any deception at all equally inconsistent with God’s goodness and so we should be able to say that we are never deceived. However, Descartes knows that we are deceived sometimes (by our senses) and so accepts the possibility that God’s goodness could be compatible with him being deceived. His argument could be presented in this way:

P1: If it is inconsistent with the goodness of God to create a person such that they are deceived all the time, then it would be equally inconsistent to create a person who is deceived even occasionally.

P2: I am deceived occasionally (Descartes does not specify this here but presumably he is thinking of how the senses deceive us).

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C: It is not inconsistent with the goodness of God to create a person that may be deceived all the time.

In this way Descartes confirms that it may be possible that there is an all-powerful God who could deceive him about even the basic principles which he had held as true after the dream argument.

### Even saying there is no God doesn’t solve the problem.

Although Descartes clearly had a firm belief in God, he also recognises that not all those who might undergo the process of meditating will have such a firm belief. He wonders whether we would fare any better if we cast aside the possibility of an all-powerful God who might be deceiving us. He claims that if there is no God then we might think ourselves even more likely to be in a state of complete deception. His reasoning is that the alternatives to God as an explanation for our existence would be less perfect than God as an explanation. The possibilities would be things such as fate or chance and, as these possibilities would be less powerful explanations for one’s existence than a perfect all-powerful being, it is reasonable to suppose that we would similarly be less perfect in ourselves.

His argument could be presented thus:

P1: If God did not create me then I exist due to a process of chance or fate, or some other means.

P2: If I am created by something less powerful than God, then I am more likely to be prone to error or deception than if I were created by a creator God.

P3: Either I am created by a creator God and am possibly being deceived by such a God, or I have been created by something less perfect and am even more likely to be deceived.

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C I may be being deceived all the time, whatever the explanation for my existence.

### Final conclusion

Descartes concludes that, at this stage, there is not a single belief that he previously held to be true that he cannot raise a doubt about. That is, all his previously held beliefs may be false. Thus, he believes he must ‘withhold assent’ from any of these beliefs until he can find something that he can trust in completely.

### Part two: Why the first part isn't enough

Descartes realises that, even despite having gone through all his concerns about his former beliefs, it is going to be very difficult for him to put aside his trust in them. This is because he has been in such a habit of accepting them to be true. Not only this, but many of the beliefs he is trying not to have faith in, are opinions and beliefs that seem highly likely to be true, and it would seem perfectly reasonable to trust them to be so. Therefore, he says that it would be best if he tries to pretend to himself that these former beliefs are not just uncertain, but are false. This will stop him from falling back into bad habits and trusting in beliefs that may not be trustworthy.

### The malicious demon

So how is Descartes going to do this?

‘I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.’

So, to help him pretend that all his previously held beliefs are false, he imagines that there might be a being as powerful as God, but evil instead of good, who is trying to trick him into believing things that are not true. This will help Descartes to keep on his guard. It is worth noting that Descartes particularly focuses on the demon deceiving him about the nature of the external world, which is the stuff that he learns through sense experiences:

*‘*I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement.’

He then concludes that, even if he is unable to get the certain truths that he is seeking, he will at least not believe things that are not true:

‘I shall at least resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree*.’*

## *Meditation 1* – Analysis and evaluation

In this section we will look at some possible interpretations of Descartes’ reasoning and how some philosophers have criticised his writing. These comments are not the only possible ways to analyse or evaluate his arguments, and teachers, lecturers, and assessors and candidates are encouraged to consider the quality of these points, and how they reflect on Descartes’ writing, for themselves.

### Descartes’ method of doubt

One thing that can be said about Descartes’ approach is that he is rigorous in his strategy. His method serves as a very successful destructive phase. He sets out to undermine all his beliefs, even those that he puts most faith in, and he has managed to undermine them, and his use of the imaginary malicious demon will help him to not just doubt these beliefs, but to consider them completely false. It also seems reasonable to think that if we can find certainty after being as sceptical as any sceptic might be, then the sceptics have been beaten; we can have some knowledge.

That said, the criterion of indubitability is a particularly high standard and it could be reasonable to argue that we can be certain about a claim and still have a small element of doubt. Perhaps this expectation of indubitability is an unreasonable standard for our beliefs.

What do you think?

### What if there are no foundational beliefs?

A genuine concern for Descartes is the risk that foundationalism is not the right approach to knowledge. Descartes has set out on his project aiming to uncover some absolute indubitable truths on which he can rebuild his whole system of beliefs. If there are no absolutely certain foundational truths, then his project fails. Even if we do find any indubitable truths, it may not be possible to build all knowledge upon them. Alternative theories of knowledge such as coherentism suggest our knowledge could be justified in a web of beliefs which support each other in a complex system. This might be a better, more pragmatic approach.

### Was Descartes sincere?

Another criticism that has been levelled against Descartes is that he set out knowing what he intended to prove. If this is true, then perhaps he has not sincerely engaged with his own method and has simply used it as a tool to present his own viewpoint. Descartes’ method encourages the use of ‘hyperbolic doubt’*.* He intends to reject beliefs if he has any grounds whatsoever for being suspicious of their truth. Could it be that the doubts Descartes raises are just a pretence, and he had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to prove from the outset? For Descartes’ method to be completely effective then surely it is reasonable to expect Descartes to genuinely destroy all his opinions. It could be argued that he only ever pretended to doubt key beliefs like his conviction that God exists.

### Problems with the dream argument

Descartes suggested that he regularly mistook the experience of dreaming for reality. In other words, he seemed to be saying that when we are asleep we have no way of distinguishing sleep from reality. Most people can understand these comments as most of us have experienced the sensation of waking up and for a moment or two not being quite sure whether we are still dreaming. However, it doesn’t take long for us to realise that we are in fact awake. It does then appear true that we mistake dreaming experience for conscious experience when we are asleep and dreaming. However, do we necessarily make the same mistake when we are awake?

When we are asleep we can’t clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep. However, when we are awake we do seem to be able to check easily. For example, when we dream our sense of touch doesn’t appear strong. Rather, dreams are very visual. Dreams also do not have the continuity of waking experience. They tend to be dominated by brief episodes that often contain strange occurrences. It has been argued, then, that Descartes seems to have made a logical error in *Meditation 1*. He takes the apparently true proposition:

‘When I’m dreaming I regularly mistakenly assume that this experience is real.’

Descartes then moves to the apparently false proposition:

‘I cannot ever tell the difference between dreaming experience and conscious experience.’

This means that his conclusion — he can’t tell whether he is asleep now — isn’t necessarily the case. This is considered an asymmetric argument. If he’s dreaming now he has a problem. However, if he’s awake now then he can know this experience is true. Some studies in psychology support the view that we can tell when we are awake. They suggest that there is a significant qualitative difference between the complexity of detail experienced in waking life, which cannot be replicated in dreams. A biological explanation for this is that the brain is incapable of processing so much detail, which results in the sort of hazy quality that dreams can have. The thought is that it takes far less brain capacity to simply observe things in the world; the detail is there, and we see it. When we are asleep, anything we experience, the brain must create. Later in Meditation 6 Descartes seems to argue that dreams and reality do have a difference in the quality of experience such that we can normally tell the difference — so does this make the dream argument redundant? Not obviously because Descartes is considering exceptions to normal circumstances. He also argues in Meditation 6 that we need to use our intellect to be sure we are awake, and he is not certain in Meditation 1 if he can trust his intellect or not.

Some might also argue that Descartes does not necessarily need the dream hypothesis at all, as the incremental nature of his doubts means that the deceiving God hypothesis will undermine his sense experience completely, even if the dream argument is insufficient. However, there is some concern with this; Descartes presented the dream hypothesis as a way to particularly undermine our trust in sense experience. *A priori* truths (such as those of geometry and mathematics) survived it, but *a posteriori* truths (based on experience) didn’t. Descartes was therefore using the dream argument to begin his case for the superiority of rationalism as opposed to empiricism. If we can challenge Descartes’ presentation of the dream argument, then maybe his argument against empiricism isn’t quite as strong as he had hoped.

Then again, the point Descartes is really going to make is that only his mind can overcome radical doubts like the dream argument or, more importantly, the deceiving God and malicious demon arguments. Even if the criticisms above are true, they don’t really affect the principles that he is trying to establish.

### Does Descartes’ method lead to a dead end?

The addition of the malicious demon is certainly the most rigorous of all arguments. However, this rigour led the famous Scottish philosopher David Hume to argue in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) that, once hyperbolic doubt is embarked upon, nothing can survive. Theoretically, all our beliefs can be doubted. Descartes’ method, therefore, according to Hume, leads to a sceptical dead end. The question to ask is whether Descartes was successful in escaping the diabolic doubt he presents us with. The deceiving God is strong enough to discount sense experience and *a priori* facts.

However, if this is a possibility, then can Descartes ever get out of this state of hyperbolic doubt? Surely all reason and logic fall victim to this argument. Is it not too strong? Should Descartes simply have stopped at the end of *Meditation* *1*?

## *Meditation 2* – Summary of content

The nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body: at the start of *Meditation 2* Descartes reminds the reader of the serious nature of his doubts and restates his intention to try to find certainty in the hope that this will lead him to something greater. He uses the analogy of the Archimedean point to suggest that, if he can find but one indubitable truth, then he too may hope for great things. He then sets himself the task of finding any one belief that might resist the doubts he has raised. He first asks if he cannot really trust in his belief in God. However, Descartes recognised that he may have created the idea of God himself. Then he looks to his own existence. At first Descartes supposes that he may not exist because he doubts the existence of his body and his senses, and supposes that this might lead to the belief that he also does not exist.

### My existence is certain

However, Descartes then recognises that, for him to be deceived about his senses and his body, and all the things he has called in to doubt, then he must certainly exist in order to be being deceived:

‘So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.’

So, Descartes has now achieved the first part of his aim to find something indubitable and from this he hopes to build up his beliefs with certainty. In the next part of the *Meditation* Descartes considers what exactly the ‘I’ that exists is. He argues that the mind and body are separate and that in essence he is ‘a thing that thinks’.

## *Meditation 2* – Analysis and evaluation

### The ‘cogito’

In this *Meditation* Descartes comes to conclude that, if nothing else, he can be certain of his own existence. The phrase ‘I am: I exist’ is often described as a self-authenticating, or self-justifying, statement. Any time you express the thought or simply think it in your mind, it must be true; it justifies itself and so does not require any further justification for accepting it.

Many of the criticisms directed against the ‘cogito’, as this claim to existence is often described, are based around Descartes’ introduction of the malicious demon.

### The malicious demon and reason

The cogito is seen to be Descartes’ first foundation of knowledge. However, we might wonder if we can fully trust in our powers of reason and logic, given the doubt raised by the hypothetical malicious demon. This hypothesis might mean that we must doubt even the reliability of logic itself.

Although on the face of it the cogito does appear self-evidently true, there are clearly logical steps involved in Descartes’ argument:

P1: If I’m thinking then I must exist.

P2: I am thinking.

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C: I must exist.

Indeed, in an earlier text, the *Discourse on Method* (1637) Descartes describes coming to this conclusion:

‘And observing this truth **I am thinking, therefore I exist** was so firm and sure that not even the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics could shake it, I decided to accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.’

In this text he used a phrase that has become one of the most memorable phrases in philosophy:

‘Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)’.

If Descartes uses reason to find his trust in his own existence is so unwavering, does this undermine the faith he puts in this claim?

### How might Descartes have dealt with this criticism?

Given that Descartes is happy that both versions of the **cogito** are valid representations of his thinking, it seems reasonable to suppose he thinks that this logical process can be relied upon. In fact, there are various parts of Descartes’ writings, in the *Meditations* themselves, the *Objections and Replies*, and other letters, where he makes it clear that the process of doubt cannot call absolutely all thought into doubt. It might be reasonable to assume that we must at the very least rely on our process of reasoning to be trustworthy, otherwise all thought becomes impossible and we cannot even embark on the process of meditating. So perhaps we can accept Descartes’ cogito, the claim to knowledge of our own existence as our indubitable truth. Although some philosophers may argue that having put the idea of the malicious demon out there in the *Meditations*, Descartes ought to be compelled to accept that reason is undermined. If this is the case, however, then it seems appropriate to say that Descartes has arrived at a dead end and there is nothing more that he can know.

### The malicious demon and language

The doubts raised by the deceiving God and malicious demon throw into doubt not just all *a posteriori* knowledge, but also *a priori* knowledge claims. Even simple mathematical concepts like 2 + 3 = 5 are open to doubt. Surely, the only way this could be so is if the meaning of the numbers and concepts of addition and equals means something different to us than we think it does. Surely it means that the malicious demon can make us think concepts mean something different from what we think they mean. Descartes’ cogito is supposed to be the self-evident truth that survives even the demon hypothesis. However, for the cogito to work, it could be argued that Descartes must have had at his disposal a list of fundamental language concepts. Descartes must have known what ‘thought’ is, what ‘doubt’ is, what ‘existence’ is, what ‘I’ is etc, before he was able to put together these ideas into the cogito. If we can’t be sure of the meaning of these concepts, then maybe we can’t be sure that ‘I am: I exist’ is a necessary concept after all.

### How might Descartes have dealt with this criticism?

We may find our answer to this issue later in the *Meditations*. Although Descartes suggests in *Meditation 1* that the deceiving God, or malicious demon, may make us think that ‘2 + 3 = 5’ is the case when it is in fact not, he later, in *Meditation 3*, recognises that, when he fully turns his attention to focus on this idea, he is as certain about this as he is about his own existence. Perhaps we can take it that there is a difference between simply thinking carelessly about the claim ‘2 + 3 = 5’ and really considering carefully the meaning of the concepts and how they work together to make certain their truth. We might take Descartes to be saying that, when casually thinking about ‘2 + 3 = 5’, we might suppose it possible that the deceiving God or malicious demon could make us think it when it is not true. Similarly, they could make us think the sky is blue when it is in fact purple, or does not exist at all. However, when we consider carefully the full meanings of the concepts, then we know it is impossible that 2 + 3 could equal anything but 5. If this is the way that Descartes intends to be understood, then perhaps this is not the major criticism that people suggest. Perhaps it is to be accepted that language concepts must be assumed to be understood. After all, without this at the very start, how are we to embark upon the *Meditations* at all?

That said, perhaps the true sceptic might argue that we simply cannot rely on fundamental language concepts, and thus the project of the *Meditations* is necessarily doomed from the outset.

### Problems with Descartes’ assumptions about the self

The amount of comment given to the *Meditations* is a sign of its importance in philosophy. The cogito is a great example of this, as is clear from the number of famous philosophers who have commented on it.

Many philosophers have raised questions relating to Descartes’ assumptions about the nature of the ‘I’ referred to in the cogito. The main focus of these criticisms is to say that when Descartes claims ‘I exist’, he claims to know more than he is entitled to, given the nature of his doubts.

David Hume (1711–1776) in his writings describes the idea of the self as simply a bundle of perceptions. As an empiricist, he claimed that all knowledge comes from experience and, when we turn our attention to the self, all that we experience are our perceptions of the world. He argued that, when he thought most intimately about what he called his self, he only ever experienced ‘some particular perception or other, heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.’ Thus, Hume concludes that the concept of ‘self’ merely refers to a bundle of perceptions. With this in mind, Descartes has no right to claim to be ‘a thing that thinks’, because this assumes that there is a persistent self that is more than just a bundle of perceptions.

Other criticisms by philosophers also rest on the fact that Descartes describes himself as a ‘thinking thing’. This also suggests that he thinks of himself as something that persists in time that has a continuity of being. Critics suggest that this goes beyond what Descartes is justified in claiming. All he has perception of at any time is of thinking taking place, and so all he is justified in saying is ‘there are thoughts’, or that ‘there is thinking going on’. It is not possible to know that thoughts require a thinker or that there is some self that exists beyond the perception.

### Can these criticisms be overcome?

There is not one perfect answer to this. If there was, philosophers would have stopped discussing, analysing and evaluating the *Meditations* a long time ago. Intuitively the cogito makes absolute sense and it does seem impossible to doubt, even despite the considerable hypothetical doubts Descartes has put in place in *Meditation 1*. Try to believe that you do not exist, try to believe that all that exists is a thought — is this a position you can really contemplate? If not, then perhaps Descartes’ position is reasonable. If you can imagine and believe it possible that all there exists is a thought that does not require a thinker to contemplate it, then perhaps Descartes has overstepped what he can rightly conclude.

## *Meditation 3* – Summary of content

### *Meditation 3. Of God: that He exists*

Descartes begins *Meditation 3* by reviewing his position so far. He reminds us that he is going to ‘withdraw from his senses’ and imagine all the ideas of physical things are false. He will instead focus in on his own self and consider what he can know of this ‘I’ that he has discovered exists in *Meditation 2*. He restates the claim that he is a ‘thing that thinks’. He also claims that, although the things that we seem to have experiences of may not exist, we do still have a thought that exists within us of such a thing. For example, I may have an experience of seeing a table which may not actually exist outside my mind. Nonetheless, I still have a thought within me of a table.

### Clear and distinct perceptions

Descartes now begins to look at what else can be known in addition to the cogito. One might think that not a lot of facts about the world obviously derive from the claim that one exists. So how is Descartes to proceed? He claims he is certain he is a ‘thinking thing’. If he is certain of this, perhaps he can say what it is that makes him certain that it is true. Then, maybe, he could begin to use that as a test to find other truths that he can know as well. He claims that what makes the claim that he exists absolutely beyond doubt, is that he has ‘a clear and distinct perception’ of it being true. He argues that this would not be enough to prove to him that he exists if it was possible to have such a perception and for that idea not to be true.

### Descartes’ argument can be presented in this way:

P1: If something I perceived clearly and distinctly could be false, then perceiving ‘I exist’ clearly and distinctly would not be enough for me to be certain of it.

P2: I am certain that ‘I exist’ because I have a ‘clear and distinct perception’ of it.

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C: Everything I perceive clearly and distinctly is true

### This argument has a valid structure:

P1: If A then B

P2: Not B

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C: Not A

### It might help to see it like this:

P1: If something I perceived clearly and distinctly could be false, then perceiving ‘I exist’ clearly and distinctly would not be enough for me to be certain of it.

P2: I am certain that ‘I exist’ because of the fact that I have a ‘clear and distinct perception’ of it. (it is not the case that ‘perceiving ‘I exist’ clearly and distinctly is not enough to be certain of it’)

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C: Everything I perceive clearly and distinctly is true (ie it is not the case that ‘something I perceive clearly and distinctly could be false’)

So, if Descartes is correct then he can use this as a general rule from which he can find other pieces of certain knowledge. **Anything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true.**

### What is a clear and distinct perception?

Before continuing to consider the rest of *Meditation 3*, it would be useful here to look at exactly what Descartes means by a ‘clear and distinct’ perception. Descartes does not discuss this here, but explains it more explicitly in the *Principles of Philosophy*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

### What is a clear perception?

Descartes states ‘I call a perception **clear** when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind — just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.’

### What is a distinct perception?

**‘**I call a perception **distinct** if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.

### An example of a clear perception that is not distinct:

Descartes gives the example of an intense pain as something that may be clear without in fact being distinct. We can have a very clear feeling of pain, but people often confuse the feeling of pain with their judgement that something painful exists in the spot where the pain seems to be located. Descartes says that it is only the feeling of the pain that we perceive clearly, the judgement around the pain is not distinct.

### Reasons for questioning the ‘clear and distinct’ principle:

Back in *Meditation 3*, Descartes considers why we might not accept this principle. What if there had been things we thought we perceived clearly and distinctly previously, and we later called them into doubt? Descartes realises that he had felt very certain about beliefs he had from his sense experience, and this could be a **counterexample** to disprove his ‘clear and distinct’ principle. So, he tries to analyse what he believed about his sense experience and whether it was indeed a ‘clear and distinct’ perception. He thinks that he clearly perceived the ideas which he felt came to him from his senses. He had ideas of the sky, of stars, people, and all objects that seem to be part of an external world. However, he argues that although he clearly perceived the **ideas**, he did not have a ‘clear and distinct’ perception that these things exist in an external world **outside of his mind**. Descartes claims that his belief that ‘there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas’ was a mistake due to habit. Having dismissed this possible counterexample, Descartes is now free to continue trusting in his ‘clear and distinct’ rule.

### The possibility of a deceiving God

Descartes then turns to consider other truths that he had previously put his trust in, such as some simple truths of arithmetic and geometry. He gives the example of 2 + 3 = 5 which he had discussed in *Meditation* *1*. He remembers that he had, at that time, also seen such ideas clearly enough to feel certain of their truth. Were these not therefore still clear and distinct ideas? Descartes realises his reason to doubt them now is due to his later concern about the deceiving God. What is the consequence of this change of view? Did Descartes previously have a ‘clear and distinct’ perception that is now open to doubt? This would undermine his ‘clear and distinct’ rule.

The next section is difficult and needs some care and attention when reading it.

### The ability to doubt depends on my focus.

Descartes agrees with his claim in *Meditation* *1* that, when he focuses on his idea of a supreme God, he has to admit that God could of course deceive him even about matters which he sees ‘utterly clearly’.

However:

When he turns his full attention to an idea that he perceives very clearly and distinctly, he feels completely and utterly convinced of its absolute certainty. He claims that no deceiver can make it the case that he does not exist (thus restating the ‘cogito’), and that it is not possible for anyone to make 2 and 3 added together come to anything other than 5. So, it seems that Descartes does take truths of mathematics, geometry and other logical propositions to be completely certain, using his ‘clear and distinct’ principle, if he is focusing his full attention on them. Whenever he removes his focus, he realises that he could again be vulnerable to being deceived by the deceiving God.

### The need to prove the existence of God

There is, therefore, for Descartes a possibility that, whenever he is not focusing his attention fully on his clear and distinct perceptions, he may be deceived by a deceiving God. However, he also recognises that this is only a hypothesis that he has presented, and thus this possibility is very slight. He does not yet even know if there is a God at all. Therefore, he thinks it is important to consider whether there is a God, and in doing so remove this doubt.

### The classification of thoughts

Descartes classifies his thought into different categories in order to say which kinds of thoughts can be said to be true or false.

### His categories are these:

* **ideas** - these are the images of things that form in his mind, such as man, sky, angel or God.
* **volitions, emotions,** **judgements** - these thoughts contain more than simply an image, as they have an object towards which they are directed.

Ideas, Descartes realises, are neither true nor false. Nor can emotions or volitions be true or false — they simply are what they are. Descartes identifies that his judgements are different. These, it seems, can be true or false, and so he must be on his guard when considering them. More specifically, one of the judgements he often makes which he must be especially wary of is when he judges that a particular idea resembles some entity outside of Descartes himself.

### What kind of ideas are there?

Descartes describes three different kinds of ideas:

* **innate ideas** — ideas he believes he has been born with, such as his understanding of truth.
* **adventitious ideas** — ideas that seem to come to him from something outside himself, and which seem to exist in the external world, such as seeing the sun, or feeling fire.
* **invented ideas** — ideas the he has created with his own imagination, such as hippogriffs.

Descartes addresses why he judges that adventitious ideas come from outside himself and resemble actual things in the world. He reasons that they seem to present themselves to him even when he is not trying to think of them. They are not dependent on Descartes choosing to experience them. He gives the example of feeling the heat of the fire. This sensation seems to come from something other than Descartes, because he cannot choose to feel it, and so it seems reasonable to assume that something with a likeness to that experience is the cause of Descartes feeling such heat. This classification of ideas is important for Descartes in the rest of his argument in this *Meditation*.

### The difference between a natural impulse and natural light.

Descartes now distinguishes his **natural impulse** (for example, to believe there are objects that exist outside himself causing him to have experiences of them), and what is revealed to him by the **natural light**. Descartes claims that anything revealed by the natural light cannot be doubted. He refers to the cogito again as an example of something that has been revealed to him by the natural light. In contrast, things that he is inclined to accept by his natural impulses can most certainly be doubted, and he claims he has no good reason to have confidence in them.

### Degrees of reality

The idea of ‘degrees of reality’ is an unusual one, but we find it common as part of medieval metaphysics. So, it will serve us to be aware of some definitions before we continue to look at the causal principle:

**substance**: something that can exist independently of anything else.

**accident**: a property of a substance.

**mode:** thedetermination of a property.

For example:

The substance is a table, the accident is the colour, and brown is the mode.

or

The substance is a tree, the accident is the texture, and rough is the mode.

Descartes claims that substance has more reality than an accident, because an accident cannot exist without a substance, and so is dependent on it. A mode has less reality than an accident. In addition, a substance that is part of another substance has less reality than it — for example, an incomplete substance such as a branch has less reality than a whole tree.

In this way Descartes considers how his thoughts or ideas can also have differing degrees of reality. If we take the mind to be the substance, then ‘thought’ is an accident of the mind. This accident ‘thought’ has many different forms or ‘modes’. My thought that I am thirsty is just one ‘mode’ that my thought can take. In this sense then, all ideas have the same degree of reality. Descartes calls this reality the **formal** reality — the reality of the form the thing takes. However, in another sense, Descartes thinks that thought has different degrees of reality. The objects that ideas represent have different degrees of reality, their **objective** reality. Some of these ideas represent substance, like my thought of a cake; some represent accidents, like my thought about taste in general; and some represent modes, like my thought of the sweetness of the cake. In this way, the objective reality of the thought ‘cake’ is more than the objective reality of the thought ‘taste’ or the thought ‘sweet’.

### The causal principle

Descartes claims that he knows by the **natural light** that the cause of something must have as much reality as the effect. From this he concludes that ‘something cannot come from nothing’ and ‘what is more perfect – that is, contains more reality - cannot arise from what is less perfect’.

Descartes gives the example of a stone — a stone cannot begin to exist without being created by something which contains all that we can find in the stone. Descartes also gives the example of heat, which he says cannot be produced in something that was not hot or at least that did not have ‘at least the same order of perfection as heat’. Note here that Descartes recognises that heat does not always come directly from something that starts off hot, but that the thing the heat energy comes from must have come from a thing with at least as much perfection. In a modern scientific understanding, we might think of the principle of ‘energy conservation’ — that energy cannot be produced or destroyed, only transferred or changed to another form. So, we get heat energy sometimes from another type of energy, but that cause must, in Descartes’ view, be seen to have as much perfection as the heat energy that was created.

Descartes then turns his attention to the causes of his ideas or thoughts. He claims the causal principle can also be applied to the cause of ideas. So, the cause of an idea must have as much reality as the object of the idea, what that idea is about:

‘So it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like pictures, or images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect.’

### First proof for the existence of God — the idea of God proves the existence of God (the ‘trademark argument’).

The argument that follows is named by philosophers as the ‘trademark argument’, because Descartes suggests that the idea of God is placed in his mind like the stamp of a craftsman (or a trademark) by God himself.

Descartes reasons that, if he possesses in his mind an idea of something which has more objective reality than he does himself, then it must have come from something other than himself. His argument can be written like this:

P1: The cause of my ideas must have as much reality as what that idea is of. (the objective reality of the idea)

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Intermediate Conclusion: If I have an idea in my mind which relates to an object which has more reality than I do myself, then I cannot be the cause of that idea.

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Final Conclusion: Therefore — the idea of God could not have come from inside me.

Descartes claims his idea of God is of a ‘substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists’.

Considering these qualities, Descartes argues that the idea of God must have originated from something other than him, because the idea of an infinite substance has more objective reality than he does, being a finite substance. The idea, he argues, must have come from something that was infinite.

Descartes then goes on to counter one possible criticism of this claim. Could it not be that he gained the idea of the infinite by negating the idea of finite? However, he claims this is not possible:

‘On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired — that is, lacked something — and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there was in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognise my own defects by comparison?’

What is Descartes’ point here? He is claiming that it is not possible to understand the ideas of imperfect, or finite without first understanding the concepts of perfect and infinite. If this is the case, then you can’t have the idea of finite first and then negate it to come to recognise the idea of infinite — the idea of infinite must be there first. Therefore, for Descartes to judge himself finite, he must already have the idea of an infinite, which he does not believe could have been caused by himself.

Descartes also considers whether the idea he has of an infinite being could simply not relate to anything in the world and only exist in the form of an idea. Again, Descartes dismissed this because he argues that his idea of God ‘is utterly clear and distinct, and contains in itself more objective reality than any other idea; hence there is no idea which is in itself truer or less liable to be suspected of falsehood’. This is unlike his ideas of things like heat or cold, which he thinks may not actually relate to anything in actuality because the ideas of them lack clarity and distinctness.

Furthermore, Descartes even counters the claim that he cannot fully grasp the concept of the infinite. He puts it in this way:

‘It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection are present in God either formally or eminently.’

### Second proof for the existence of God — my existence requires the existence of God.

Descartes’ second argument focuses on the idea that God must have caused me. I, who have this idea of God, can’t exist unless God does, because if I created myself, I could give myself every perfection. This is because creating a substance requires more power than creating properties — hence causing myself (a substance) involves more power than creating perfections (which would be properties). But I can’t give myself every perfection, so I could not have caused myself. Again, if I created myself, I could also have given myself the idea of God, but, as argued above, I can’t do this either.

Of course, we might think, I was created by my parents. But if only my parents were involved in explaining my creation, then they must have sufficient power to cause the idea of God in my mind. But they have no more power to do this than I do. We could continue back to their parents, and so on. Descartes allows that there could be an infinite series of creatures, each causing the next in the series. But, he objects, this won’t be able to cause the idea of God. So, since I have the idea of God, God created me and gave me this idea.

### God is not a deceiver

The final task for Descartes in *Meditation 3* is to consider whether God could be deceiving him. Descartes argues that his idea of God is of something that has ‘all perfections’. Even though he claims not to fully grasp what these are, he also claims that it is evident to him that, since God has all perfections, he could not be a deceiver. Descartes claims that ‘it is manifest by the **natural light** that all fraud and deception depend on some defect’. Given that God contains no defect, we should accept that God cannot be a deceiver. Descartes goes on in the *Meditations* to use the fact of God’s existence, and that he is no deceiver, to build upon these foundations, including arguing that he can usually trust in the evidence from his senses.

## *Meditation 3* – Analysis and evaluation

### Evaluation of Descartes’ reliance on God

God has a very important role for Descartes in his *Meditations*. In proving God, Descartes can completely put his trust in his reasoning and in his sense experiences. If God can’t be shown to exist, then Descartes can’t fully eliminate the hypothetical doubts of being permanently deceived. He may have established the truth that he exists. However, without God, he is not able to progress to trusting in his sense experiences. Of course, people today aren’t nearly as convinced of the existence of God as Descartes was.

### Issues with innate ideas

The trademark argument relies on our **innate idea**of God, of perfection and infinity. However, some philosophers doubt the existence of any innate ideas. Could Descartes’ understanding of God be something his mind has invented using his imagination? Well, perhaps, and this is the suggestion that philosopher David Hume puts forward in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. The claim is that we take ideas that we have of goodness and power and maximise them. However, Descartes has put forward some reasons to say that this is not going to be enough to explain his idea of God as a perfect, infinite being. He has argued that the idea of perfection and the infinite is needed first in order to understand imperfection and the finite. He suggests that we necessarily need to understand the infinite in order to grasp the finite, and so the idea of the infinite needs to come first. Descartes claims to have a ‘clear and distinct’ perception of the infinite. So, whether we accept Descartes’ reasoning depends very much on whether we accept his reasoning that the concept of the infinite must come before understanding the finite, or if, on the contrary, we think we could have gained the idea through some other kind of abstraction. What do you think?

### What if there is no ‘clear and distinct’ idea of God?

Descartes’ argument rests on his ‘clear and distinct’ perception of God. It might be reasoned that the fact that Descartes’ idea of God is clear and distinct is what makes it impossible that this idea comes from Descartes himself. If it were a hazy concept of perfection or the infinite, we might think this could easily be based on magnifying qualities we understand from our limited human experience. We might also imagine this could be drawn from negating the idea of the finite or imperfect. So, could Descartes be wrong in thinking he has a ‘clear and distinct’ idea of God? Descartes claims that although he does not fully grasp the concept of the infinite, he nonetheless has a clear and distinct perception of it. This seems hard to accept; is it not reasonable to expect that having a clear and distinct perception of something requires grasping the idea fully?

Another related problem is that I may not have a clear and distinct idea of God, perfection or the infinite. Even if I suppose Descartes **does** have a clear and distinct idea of God, it does not mean that **I** do. Surely Descartes has only proved God’s existence to those people who similarly have such a perception? Must I simply take Descartes’ word for it that he has such a perception, and on that basis trust in his proof for the existence of God? This seems to be very much like an argument from religious experience then. If a person has such an experience it may be perfectly legitimate for them to trust completely in what that experience was of, but it does not provide complete proof for those who lack that experience. In the same way, perhaps someone following Descartes’ meditations should only be convinced if they also have this clear and distinct perception of God.

### Issues with the causal principle

Another challenge to Descartes’ arguments comes from his reliance on the causal principle.But what if this principle isn’t in fact true? Descartes does claim he knows this principle by the natural light. So, he is suggesting that he is completely certain about it. If we can doubt this principle, then it would undermine his proof of God.

Some have challenged Descartes’ principle by looking to examples that go against the assumptions of the causal principle. Some examples that people have suggested are things like lighting a match and creating fire, or a whisper creating an avalanche. These examples do seem to be of an effect that is, in some respect, greater than the cause, but these do not really go against Descartes’ causal principle. Remember that, when Descartes talks about the cause having at least as much reality as the effect, he means something very specific. These effects have the **same** **reality** as their causes, as the match is a substance, as is the fire. Similarly, the avalanche is not simply caused by the whisper, but is an accumulation of many things which all add up to the effect of the avalanche, and so this does not really provide a true counterexample to the causal principle.

### What are degrees of reality?

Perhaps a better way to challenge Descartes is to question the concept of having degrees of reality in the first place. One might simply argue that surely something either exists, and is real, or it does not exist, and so is not real. The concept of having more or less reality does not obviously make sense and perhaps can be challenged on its own. If we deny the possibility of having degrees of reality, then this would undermine Descartes’ reasoning for God.

### Does the causal principle apply to ideas?

Even if we accept that there might be degrees of reality (and many thinkers today do not), we might still think the causal principle only makes sense when talking about things that actually exist, or at least appear to exist, in the world, ie substances. We might think that ideas don’t have to be created from something that is as real as the things they are about. We might think that we can create ideas of things that are vastly more perfect than we are ourselves. This would perhaps be because ideas which are modes of thinking seem to be less real than actual substances. It seems legitimate to think that an idea of God is still much less real than the actual Descartes.

### Is Descartes’ clear and distinct’ rule reliable?

Descartes argued that the success of the ‘cogito’ was down to the fact that it can be grasped clearly and distinctly. How can we know for sure whether something is clear and distinct? Even though Descartes does give some discussion of what he means by ‘clear and distinct’ elsewhere, we might still be left wondering if we really can recognise when a belief we have is clear and distinct. It is surely possible to think that you have identified something clearly and distinctly when in fact you haven’t. Descartes recognises that he himself mistook his own faith in the existence of the external world as clear and distinct when it wasn’t in fact this that was clear and distinct, but simply the ideas in his mind. In *Meditation 1* he spends a lot of time showing how easy it is to be mistaken when making a knowledge claim. Descartes also claims often that man is ‘subject to error’. Therefore, could we be mistaken about having clear and distinct perceptions?

Is the ‘clear and distinct’ rule anything more than just saying that if you are sure about something it must be true?

In order to help guarantee that we can in fact have knowledge based on the ‘clear and distinct’ rule, Descartes brings in his proof for the existence of God. His argument is of this form:

P1: God exists and is good.

P2: A good God would not deceive us into thinking that something is clear and distinct when it is not.

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C: We can therefore trust our intuition about what beliefs are in fact clear and distinct.

This argument leads us to one of the most well know criticisms of the *Meditations*. Descartes appears to use circular reasoning.

### The Cartesian circle

According to Descartes there are certain truths that are so clear, so self-evident that we simply know them to be true. These include the cogito and truths of logic, reason and mathematics. He also believes the idea of God is certain. The problem for Descartes is that he needs God to establish the reliability of reason. To know that God exists in the first place he needs to know that his mind is reliable.

We might think that Descartes’ argument is circular. This means that it assumes to be true what it sets out to prove. To prove that his clear and distinct judgements can be trusted he needs to rely on God’s goodness. To know that God exists he needs to rely on his clear and distinct idea of God. This is circular. Descartes needs some independent proof of one of these to show that the argument works. We can represent it in this way:

### Argument 1

P1: I have a clear and distinct perception of God.

P2: I couldn’t have this idea if God did not exist.

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C: God exists.

### Argument 2

P1: God exists.

P2: God is no deceiver.

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C: I can trust clear and distinct perceptions to provide me with reliable truths.

One defence that Descartes could present would be to say that he does have independent reasons to believe in clear and distinct perceptions based on the cogito. If we accept this then perhaps Descartes’ reasoning is not actually circular. Do you accept this defence?

## Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Before we look at the text of the *Enquiry*, it is again worth pausing a moment to consider the title of Hume’s writings. Hume is looking to investigate human understanding. From this we can see that Hume is concerned with psychology, and the workings of the mind. As we read the *Enquiry* we see that Hume is an empiricist; he believes that the mind is constrained by what it receives from sense experience. It receives experiences, and from these, gains knowledge. We will see that Hume argues that there are no ideas that are not based on experience. Even our knowledge gained through a process of reasoning is to some extent limited by the concepts we learn through our experience of the world.

## Section 2 The origin of ideas – Summary of content

Hume begins section 2 of the *Enquiry* by looking within the mind and tries to distinguish the different entities we find there. He talks of the ‘perceptions of the mind’ and, although he does not clearly define this phrase in the text, it seems reasonable to take him to mean any content which we are aware of within the mind.

### Impressions and ideas

So, for Hume, our perceptions are a kind of thing — not something we do, but something we have. Hume divides these into two categories:

* **impressions** — those perceptions that come directly from our senses, which are the more vivid and lively of our perceptions.
* **ideas** — our memories and our imaginings which are the weaker and less vivid perceptions.

‘Memory and imagination may mimic, or copy the perceptions of the senses, but they can’t create a perception that has as much force and liveliness as the one they are copying.’

Hume uses the example of feeling pain from being burnt, compared with simply remembering that experience, to make clear the distinction in the quality of the two categories of perception. When we feel the pain of being burnt, this is a much stronger and more vivid experience than when we simply recall that event or imagine such an experience. That said, Hume does suggest there may be exceptions to this, which is ‘when the mind is out of order because of disease or madness’. Hume is sometimes criticised by philosophers who give examples of hallucinations which are so vivid that they are taken for real experiences. This may be an issue for Hume and will be discussed in the analysis and evaluation section, but it is worth recognising that Hume has not denied that ideas can, on specific occasions, be as vivid as impressions. Indeed, he makes this clearer in the *Treatise*:

‘The usual degrees of intensity of these are easily distinguished, though there may be particular instances where they come close to one another. Thus, in sleep, in fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may become like our impressions; as on the other hand it sometimes happens that our impressions are so faint and low that we can’t distinguish them from our ideas.’

### Inward impressions

Hume points out that we can also apply the distinction between impressions and ideas to sensations and emotions (inward impressions). We have direct immediate experience of feeling love, or hate, or anger, and this is different from our memory of, or imagining, these feelings. Again, the difference is in the force or liveliness with which we experience them.

### All ideas are based on impressions.

Hume begins to look at the imagination. When we first consider the human imagination, it seems completely boundless. There doesn’t seem to be anything that we can’t create with its powers. The only restriction on it appears to be logic, as we cannot imagine anything that is contradictory. However, on reflection, Hume argues that there are some very specific limits on what we can come up with using the powers of the imagination.

### Simple and complex ideas

At this point in the *Enquiry* Hume simply describes the different ways that we can create complex ideas. However, it is useful to look at some text from the *Treatise* first, because it is there that Hume provides a clear description of the distinction between simple and complex ideas:

‘Another division of our perceptions should be noted; this one cuts across the line between impressions and ideas. It is the division into simple and complex. Simple perceptions — that is simple impressions and ideas — are ones that don’t allow any distinction or separation •[[2]](#footnote-2)among their parts•. Complex perceptions, on the contrary, can be distinguished into parts. Though a particular colour, taste, and smell, are qualities all united together in this apple, it’s easy to perceive that they aren’t the same as one another and can at least be distinguished from each other - •and so one’s total perception of the apple is complex.•’[[3]](#footnote-3)

From this we can take these definitions:

**simple perceptions** — impressions or ideas which cannot be broken down into any separate parts.

**complex perceptions** — impressions or ideas which can be broken down further into distinguishable parts.

Now back to the *Enquiry*; Hume argues that ‘when we look more carefully we’ll find that it (the imagination) is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts merely to the ability to combine (compound), transpose, enlarge (augment), or shrink (diminish) the materials that the senses and experience provide us with.’

So, the four things that imagination can do are:

1. compound (combine)

The imagination takes two or more ideas and puts them together to create a new idea. Hume provides two examples of this: a golden mountain, and a virtuous horse.

### 2. transpose

To ‘transpose’ is to change the position of a thing. We can create with our imaginations all kinds of weird and wonderful creatures by taking a part of one animal and putting it upon another. A hippogriff, or a centaur are such examples. The likes of science fiction movies are abundant in examples.

3. augment (enlarge)

To ‘augment’ is to increase. I can easily imagine a mouse which is the size of a tall building, for example. Augmenting can also mean to magnify a concept or idea or to make bigger by adding to it. Later Hume talks about how we come up with the complex idea of God, by augmenting qualities we see in humans.

**4.** **diminish** (shrink)

To ‘diminish’ is, of course, the opposite of to augment. I can easily have the idea of a tiny elephant — or of an elephant with a barely audible ‘trumpet’.

If Hume is correct, then the imagination is quite limited in what it can do. Firstly, it must have something to work with. In order to create these complex ideas, we need ideas that have come from experience in the first place to create new ones. We can take ideas we have already and add them together, mix them up, change them around in any way we like, but we need some ideas to start off with.

This leads Hume to conclude:

‘All the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward senses or from our inward feelings: all that the mind and will do is mix and combine these materials. Put in philosophical terminology: *all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones*.’

This is the foundation of Hume’s empiricism; the claim that any content of the mind is necessarily based on our experience of the world. Whether an idea is simple or complex , it is based on experience, and can either be a direct copy from that experience, as is the case of simple ideas, or it can have been worked upon in some way, when it comes to complex ideas.

Hume provides his reader with two arguments to convince us of the claim that all our ideas are derived from impressions.

1. All of my most unusual ideas can be traced back to earlier impressions.  
   The first argument Hume presents is an inductive one. He argues that any idea that you can think of, no matter how complex or far from our experience of reality it seems, can always be traced back to component parts which are based on impressions which have been worked on in some of the ways described above. The example Hume gives here is of God, which is a concept far removed from our experience of reality. Hume argues that this idea could be created by augmenting the qualities of intelligence, wisdom, and goodness, and extending them to the infinite. Hume suggests that if the reader doubts his claim then all they need do is to present an idea which is not attributed to other impressions, and his theory will be shown to be false. If Hume wishes to defend his position, he will then have to find the impressions that such an idea is based upon.
2. If I don’t have the impression, then I don’t have the corresponding idea.   
   Hume’s second argument is to show that when the person does not have an impression, then they also don’t have the idea. He argues they will lack the corresponding idea as they have not gained the impression to derive the idea from.

Hume gives three different examples of this:

* 1. Malfunctioning senses  
     Hume gives examples of when the senses have been impaired in some way. He claims that a blind man who has never experienced colour has no concept of what colour is. In the same way, a deaf man will not have any idea of sound. If the sense organs are restored and the blind man sees, then he will then gain the idea of colour, and on gaining his hearing the deaf man will form ideas of sounds.
  2. Absence of relevant experience  
     When someone has never had a particular type of experience, they won’t know what exactly it is like. For example, someone who has never tasted the Scottish treasure that is Irn Bru will not know exactly what it is like. Similarly, though Hume says to a lesser degree, we can see this with inward sensations as well. Someone who is of a kind and gentle nature cannot really form the idea of cruelty and revenge — they find it hard to comprehend. Also, a selfish person may find it hard to understand friendship and giving.
  3. Absence due to species limitations  
     Most people will accept that other non-human animals have senses that we do not, and because we do not have them, we happily accept that we do not know what it is like to experience them. An example of this might be bats that ‘see’ through echolocation — we don’t know what it is like to see in this way.

### The missing shade of blue

Having laid out his position, Hume puts forward a potential challenge to his theory:

‘There is, however, one counterexample that may prove that it is not absolutely impossible for an idea to occur without a **corresponding** impression.’

The phrase ‘without a corresponding impression’ is important here. The missing shade of blue is often mistakenly interpreted as a challenge to Hume’s claim that all ideas come from our experience, or as Hume put it, our impressions. However, it does not necessarily challenge this claim. Rather it is presented by Hume as a case where there seems to be a simple idea that is formed not directly from a ‘corresponding impression’. Hume has suggested that complex ideas are created from the imagination, whilst simple ideas come directly from our experience. This is what the missing shade of blue challenges.

Hume begins by showing why he thinks that shades of colour (or indeed different sounds) must each be a single distinct idea. He does this using a *reductio ad absurdum* ‘proof’. He takes the opposite possible claim that shades of colour are each the same idea and reduces the claim to absurdity to show that it cannot be possible.

If we were to assume, he argues, that all shades of colour have the same idea, then ‘we can create a continuous gradation of shades, running from red at one end to green at the other, with each member of the series shading imperceptibly into its neighbour. If the immediate neighbours in the sequence are not different from one another, then red is not different from green, which is absurd.’

### The thought experiment

Having shown that each different shade of colour must be a discrete idea, Hume goes on to present his counterexample.

Hume asks the reader to imagine a man who has good vision, who has experienced in his life many colours, including all but one singular shade of blue. Hume suggests that were this man presented with all the shades of blue before him, with each blending from the lightest shade to the darkest, but without the missing shade included, this man would be able to do the following:

1. He would notice that there was a slight jump between the shade before and after the missing shade, and would notice that there should be another shade in between them.
2. He would be able to imagine the missing shade, creating an idea of the shade in his mind, even though he had never seen it (that is, had an impression of it) previously.

The conclusion that Hume comes to is this ‘simple ideas are not always, in every instance, derived from corresponding impressions’.

Hume also argues that given that this is a ‘singular’ example, we should not discard the general rule because of it.

### The philosophical application of the claim that there are no ideas without impressions.

Hume goes on to explain ways that he thought we could use the claim that all our ideas are gained through our impressions. Hume claims that a lot of philosophy has been dominated with a lot of nonsensical jargon. The reasons he thinks this has occurred are these:

1. Abstract ideas are obscure, and the mind finds it hard to fully grasp them.
2. It is easy to confuse one idea with other similar ideas and get them muddled in our minds.
3. People naturally believe that if we have used a word a lot, then it must have a specific meaning within it.

Hume hopes that his principle might help to avoid this in future. He argues that in contrast to ideas, impressions are **1**) naturally vivid and strong, **2**) easily distinguished from each other, and **3**) it is not easy to make mistakes about them.

Because of this, Hume suggests that, whenever we do come across an idea or philosophical concept that we think is meaningless, then we should simply try to work out what impression the idea has been drawn from. If we cannot find any impression from which the idea has been derived, we can safely assume that the concept is indeed nonsensical.

## Section 2 The origin of ideas – Analysis and evaluation

### All Ideas come from impressions

To begin, it is worth looking at some of the successes of Hume’s theory. Firstly, we might be quite convinced by his claim that all ideas come from impressions. It does seem impossible to think of an idea that is not based on an earlier impression, or involves using one of the processes of the imagination that Hume describes. Even the most weird and wonderful things you can imagine seem to have some basis in impressions that you have gained from the world — unicorns, centaurs, ogres, giants, etc.

Looking at Hume’s arguments, it seems very plausible that a person who has been blind from birth would not have an understanding, or idea of colour. One might wonder what they would base that on. Indeed, studies have been done researching blind people’s dreams —they suggest that nothing visual is experienced, but instead they tend to be centred around sounds, smells and touch sensations. Does this mean that a blind man really has no **notion** of colour? Maybe they have a notion of colour to do with temperature or touch? One might argue that Hume’s claim is impossible to test, as we would lack the appropriate vocabulary to really discuss this with a blind person. Given that no one is able fully to know what another person’s experience is like, we cannot know whether a blind person would hold such a concept or not, even if we might think that Hume’s argument is inherently plausible without the ability to test it.

A challenge that has been raised against Hume is that his theory seems to view impressions and ideas simply as though they are images that are initially clear and vivid and then fade with time. But is an idea really an image? Sometimes we have ideas or concepts without a corresponding ‘picture’ in our heads. What about the idea of justice, for example? It is not clear that we have any direct impression of **justice**, or other abstract ideas like **knowledge**, **truth**, **beauty**. It seems reasonable to think these ideas are meaningful, as we can discuss and debate them in great depth and detail. If we have not experienced them, then it is hard to see where they come from. Hume could argue that they are complex ideas and so are not themselves directly experienced but are based on simple ideas which come from experience. If that is so, then it seems fair to ask what simple ideas they are built upon and that seems hard to establish.

A rationalist could argue that such concepts as **justice** are innate within us, but Hume does not think this is a possibility. If Hume were to argue that it is a meaningful idea, then perhaps this is because we have experienced justice, or injustice, being executed in some way or another, and we have worked out the concepts using our imagination. Is this a reasonable explanation? Hume elsewhere in his discussions on morality describes his theory that concepts like justice arise from our sentiments, and are not reflections of any innate idea nor are they outward impressions of objects present in the world. It would then be reasonable to describe justice as an inward impression we have when we experience certain events. Is this a satisfying explanation?

### Impressions are lively and vivid — ideas are less so.

What about Hume’s qualitative distinction between actual experiences (impressions) and memories or imaginings (ideas)? He says impressions are vivid and strong, whilst ideas are necessarily less so. Is this really the case? Have you ever had such powerful memories of events and places that they seem of greater strength even than the original experience? What about dreams and nightmares — these can be incredibly vivid, much more so than the impression of being in bed asleep! How much of an issue is this? Hume recognises in writing that there are occasions when our ideas are so vivid as to be difficult to distinguish from real impressions. He says this is so when the mind is disordered by disease or madness. But is this the only case? Dreams are a normal functioning of a healthy brain when we are asleep, and they can most certainly seem as vivid as real experiences. So much so, that the memory of a vivid dream can leave us later questioning if it really was a dream, or something that happened in the past. However, we usually do know when we are experiencing the world and when we are not. So, is this problematic for Hume? Well, it might be. The fact is that, as an empiricist, Hume wants to claim that all our knowledge comes from experience and he also wants us to use this to rid us of meaningless ideas that don’t seem obviously based on experiences. If there is a doubt about what is real and what is not then this is a problem for Hume, the empiricist. Think of Descartes’ *Meditation 1* and the dreaming argument, and the issues this raises!

### The missing shade of blue

Hume seems here to give his own example of a case of having an idea without an impression and this might seem to be particularly damning. A counterexample is generally used to show how universal claims cannot be true. If Hume has found a counterexample to his own theory, then should he not abandon it altogether, or at least try to modify it to accommodate this counterexample? However, as was mentioned in the commentary this is not obviously a counterexample to the claim that all ideas are based on impressions. After all, Hume is saying that the man must have had experience of the other shades of blue to be able to imagine the colour. It seems to be a case where we have used our imagination to create a simple idea, when usually Hume claims that we get these directly from the corresponding impressions, and normally it is complex ideas that are created by the imagination. It is not clear that this is such a problem for Hume.

Some may argue in Hume’s defence that in fact we cannot imagine the missing shade of blue! Maybe it is not actually possible! In that case, Hume has opened the can of worms unnecessarily.

Hume dismisses his counterexample because he thinks it is only a singular objection, but many philosophers have suggested you could imagine other possible cases wherever we take a quality that can be scaled (missing notes in a scale, missing sweetness in taste, etc). Although this is the case, it does not seem that Hume was unaware of the fact. He talks of the missing shade of blue as a ‘class’ of examples and he mentions different sounds in the early introduction to his argument, so we might think that he recognises there might be several similar types of cases with any form of scale. Does it make it more of a problem, is the question we might ask? It probably depends on how many other similar types of examples we think there are.

### Other points for discussion

In presenting his theory, Hume has ruled out the possibility of innate ideas, but what if we have some? Carl Jung, a famous psychologist, argued that humans hold in their psyche from birth a ‘collective unconscious’ which we inherit from our ancestors. It is the reservoir of our experiences as a species (possibly passed on through our genes and in a way holds the history of these genes through the generations). There is some limited evidence in science that genes can pass on learnt aversions to offspring. Studies in psychology have shown that some animals can be taught to be averse to a taste or smell, and this changes the animal’s genes such that the aversion is passed on to its offspring. This is an instinct rather than an idea that is being passed to the next generation, so there is a clear difference. However, it might be taken as evidence of the possibility that other information may also be passed on through the genes, and this could account for the possibility of a person holding an idea that is not based on experience (or at least their own experience) of the world.

There is also no guarantee that the external world is responsible for impressions. Hume is subject to one of the main criticisms of empiricism — how can we trust that the senses relate to the real world? This ties in with the issue raised by our ‘vivid dreams’. Also, as Descartes points out, the senses have in the past deceived us, so when do we know when to trust them, even if we take them to generally be reliable?

## Section 4 Sceptical doubts about the operations of the understanding – Summary of content

### Part 1 The distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact

Hume begins this section by distinguishing and defining two types of knowledge that he believes cover all knowledge it is possible for us to have.

We can, he says, have knowledge of:

* relations of ideas
* matters of fact

For Hume, relations of ideas are *a priori* and analytic, whilst matters of fact are *a posteriori* and synthetic.

|  |
| --- |
| A proposition is **analytic** if it is true or false just in virtue of the meanings of the words.  A proposition is **synthetic** if it is not analytic, that is, it is true or false not just in virtue of the meanings of the words, but in virtue of the way the world is.  A proposition is true ***a priori*** if it can be known without reference to experience.  A proposition is true ***a posteriori*** if we must refer to experience to know that it is true. |

### Relations of ideas

Hume tells us that a relation of ideas is ‘either intuitively or demonstratively certain’. There are two ways in which we may come to know relations of ideas: through intuition, or through demonstration.

If we know something by intuition, we can take this to mean that it is self-evidently true.

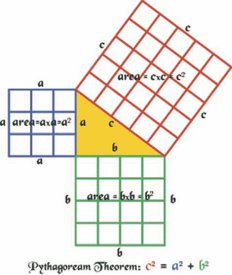
Here are some examples of things we might know intuitively are true:

* anything that has shape has size
* either today is Tuesday or it isn’t
* nothing can be bigger than itself
* an object cannot be bigger than all its parts combined
* the shortest distance between two points is a straight line

Some relations of ideas are demonstratively certain, which means that we can work out that they are true. Hume points out that geometry, algebra and arithmetic deal in knowledge which, if not intuitively certain, is demonstratively certain.

An example is Pythagoras’s theorem:

‘the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides’. This image represents a demonstration of this truth.



As Hume puts it:

‘Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would for ever retain their certainty and evidence.’

### Matters of fact

Knowledge of matters of fact is always *a posteriori* and synthetic. We gain it by using observation of the world. The foundation of this knowledge is what we experience here and now, or can remember experiencing. All matters of fact are also contingently true — this means they could have been false.

Hume points out that ‘the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it doesn't imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind as easily and clearly as if it conformed perfectly to reality’. Although grass is often green, I can easily imagine a world where grass is never green and is blue or red. There is no logical contradiction in doing so, and so the claim that grass is green is a contingent truth that could logically be false.

Having made these distinctions, Hume asks what gives people grounds for accepting as true those facts about the world that have not been verified by their own current experience or their memories of experiences in the past. That is to ask why do we have faith in facts about the world that go beyond our own experiences of the world?

### Why is it necessary to study the relation of cause and effect?

‘All reasonings about matters of fact seem to be based on the relation of cause and effect, which is the only relation that can take us beyond the evidence of our memory and senses.’

Hume argues that any beliefs that we have about the world that are not directly observed by us are based on a faith in the notion of cause and effect. He gives three examples of how this occurs:

1. Take a person who believes the claim ‘My friend is in France right now’ to be true. This claim is a ‘matter of fact’, as it is not known *a priori*, nor is it intuitively nor demonstratively certain. However, the person believing this claim has not seen their friend in France. They have not directly experienced the fact that their friend is in France. They believe this because their friend told them they were going to France, or because they received a letter from their friend. The assumption that the person is making is that the letter which arrived in the post was caused to be there by a chain of events which must have started with their friend being in France and writing the letter.
2. A person is on a desert island and they find a watch. They conclude that there have been other people there before them. Their thinking is that watches are worn by people, and that the cause of the watch being there is some other person having been there previously and dropped it.
3. Someone in a darkened room hears a voice, and having spoken with them rationally they conclude that there is some other person in the room with them and talking to them. Again, the assumption is that such conversation can only be caused by another person being there, even though we have not directly seen the person there.

Hume comments that, even though the causal chains of reasoning may be of varying lengths, one always seems to be the basis for our reasoning around any matter of fact that we accept to be true even when we have not actually experienced the matter of fact itself. This does not always have to be a direct line of causes, as we can also infer from events that have shared causation, for example when we see light, and assume there will be heat because we assume the source of the light is a fire.

Based on the above examples, Hume reasons that, if we are to understand our faith in these kinds of matters of fact which we have not experienced, we must understand the basis for our belief in cause and effect.

### Cause and effect is not known *a priori*

Hume goes on to present reasons why he thinks that cause and effect are not known *a priori*:

‘I venture to assert, as true without exception, that knowledge about causes is never acquired through a priori reasoning, and always comes from our experience of finding particular objects are constantly associated with one other.’

Hume’s first reason for this claim is that, when a person encounters a completely new object or event that he has never experienced before, he will not know what the causes or effects of that object are, just by reasoning around it.

### Adam – a practical application of the claim

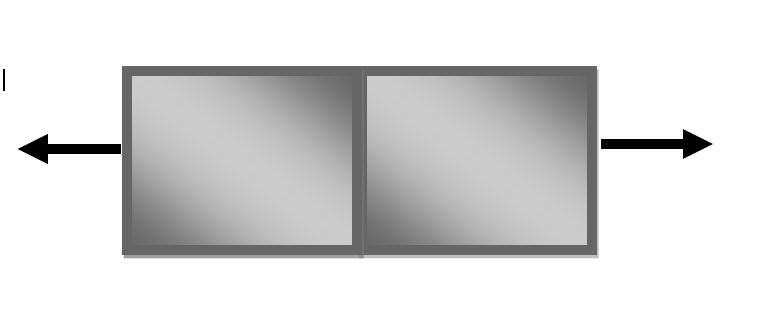
Hume gives an example to exemplify this claim. Adam, the first man in the biblical stories, would not be able to work out that water would drown him just by seeing its clear, colourless nature. Nor would Adam be able to tell that fire would burn him, without directly experiencing these effects.

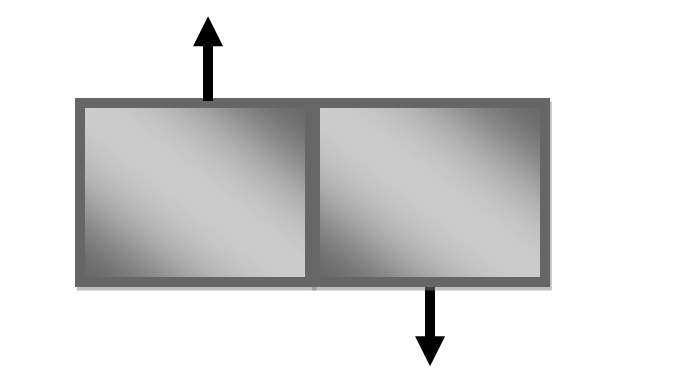
In summary, Hume claims ‘the qualities of an object that appear to the senses never reveal the causes that produced the object or the effects that it will have’. What he is saying is that, just by observing certain qualities that an object has, we cannot work out where it came from nor what effect it will have on anything else.

### Three examples where people would agree with the claim

Usually, Hume observes, people are happy to accept the claim that the causes and effects of an object are not possible to work out using reason. The following are examples of the kinds of instances where this is so:

1. When people can remember a time when they did not understand the way an object works, they are usually happy to agree that they did not know it by using reason alone. An example of this that Hume gives is of two smooth pieces of marble. Two smooth pieces of marble will be difficult to separate by pulling each piece directly away from the other. But it is relatively easy to slide each away from the other along their sides. See the diagrams below.

 Very hard to do.

Relatively easy to do.

1. Events which are particularly unusual and not like the normal course of nature are also events which we usually accept we don’t understand the causes and effects of by using our reason. The examples Hume gives are of gunpowder and magnets. We don’t normally believe we could know or understand the effects or causes of gunpowder or magnets using our reason alone, because we may still be surprised by them and, even though we have experienced them before, we may not expect them to work in the way they do.
2. The third example Hume gives is when something is quite complex, or has parts that we don’t know of. The example Hume gives is of bread and milk. He says that we attribute our understanding that milk and bread are nourishing to humans and not to tigers down to our experience of them being so. We don’t know that they will have these effects until they are experienced.

### Three examples of where people find the claim difficult to accept

Having identified cases where people are happy to agree that their understanding of the causes and effects of an object are known not by reason alone, Hume then identifies cases where people seem not to accept this claim. These are:

1. When we have become completely accustomed to a certain type of event throughout our lives.
2. When the event is one that is like most other events in nature.
3. And finally, when the event is of something simple which does not have any hidden parts or complexities that we are unaware of.

Hume states that, often when we become accustomed to certain types of events and they seem very straightforward to us to observe, we start to assume that we could predict their causes and effects using reason alone, even if we had never experienced them before. He gives the example of billiard balls (think snooker or pool balls). We might imagine that we could know using reason alone that, when one billiard ball struck another, this would necessarily make the other ball move. Hume wants to convince us that we cannot predict this behaviour using reason. He asks the reader to imagine they were shown something they had never encountered before, and were asked what the effect of it was. Surely, he suggests, they would have to arbitrarily come up with some answer using their imagination, and there could be any number of possible effects that could be entertained.

As Hume puts it:

‘The mind can’t possibly find the effect in the supposed cause, however carefully we examine it, for the effect is totally different from the cause and therefore can never be discovered in it.’

Hume expands on this claim with two examples:

1. Going back to the billiard balls, the movement of the first ball is entirely separate from the movement of the second ball. As such, we cannot reason from the movement of the first to assume the second would necessarily act in the same way.
2. Equally, letting go of a stone one is holding in mid-air, does not logically mean that it would have to fall downwards, or fall at all. It is equally logical to consider the possibility of it going upwards or sideways, or staying motionless. All are logical possibilities for the event and so, using reason alone, we cannot work out what will happen.

### We cannot discover the necessity of the effect a priori

Not only can we not know what the effect of an object/event will be using reason, we also cannot know using reason that any cause must **necessarily** have a particular effect either:

‘Just as the first imagining or inventing of a particular effect is arbitrary if it isn’t based on experience, the same holds for the supposed tie or connection between cause and effect — the tie that binds them together and makes it impossible for that cause to have any effect but that one.’

What does Hume mean by this? His point is that we often take it to be true that, having seen an event happen once, we assume that the way it occurs, the cause and the effect, is necessary. We believe that, when I drop a stone it **must** fall to the ground — that this is necessarily the case, as this was the effect of this event. Similarly, when the billiard ball strikes another, we think that it must cause the other ball to move. We take cause and effect to be by necessity, but this is not something we can know by reason. If we can’t work out using reason what the effect would be of an unknown event, then we also cannot know using reason that the effect must necessarily occur. Why does Hume think this is so? This is because we can imagine any number of effects occurring; and we can imagine that these effects could be different each time an event occurred, so our reason does not tell us that there is necessarily one outcome.

### A summary of Hume’s position so far

‘In short, every effect is a distinct event from its cause. So, it can’t be discovered in the cause, and the first invention or conception of it a priori must be wholly arbitrary. Furthermore, even after it has been suggested, the linking of it with the cause must still appear as arbitrary, because plenty of other possible effects must seem just as consistent and natural from reason’s point of view. So, there isn’t the slightest hope of reaching any conclusions about causes and effects without the help of experience.’

Ultimately, if we want to know about causes and effects we need to look to experience.

In a final defence of this position, Hume dismisses the work of scientists and applied mathematicians as evidence that we can use reason to give us information about cause and effect. He argues that the general rules which we may use to predict events are based on evidence which we have gained first from experience, and our predictions involve a lot of assumptions about the uniformity of nature, amongst other things. If we had no relevant experience prior to creating the laws, we would be unable to make any such predictions using our reason alone.

### Part 2 It is not enough to say our reasonings about matters of fact are based on experience

The initial question Hume asked near the start of section 4 was ‘what is the basis for our reasonings about matters of fact?’ He wants to understand on what basis we accept as true matters of fact which we have not directly experienced, such as the claim that ‘my friend is in France’, or that ‘someone was on this desert island before me’. He presented reason to say that this was based on cause and effect. From here, Hume discusses where our understanding of cause and effect comes from. In the course of section 4 part 1, he has ruled out the possibility that cause and effect come from *a priori* reasoning, and has instead shown that experience must have a role to play. However, Hume does not think this is going to be enough, because we can still ask ‘what are inferences from experience based on?’ Hume is really asking: ‘Why and how do we move from “this is what is happening here and now” to “this is what happens generally”?’

### The problem of induction

You learn about inductive reasoning in the Arguments in Action unit. Inductive reasoning often involves looking at past events and using them to form a conclusion about the future. This could be to say that the sun will rise tomorrow because it rose every day up until now; or that, when a billiard ball is hit by another ball it will always move away from the point it was struck, because, when we have observed it moving previously, it has followed this same pattern.

The assumption that seems to be behind such reasoning is that similar causes have similar effects, and so the future will be like the past. It also means that we assume that events elsewhere that we haven’t experienced will be like events we have already experienced. Hume gives the example of bread. We don’t know why it is that bread is nourishing, we only know from experience that it has been in the past. Even though we do not know if bread will nourish us again in the future, we assume that it will and happily ‘experiment’, as Hume puts it, with eating bread-like substances on a regular basis. But why do we assume that the bread will continue to do this? There is nothing observable in the event itself that tells us that another future bread-like substance will be nourishing. Nonetheless, Hume observes we clearly do move from the fact that bread was once nourishing to conclude that bread will be nourishing again in the future and indeed perhaps that it will always be nourishing.

Hume argues that we cannot draw these inferences about cause and effect using reasoning. He has several arguments for why he thinks this.

Hume points out that we move from the proposition that ‘I have found that such and such an object has always had such and such an effect’ to the claim that ‘I foresee that other objects which appear similar will have similar effects’. In standard form we might present the argument like this:

P1: In the past, such and such an object has always had such and such an effect.

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C: In the future similar objects to this one will have similar effects.

What reason do we have for accepting this argument? Hume claims that the conclusion does not intuitively follow from the premise — it is not self-evident that this would be the case. If it is not intuitively drawn from the premise, then there must be some intermediate claim or claims (a hidden premise or premises) that have been left unstated which ties the conclusion to the first claim. So far as we know, no one has come up with an explanation of what the intermediate stage of thinking is and so we might doubt that there could be any additional reasoning involved.

### Our belief in the necessity of cause and effect is not a relation of ideas

To further support his claim that the belief in cause and effect is not *a priori*, Hume points out that it is not a necessary truth, as are the relations of ideas that are known through reasoning. We have not drawn it from a process of logical demonstration. If we had, then it would not be possible to imagine the opposite of a cause and effect being true. Hume claims that the course of nature could be utterly different from how it is, and this would not be logically contradictory. He gives several examples here. He points out that we can imagine that snow tastes salty or that it feels hot. We can imagine the seasons being completely different to how they normally are. Nothing about these causes and effects being totally different from the way we normally find them is inconceivable, and so it cannot be a truth that can be demonstrated through logical reasoning.

### Reasoning based on matters of fact

What if the reasoning we are using is based on a matter of fact? Hume argues that any reasoning that we might draw from our experience to conclude that cause and effect exist in a particular way must surely be circular.

Look at the inference that Hume believes we are making:

P1: In the past, such and such an object has always had such and such an effect.

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C: In the future similar objects to this one will have similar effects.

What underlying assumption might we be basing this principle on that we have gained from experience? Perhaps the fact that ‘In the past other similar causes have had similar effects’.

This reasoning is circular — if we point out the possibility that the future may not resemble the past, then the fact that the past has previously resembled the future does not help us to be sure that it will continue to hold for future futures! The future may not be regular, and laws of nature may change, gravity may stop causing things to fall to the ground when released in mid-air, and snow may begin to taste salty, bread may become poisonous and billiard balls may not move when struck. This is the problem of induction — we have no independent reason to take inductive reasoning to be reliable, other than the fact that it has previously been reliable. This is circular.

Although Hume seems to be making a most extreme and controversial claim when he says we have no rational basis for trusting in our beliefs about cause and effect, he does not deny that he will himself continue to trust in these very beliefs. In fact, his very point is simply that he does continue to have faith in them daily. Whenever Hume (and he thinks everyone else as well) is deciding how to act day to day, he acts with complete faith in his belief that events have consistent and necessary effects, which can be reasonably predicted. What he is trying to understand is why it is that we are inclined to believe this when there is no logical argument that he can conceive of that would justify this belief.

### Maybe the relevant argument has not been uncovered yet

Hume points out that it is of course possible that he simply has not managed to work out the right logical argument for this belief in causation, and perhaps it may still be uncovered in the future. However, he doubts that this could be the case:

‘this is unlikely since those with little or no learning also draw conclusions from experience so if it was going to be a process of reasoning it should be simple and easy to identify.’

Given that young children, the uneducated and even animals seem to draw conclusions based on past experiences of cause and effect, and therefore believe that similar events will have similar effects in the future, we might believe that the reasoning, if there is any, would be very simple. If we still are unable to explain what the reasoning involved is, then we might suppose that there is no such reasoning involved. This leads back to Hume’s previous claim which was:

‘I venture to assert, as true without exception, that knowledge about causes is never acquired through a priori reasoning, and always comes from our experience of finding particular objects are constantly associated with one other.’

Hume goes on to argue why he holds that our beliefs about cause and effect are gained through constant conjunctions of events being associated with one another later in the *Enquiry*. His position is that we draw the inference from cause to effect without reasoning or argument, but on the basis of a principle of the ‘imagination’ — custom — that has bound the two ideas — of the cause and of the effect — together in our minds. Custom is an instinct of the mind, a disposition we simply have because of experience of constant conjunction. When we experience something that has been a cause in the past (one billiard ball striking another), we believe that its usual effect is about to occur. Without custom, we would be unable to draw causal inferences. Without causal inference, we have no knowledge of anything beyond what is immediately present to our senses, or we remember being so.

## Section 4 Sceptical doubts about the operations of the understanding – Analysis and evaluation

### Hume’s fork

Hume claimed that we can divide knowledge into two categories, matters of fact and relations of ideas. Relations of ideas provide certainty because they are either intuitively or demonstrably true. Matters of fact, on the other hand, are contingently true. Hume argues that any knowledge claims that don’t fall into these categories are not meaningful and can be cast aside. However, philosophers have challenged Hume, asking what basis he has for this claim. Does Hume’s Fork pass his own criteria? It is neither a relation of ideas, nor a matter of fact! Kant also challenges the claim that there are only ever analytic *a priori* truths. He thought that we could have some synthetic *a priori* truths. Examples of this are when scientists use their knowledge from experience of the world and their reason to predict events in the future. For example, we might predict the date and time of a solar eclipse before it happens. If we do this, then we might say we know when this will happen, but we have not yet experienced the event. It is not a necessary, analytic truth, that is true by virtue of the meaning of the terms that ‘A solar eclipse will take place at such and such a day and time’. This is a synthetic truth; but it is also known before experiencing the event, which makes it *a priori*. Kant also thought our knowledge that every effect has a cause was such a synthetic, *a priori* truth.

Is Kant correct to suggest that we ‘know’ that an event in the future will occur?

### Causation

Hume argues that our knowledge of causation is not based on reason, but necessarily requires experience of the world. He shows the reader that they will usually accept this claim, giving three cases which demonstrate this point, and he seems to be able to account for why we sometimes do dismiss this, assuming that we can judge causes using our reason. So, we may be inclined to agree with Hume that knowledge of causation is not based on *a priori* reasoning.

### Inferences from experience — the problem of induction

He then puts forward the claim that we can never fully justify, using reason, our faith in the inferences from experience of cause and effect. Again, his arguments are compelling, and it does seem that there is a gap in our reasoning such that we can never truly justify trusting in our judgements about cause and effect. One of the most significant of these arguments is what has now been called ‘the problem of induction’. Repeated attempts have been made since Hume first published his argument to try to refute his case. Although many philosophers have tried to tackle this problem, there is no clear refutation of Hume’s claims.

One strong case is provided by the philosopher Karl Popper. What Popper does is side step the problem by accepting Hume’s position to an extent. He acknowledges that the problem of induction exists, but argues that ultimately it is not how science works to find information about the world, including knowledge of cause and effect. Popper thought that Hume had misunderstood how the scientific process works. Although induction is somewhat relevant, it is not the whole story. Perhaps we can forgive Hume for this because science as we know it today was still a relatively new discipline in his day, so if he did not fully understand it, this is not entirely his fault. We now know that scientific research goes far beyond a simple repetitive experiment that is intended to find general truths by a process of induction.

The scientific process, according to Popper, is more about a process of trial and error than inductive reasoning. When we conduct experiments, we do so knowing that the future may not always resemble the past. What we are doing is testing assumptions that we have, knowing that they may need to adapt and change as we gain new information. So, instead of inducing general claims from many instances, we should see scientific propositions as attempts at finding answers, knowing that we will probably often find the proposition to be wrong, and as a result we will reconstruct our proposition to get us closer to the truth.

How successful is Popper’s criticism? It does help to deal with the challenge against inductive reasoning, but it is not clear that underlying this scientific process there is not still an assumption that there is some general rule that is governing causes and effects that goes beyond the single observation. Hume might still ask why we should start with any assumptions at all based on the previous observations, given that there is no logical reason to believe they are more likely to occur than some other outcome.

### Habit and custom

The explanation Hume gives for why we draw inferences from our experience to the future is that from constantly seeing events together, we come to associate them together. This is a habit of the mind. Hume goes on to compare the reason of animals to that of humans to justify this position. Hume’s conclusions would have been seen as controversial in his day, as he was suggesting human psychology is just like all other animals, which went against the thinking that we were unique and special, but it was later supported by the findings of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. However, there are reasons to think that human psychology is more complex than Hume suggests,. It is not always the case that constant conjunction yields a belief in necessary connection. We also seem to be able to draw inferences about causes from single observations — eg food poisoning.

1. The full extracts are included in the non-mandatory extracts for the course. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Small •dots• enclose material that has been added by Jonathan Bennett, but which is intended to be read as though it were part of the original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Treatise of Human Nature, Book 1 David Hume 1739. Copyright © Jonathan Bennett 2017. All rights reserved [↑](#footnote-ref-3)