

Hume's "General Point of View" and Descartes' "Clear and Distinct Perception"

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Introduction

Hume's philosophy is permeated by multiple layers of influences and confrontations with Cartesian theories. He was not only directly influenced by Descartes own writings, but by many Cartesian and anti-Cartesian philosophers including Hobbes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Locke.¹ In particular, the theory of the external body features the final stage in the epistemology of both Descartes and Hume. It is certain, however, that Cartesian influences on Hume are mostly negative in the sense that Hume attempts to replace the Cartesian theory to establish a kind of science different from Descartes. Most fundamentally, Hume's theory is centred on perceptions, while Descartes' central principle of recognition is reason.

Hume and Descartes share a similar concern regarding the standard of truth; Descartes attempts to establish the standard of true knowledge, while Hume attempts to establish the standard of true belief. Hume replaces the Cartesian system of true knowledge with his system of true belief. The Cartesian clear and distinct recognition and the Humean general point of view represent respectively the standard of true knowledge and true belief, in accordance with the difference of their destinations. The difference between Descartes and Hume is clearly shown in their theories of external body. This paper highlights Hume's modification of Descartes by arguing that the general point of view can be understood as a device for producing the perception of external objects, signified by Hume to be the natural perception of human beings. Don Garrett calls the "Separability Principle" Hume's principle that "whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination". The "Separability Principle" can be clarified as the principle for establishing external objects, and it can be understood as the Humean alternative to the Cartesian principle of existence.

1 . The Cartesian Standard of Truth

Let us consider Descartes' theory of the knowledge of external bodies, and see why and how it starts from the Cogito. Descartes is indisputably a foundationalist. He is unequivocal about the aim of his philosophy: to establish the most certain foundation of all knowledge. He declares that:

Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable. (AT VII 24; CSM II 16) ²

Thus by his methodological doubt, Descartes seeks the foundation of certain knowledge. As a result, he reaches the celebrated conclusion that "I am, I exist" is the truth that is beyond the most rigid doubt.³ Descartes argues that "the I" can only be a thinking substance, and he defines "the I" as "A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (AT VII 28; CMS II 19).⁴ However, it is important to note that the exposition of the self itself was not Descartes' final concern. His purpose is to present a standard for true knowledge. Therefore, he decidedly argues that "cogito ergo sum" cannot be doubted in the least.⁵ It needs to be noted that Descartes does not discover the existence of the Cogito proposition. Rather, for the first time he proposes the Cogito as the true foundation of all knowledge. Therefore, in the first instance, the Cogito proposition is the only certain knowledge that can be obtained. But his enquiry does not end here. Descartes needs to show that he can deduce all other knowledge from the foundation. Thus he needs to demonstrate the existence of God, which guarantees the deduction of science from a foundation of certitude.

The problem of circularity, that is the allegation that Descartes asserts the necessity of recognising an existing God in order to attain true knowledge, which is the outcome of the clear perception, but he uses clear perception as a means to establish the existence of God, has been one of the fundamental problems in understanding Descartes. Commentators have raised many questions about this matter.⁶ It is important to understand that the existence of God is necessary for Descartes to make clear and distinct perception

function as the standard of truth.⁷ The Cartesian Cogito does not mean the merely factual proposition that "I exist". It more explicitly means that it is an example of certain knowledge. Further significant implications are buried in this assertion, and Descartes extends the standard of clear and distinct perception to other propositions beyond the Cogito. After establishing the existence of God, clear and distinct perception becomes the basis for additional knowledge which is also granted by God. The possibility that clear and distinct perception is not true may be conceived only if almighty God is a deceiver which is impossible. Therefore, Descartes establishes by means of his reference of God that clearness and distinctness as the standard of truth.⁸

As revealed in the criticism of Leibniz, Descartes understands that clear and distinct perception is not in itself enough for the condition of truth.⁹ Thorough doubt admits the possibility that a demon may deceive him into believing false knowledge as true. Descartes' discussion of God has the aim of answering this problem of whether clear and distinct perception is true. By establishing the existence of God, he can be assured that the principle of clear and distinct recognition is true. This implies that there can be no guarantee of the truth of clear and distinct recognition by any human faculty. The possible falsity of clear and distinct recognition is that the reality does not correspond to the recognition. Because God is veracious, he must guarantee that clear and distinct recognition corresponds to reality. On the other hand, if clear and distinct recognition is false, by which is meant that there is no exact correspondence between the mind and the world, it is because of the use of free will which is a deliberate disregard for clear and distinct perception. In both attaining and failing to attain the truth, Descartes shows that clearness and distinctness can be the ultimate criterion of truth accessible to the human mind. In this way, Descartes attempts to establish that clear and distinct recognition is different from a subjective conviction. The Cogito thesis can expand the meaning of truth as endorsed by the veracity of God. Therefore, the Cartesian God has a significant role to play in his system. Because of the link between truth and God, indubitable perception is good and unailing as a basis for the natural sciences.

After discussing the validity of theoretical perception, Descartes attempts to establish the existence of the external world. According to Descartes,

because the existence of the mind is self-evident, it is different from the existence of the body. This means that the existence of body must be established differently. Precisely because material things are different from the mind which is self-evident, their existence cannot be demonstrated to be the product of clear and distinct perception. Here, Descartes resorts to God, who is almighty and veracious, and is capable of making things exist as we recognise clearly and distinctly. Descartes says:

Because I know that all that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God as I understand it, it is enough that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another, for me to be certain that one is different apart from another, because they can be placed apart at least by God; and it does not matter by which power this is done, in order for us to judge them to be different; and thus, from this very fact, that I know I exist, and that meanwhile I notice things, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this one [thing] that I am a thinking thing. (AT VII 78; CSM II 54)

Based on this principle, Descartes explains the "*distinctio realis*" (real distinction) (AT VIII 28; CSM I 213) between mind and body. Thus body can exist as far as he recognises it with the clarity of mathematical truth. It is external to the human mind. In this way, Descartes shows the possibility of the existence of the external world as extension, as the object of mathematical understanding.

Using his notions of the Cogito and God, Descartes attempts to demonstrate the existence of the external world. Descartes' demonstration of the existence of external objects depends on the existence of mind and the veracity of God. He identifies "ideas" as the material of thinking. Because the mind is a purely thinking substance, it contains no external material. Therefore, the representational content or what he calls "*realitas objective*" (objective reality) (AT VII 167; CSM II 118) must have its cause somewhere.¹⁰ Descartes observes that nature has given us a "great propensity" to believe in the existence of the external world through the working of sensation and imagination. The cause cannot be the mind itself, because mind is clearly and distinctly distinguished from the body, the

perception of which is passive and involuntary. The cause cannot be God, because it would make God a deceiver. Therefore, the bodies must exist as the cause of the perceptions of them. In other words, Descartes concludes that we must recognise that the external world exists, in so far as it is the cause of our clear and distinct recognition.

In this way, Descartes deduces the recognition of the external world by reasoning. As a negative consequence of this reasoning, Descartes separates every quality of human sensations from external objects, which is later named by Boyle and others as secondary qualities. The de-animation of physical objects was a conclusion that Descartes required in order to establish a new science. For Descartes, the existence of external bodies is the least certain of the clear and distinct perceptions. Therefore, it behoves us to examine Hume's alteration of this theory of the existence of external bodies.

2 . Hume's Concept of "Existence"

Hume discusses the existence of external objects after the discussion of causation. He begins his discussion with his trademark question, asking whether or not we have impressions corresponding to their existence. Hume is confident when he states that "So far from there being any distinct impression, attending every impression and every idea, that I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd" (T 1.2.6.3; SBN 66).¹¹ Hume, however, is making not an ontological but an epistemic claim: our perception of existence is no different from other perceptions. There is no other means for us to reach existence other than via perceptions. Hume says,

Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd (T 1.2.6.8; SBN 67-68).

This is virtually a declaration that unlike Descartes Hume will not go from ideas to existence, and confines his theory to the boundary of perceptions.

Hume holds that impressions of sensations arise "in the soul originally, from unknown causes" (T 1.1.2.1; SBN 7). Hume's problem is not to deduce real existence from ideas, but to explain the perception of external existence. He transfers the problem from "what is out of the mind" to "how perceptions create what is out there". For Hume, perception is a fundamental given. Hume's is not a causal theory, nor is it a representative theory which supposes the objects of perception to exist independently of perceptions. What matters for us in our common life is not the ontological constitution of existence, but the perception of existing things. Hume tries to explain what it is that we believe to exist.

Usually, ordinary people - the Humean "vulgar" - think that things exist outside of their minds. Perception is naturally taken to be about something external. However, from the Humean perspective, perceptions constitute the mind. Hume begins from a philosophical premise and proceeds to show how the final construction is produced, the latter being something which is already at hand. Hume's task is to explain, from the given facts, the real nature of the concept of existence. How it is that we come to entertain the concept of existence as we do, though we in fact have only perceptions. First Hume needs to indicate the nature of the problem itself. He says,

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. Generally speaking we do not suppose them specifically different; but only attribute to them different relations, connexions and durations. (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68)

This shows that Hume's objective is not to argue for or against the existence of the external objects, but to explain how our idea of the existence of external objects is composed out of impressions and ideas. This means that there is nothing that produces the understanding of existence other than perceptions. Hume is therefore attempting to provide an explanation of our common understanding of existence which is firmly based on perceptions.

Hume's theory of external objects is principally developed in the section titled "Of scepticism with regard to the senses". This section is preceded by its twin argument titled "Of scepticism with regard to reason". It is important

to understand the second argument on the basis of the first. In "Of scepticism with regard to reason", Hume examines the system of philosophy that relies on reason. Clearly, he aims to criticise Descartes, among others, who proposes reason as the foundation of all certain knowledge. Hume does not deny the certainty of "the rules" of reason, but is concerned with our application of the rules to real situations in which real human activities are directed towards dealing with truth. For Hume, no rule can play its role in our life without our applying it to reality. Hume claims that ever in the accumulation of a large number of trials there emerges a possibility of error. He argues that all human knowledge is empirical and is subject to probability. Hume argues that in any reasoning there is a possibility of error, and therefore "all knowledge is denigrated into probability", which leads to "continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence" (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 183). Hume takes the example of mathematics and maintains, "there scarce is any proposition concerning numbers, of which we can have a fuller security." According to Hume, even mathematics, which Descartes uses as a paradigm for his conclusions, is also a matter of probability in so far as any human commitment is involved. This is a challenge to the Cartesian principle of "clear and distinct" perception as the foundation of knowledge. Hume does not accept clear and distinct perception as the criterion of truth because it can be a strong but false conviction without further assurance.

Once we are trapped in scepticism, the conflict between the "sceptical and dogmatical reasons" continues until "both vanish away into nothing" (T 1.4.1.12; SBN 187). This argument reveals Hume's true intention here, which lies in answering the question "how it happens...that these arguments above-explain'd produce not a total suspense of judgement, and after what manner the mind ever retains a degree of assurance in any subject?" (T 1.4.1.9; SBN 184). Hume ascribes the attainment of assurance in this matter to the working of nature. It is remarkable that at the height of his sceptical argument Hume turns to the workings of nature. Nature "breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding" (T 1.4.1.12; SBN 187). This idea parallels Hume's account of causation where he ascribes what is usually taken to be the working of reason to the "sensitive" (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 183)

part of our nature. In fact, all of his arguments in the *Treatise* aim to explore how the principle of nature solves the otherwise insoluble problems of reason in human matters. This basic conviction is persistent also in his dealings with the existence of the external object. Although reason cannot defend the principle concerning the existence of body, the sceptic is not allowed to doubt it, because

Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* This is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings. (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187)

In T 1.2.6., Hume also rejects the Berkeleyan identification of ideas with being, because simply replacing materials with ideas does not explain the fact that there seems to be an external object around us that is distinct from ideas. When he first affirms the existence of the objects of perceptions, Hume does not mean that the objects exist independently. However in general claiming the existence of objects commonly entails claiming that the object is distinct from the perception itself. Accordingly, Hume goes on to explore how it is possible that objects of perception exist "externally". He asks how it is that we come to believe that there is an object that is different from perception. Regarding this he says, "our present enquiry is concerning the causes which induce us to believe in the existence of body" (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 187-88).

Now Hume has a premise and a conclusion: we only have impressions and ideas, and we in fact believe in the existence of bodies. Hume's task is to bridge the gap between the foundation of his epistemology, perceptions, and our compelling natural belief in external bodies. Hume explores the full scope of this thesis with regard to human nature. The key difficulty however is that external objects seems to possess some qualities that are different from our perception.

In order to explore the nature of external objects, Hume distinguishes two more specific beliefs that we have regarding external objects, namely, that

they have a *distinct* existence from us, and secondly that they have a *continued* existence. Hume asks:

why we attribute a CONTINU'D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses; and why we suppose them to have an existence DISTINCT from the mind and perception? Under this last head I comprehend their situation as well as relations, their external position as well as the independence of their existence and operation. These two questions concerning the continu'd and distinct existence of body are intimately connected together. For if the objects of our senses continue to exist, even when they are not perceiv'd, their existence is of course independent of and distinct from the perception; and *vice versa*, if their existence be independent of the perception and distinct from it, they must continue to exist, even tho' they be not perceiv'd. (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188)

In other words, the belief in the existence of the external object is elucidated as continued and independent existence. Hume strategically retains this distinction, and tries to show that continued existence is entailed by distinct existence.¹² It is crucial to understand the implication of this distinction; mere continued existence signifies an inert object, whereas independent existence signifies a lively object.

As Descartes does, Hume questions which faculty of the human mind, the senses, reason, or the imagination produces the belief in the continued existence of objects. To take the conclusion first, Hume shows that the belief is not the product of the senses, nor of reason, but of imagination. First, the senses cannot produce the belief in the continued existence of their objects, because they deal with perceptions only in so far as they appear to the senses. In fact, sense cannot even underpin the belief in distinct existence, for it is evident that "our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*, because they convey to us nothing but a single perception". In order to have an impression of an independent object, we have to sense every aspect of the object at once; the independence of our perceptions from ourselves can never be an object of perception. Therefore, Hume asserts that a "single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some inference either of the

reason or imagination". Moreover, Hume claims that if the senses were to produce the belief in the independent existence of objects, they must show at the same time the "relation and situation" (T 1.4.2.4; SBN 189) between the objects and our impressions. It is significant that Hume questions not the perception of external things, but turns his fundamental scepticism to the relation of the perceptions to externality. Therefore, what is established as an external object in the end is not the perceptions of external things, but more fundamentally the relation of the externality of our perceptions.

Specifying the exact meaning of "externality" poses a problem: Hume asks with respect to what an object must be positioned in order to be external. "External" does not mean spatially distant from the "body", because the body is also an external existence. What is perceived as external existence is the same object of perceptions that exists in the absence of the perception. This does not mean that there exists something that is different from perception, however: Hume's theory does not recognise independent existence as the cause of perception. The emergence of externality in fact means there must be established a point of view that regards an object as external and is crucial to understand what this point of view is.

3 . The General Point of View and External Bodies

In this matter Hume takes a different path from Descartes and Locke, and attempts to explore the working of imagination to explain our belief in external objects. Since not all impressions generate the notion of their distinct and continued existence, it is necessary to explain which kinds of impressions do cooperate with the imagination to produce this notion. Clearly, it is not those characterised by "involuntariness", "superior force", and "violence" (T 1.4.2.16; SBN 194). For, says Hume, " 'tis evident our pains and pleasures, our passions and affections, which we never suppose to have any existence beyond our perception, operate with greater violence, and are equally involuntary, as the impressions of figure and extension, colour and sound, which we supposed to be permanent beings" (T 1.4.2.16; SBN 194). Another hypothesis is therefore required. It is apparent that this is a basic idea in Hume's theory of belief. Merely involuntary, strong, and violent beliefs are not in themselves a reliable guide for understanding the world and our behaviour. This, I shall argue, introduces the possibility that

Hume's search for the "manner" in which some perceptions constitute our belief in the external object also clarifies the notion of a valid belief in morals.

Hume observes that "all those objects, to which we attribute a continu'd existence, have a peculiar constancy" (T 1.4.2.18; SBN 194). By "constancy", Hume means appearance "in the same order", or presence "in the same uniform manner". It is to be remembered that causation depends on a similar notion of "constant conjunction". Most significantly, continued existence is founded on the relation of resemblance. But there is a problem in thinking of constancy as the essential characteristic of things possessing continued existence, because constancy "is not so perfect as not to admit of very considerable exceptions. Bodies often change their position and qualities, and after a little absence or interruption may become hardly knowable" (T 1.4.2.19; SBN 195). Hume holds that coherence within changes which the perceived objects undergo has a better chance of the defining the characteristic of external objects.

The coherence of appearance cannot be obtained from reasoning concerning causes and effects, for there is no causal regularity in the impression of external objects, "since the tuning about of our head, or the shutting of our eyes is able to break it" (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 198). The coherence of appearance is supported primarily by the understanding, and only indirectly by custom, because custom cannot be obtained from what was never present in the mind. "There is scarce a moment in my life", Hume confesses, where "I have not occasion to suppose the continu'd existence of objects" (T 1.4.2.20; SBN 197). Therefore, it is doubtful that the external object is the product of an inference of the understanding. The supposition of external objects should be the result of a more natural mental function than the result of inference. It is true that we certainly suppose the continued existence of objects, which is not the direct and natural effect of constant repetition and connection, but "must arise from the co-operation of some other principle" (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 198). The idea of coherence needs the hypothesis of the continuing existence of objects, but coherence is "too weak to support alone so vast an edifice, as is that of the continu'd existence of all external bodies" (T 1.4.2.23; SBN 198-99). Hume thinks "we must join the constancy of their [external bodies'] appearance to the coherence, in order to

give a satisfactory account of that opinion." However, the constancy of our perceptions "gives rise to the opinion of the *continu'd* existence of body, which is prior to that of its *distinct* existence, and produces that latter principle" (T 1.4.2.23; SBN 199). Hume provides us with "a short sketch" of his theory as follows.

When we have been accustom'd to observe a constancy in certain impressions, and have found, that the perception of the sun or ocean, for instance, returns upon us after an absence or annihilation with like parts and in a like order, as at its first appearance, we are not apt to regard these interrupted perceptions as different, (which they really are) but on the contrary consider them as individually the same, upon account of their *resemblance*. But as this interruption of their existence is contrary to their perfect identity, and makes us regard the first impression as annihilated, and the second as newly created, we find ourselves somewhat at a loss, and are involv'd in a kind of *contradiction*. *In order to free ourselves from this difficulty*, we disguise, as much as possible, the interruption, or rather remove it entirely, by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible. This supposition, or idea of *continu'd* existence, acquires a force and vivacity from the memory of these broken impressions, and from that propensity, which they give us, to suppose them the same; and according to the precedent reasoning, the very essence of belief consists in the force and vivacity of the conception. (T 1.4.2.24; SBN 199, italics mine)

The significant point is that we, by the natural tendency of the imagination, tend to regard interrupted, but resembling, perceptions as connected in order to save us the trouble of treating them as different. Custom is indifferent to the truth-value of reason. We may be uncertain about the essence of each perception, but it is impossible to question all of them, all of the time. Most importantly, the underlying principle of the belief in the external object is fundamentally the same as that of treating a particular impression as belonging to a wider class of perceptions. The manner we imagine external objects, which are distinct, is also closely related to the principle of taking the general point of view in moral

judgement, which consists in avoiding contradiction and arriving at a stable judgement.¹³

Hume arrives at the assertion that "When the exact resemblance of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them an identity, we may remove the seeming interruption by *feigning* a continu'd being, which may fill those intervals, and preserve a perfect and entire identity to our perception" (T 1.4.2.40; SBN 208, *italic mine*). Feigning the continued existence of the objects of perception is, therefore, the means whereby the mind attains stability. It is a fiction but does no harm to the mind because it "involves no contradiction" (T 1.4.2.40; SBN 208). Once the fiction of the independent object is established, it is supposed to possess different qualities, and thus it is easy to believe that it exerts different causal effects.

However, it is not enough to feign continued existence. We must also in fact believe the fiction to be real. So Hume proceeds to answer a further question; "*from whence arises such a belief*" that we "not only *feign* but *believe* this continu'd existence". The difference between an idea and belief lies in its vivacity. "The relation causes a smooth passage from the impression to the idea, and even gives a propensity to that passage" (T 1.4.2.41; SBN 208).

As in Hume's theory of causation, and also in his theory of sympathy, the perception of resemblance confers vivacity to the idea. The idea of continued existence obtains vivacity through the memory of accumulated experiences. The general point of view is involved here in recognising the resemblance, and it becomes clear that the belief in continued existence is a means to "avoid the contradiction". Hume also explains why we believe in the continued existence of new objects.

If sometimes we ascribe a continu'd existence to objects, which are perfectly new to us, and of whose constancy and coherence we have no experience, 'tis because the manner, in which they present themselves to our senses, resembles that of constant and coherent objects; and this resemblance is a source of reasoning and analogy, and leads us to attribute the same qualities to the similar objects. (T 1.4.2.42; SBN 209)

It is because of neither the content, nor the violence, but the "manner, in

which they present themselves to our senses" that we ascribe a continued existence to objects. It is impossible to emphasise the importance of "manner", not "content", as the standard that distinguishes reliable belief from mere fiction in Hume. The perception of an external object is the result of the manner in which we have treated the perceptions of similar objects. Thus, as in the case of the classification of ideas, in which a new idea is classified the same as already experienced ideas that resembles them, new objects are believed to have continued existence in so far as they resemble other objects that are supposed to have continued existence. Once the continued existence is established, it is naturally converted as distinct existence. Though continued and distinct existence is a fiction of the imagination, Human beings base their behaviour on this convenient fiction. We come to believe this fiction and behave as if it were real. Thus, the general point of view represents the manner perceptions are constructed by imagination to produce continued and distinct objects.¹⁴

According to Hume's Separability Principle, "whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination" (T 1.1.7.3; SBN 18). Hume shows that external objects are recognised as being different and distinguishable when seen from the general point of view. Hume does not recognise the Cartesian urge to establish external bodies as substances. It is enough for Hume's science of man to explain the external body as the Cartesian "*distinctio modalis*"(modal distinction) (AT VIII 29; CSM I 213). The general point of view represents the manner or the "mode" of perceptions. External objects need not exist as substance, but only distinguished by thought and imagination. The objects that are perceived as different by the general point of view are taken to be distinguished on Hume's Separability Principle. In this way, Hume explains how the "great propensity" (AT VII 79-80; CSM II 55) about recognising the external body arises. It is a point Descartes ascribes to God.

4 . The Moral Significance of the Belief of External Bodies in Hume

Let us consider the underlying moral implications of Hume's theory of external bodies.¹⁵ First, as in other major topics, Hume's argument concerning the existence of external objects is a theory of belief. This is in

clear contrast to Descartes' theory about scientific knowledge of external bodies. Hume clarifies that to have a belief in the external object is to believe in the continued and distinct existence of objects. He asserts that this idea is a fiction, and this is a conclusion which makes him appear sceptical. But this epistemic scepticism does not have any destructive power in moral matters. No matter what reason asserts, the natural belief in the existence of external objects is ineradicable. In this way, Hume establishes the priority of the working of human nature over reason for producing an understanding of the world. Most important of all, Hume indicates a significant departure from the Cartesian concept of "certainty". While for Descartes it is reason that produces certainty, Hume asserts that the sense of certainty is derived from the imagination; imagination produces the belief in the existence of a supposed external object, by which we obtain a stable view of the world: that is, a belief in the independent, unchanging existence of objects. Hume calls these continued and distinct objects which constitute the content of the most stable and reliable form of belief. Furthermore, reliable beliefs provide one with the circumstance in which to engage in one's more particular activities.¹⁶ No purposeful and consistent activities are possible without the belief in the stability of external world. We obtain a sense of certainty for the first time from the perception of external objects. This is in a sharp contrast to Descartes who insists that only reason can assure the certainty of knowledge.

It is significant that the basic concept of "objectivity" derives from the belief in external bodies.¹⁷ It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of this concept. Objectivity signifies our common picture of the world which is composed of independent objects. The concept also produces our common notion that each object has its own structure and qualities. Objectivity is constituted by general ideas that represent existences, and on which is based an absolutely fundamental reliance in the world. By obtaining the notion of objectivity, the notion of subjectivity also emerges, for objectivity and subjectivity mutually imply each other. "Subjectivity" can be defined as perceptions that do not form beliefs in independently existing objects. Insofar as they are perceptions, they are no different from "objective" perceptions: they lack only the specific manner of appearing needed to produce the fiction of independent existence.¹⁸

Apart from the specific manner in which they appear, pleasure and pain which are considered paradigmatically subjective perceptions are no different from colour or other "objective" perceptions. Thus Hume explains the perception of external objects as the working of human nature, and prepares us for his explanation of moral sentiment, as a particular pleasure or pain, as the standard for moral judgement. The principle that underlies, and partially constitutes, the idea of the external object is again proven to be the general point of view, which assures that things are perceived in the particular manner inherent to objective perception.

The relation of resemblance has an equally significant role to play here as it does in the case of abstract ideas. Resemblance consists in seeing one particular in association with other particulars. Thus, belief in the externality of objects consists in the point of view which treats different perceptions as signifying the same object, rather than in the theoretical structure of the perceptions themselves, which it is in fact impossible to identify because what appears to us is always changing. Only because of the general point of view, external things are perceived as stable, which is the hallmark of nature.¹⁹

Locke thought that for there to be objective moral truth, that truth must be discoverable through reason alone.²⁰ Hume provides an alternative to this idea by showing that the alleged externality of perceptions is a fiction of the imagination. Even if the notion of objectivity is a scientific hypothesis, the problem is how and from where we obtain the hypothesis in the first place. The consequences of rationalist theory therefore are the neglect of convention, sentiments, and human nature, which Hume places at the centre of his entire system. This is why Hume persistently criticises reason as a principle in moral matters. In this way, his epistemology can be regarded as preparing the ground for his moral theory.

Vulgar people arrive at a mistaken belief in objectivity by tracing a natural course from the notion of a continued object to the notion of a distinctly existing object. But the objectivity alleged by this "false philosophy" inevitably results in falsehood, because it has no other means but to smuggle its truth surreptitiously from imagination whose credibility it officially despises.²¹

Although continued existence and distinct existence imply each other,

distinct existence has a deeper moral significance. Because external existences are distinct and independent, it is a natural inference to believe that their activity must be derived from themselves; they are considered to have their own principles which sustain and move them. This is the genesis of the idea of power, and eventually autonomy. As an extension of this idea, other people, as external bodies, are recognised as free agents capable of spontaneous activities. This is the natural basis for ascribing to other people the right to freedom. In this sense, the physical perception of others occurs prior to moral recognition, and the idea of free agency is founded on the natural stability of the former. Hence, the notions of power and spontaneity are by-products of the imaginative creation of external objects. We regard the object as the source of different qualities. By supposing this origin of variable perceptions, perceptions are first completed and become available for stable beliefs. In this sense, the creation of external objects is the terminal of the formation of physical perceptions. The most significant of all external bodies are human beings. It is possible to understand the recognition of people as the underlying objective of Hume's exposition, which is not at all implied in the Cartesian world of extension. Thus in his theory of external bodies, Hume presents the theory that human beings are supposed to be independent, have their own qualities which comprise character,²² and their own principle of movement which is freedom. This means that when we recognise others, we should treat them as such in order to have a stable relationship with them.

There is a moral reason to regard external objects and human beings on a par. The quality of external objects is treated as it is because it is believed to be distinct, and distinctiveness is the most appropriate concept for perceiving human beings because morality requires us to respect and treat human beings as having their own inherent qualities. To regard others as they are is the natural significance of the idea of recognition which leads to a clearer notion of morality, which includes the notions of freedom or moral right. Hume's sceptical argument about external objects shows that nothing is solid and impenetrable by its own power. What confers solidity and impenetrability to external objects is our mind that imagines them to be objective, and human beings are solid and impenetrable only by virtue of moral perceptions that consist in the general point of view.

5 . Concluding Remarks

I have argued that Descartes and Hume have opposed theories regarding the understanding of external bodies. Descartes starts from an Archimedean point or the certainty of the Cogito in which the example of certainty lies, to demonstrate the separate existence of external bodies. On the other hand, Hume maintains that external bodies appears as the final product of our belief, which for the first time provides the sense of reliability because of its stability. The perception of external objects is attained by obtaining the general point of view which is known through a particular feeling as in moral perception. In Hume's system, clear and distinct recognition can only be a particular manner of perception. Thus Hume replaces the Cartesian criterion of "clear and distinct" perception with the general point of view²³.

Don Garrett has argued that two of Hume's most important principles are the "Copy Principle" and the "Separability Principle".²⁴ He maintains that there is no clear source for Hume's Separability Principle, while the Copy Principle certainly derives from Locke. However, it is now arguable that Hume's Separability Principle can be an alternation of the Cartesian "principle of separation" that is characterised by the combination of clear and distinct perception and God's almighty power and veracity.²⁵ The general point of view naturally distinguishes certain classes of perceptions as distinct bodies. In this way, Hume replaces the Cartesian real distinction with his Separability Principle. It is also possible to think that Hume shares with Locke a critical consciousness of the Cartesian theory of existence in his adaptation of the Copy Principle. By the Copy Principle, Hume demolishes the Cartesian distinction between idea and existence, which thus makes the notion of substance redundant. And by the Separability Principle, he shows how individual objects are articulated by the working of imagination.

In the theory of external existence, Hume presents the principle for unifying the perception of human beings and other objects, while Descartes confines the scientific perception of external objects to geometrical recognition. Thus Hume presents a totally different notion of human beings from that based on the Cartesian Cogito. It is easy to see that Hume's explanation of a person as an external object leads to the denial of personal identity as posited by the Cogito. Here is the continuity of Hume's theory of external body and that of personal identity. Although Descartes concludes

the *Sixth Meditation* by pointing out the weakness of human nature, Hume severely criticises the Cartesian separation of science from common life, and goes on to argue that moral perception and its validity can depend only upon human nature. This indicates the difference in the science they purport to establish.²⁶

Notes

- 1 Cf. Nicholas Jolley, "The Reception of Descartes' Philosophy", in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, chapter 13.
- 2 In accordance with the general practice, references to Descartes' works are made in parentheses in the main body of the text, by volume and page number to the Franco-Latin of C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, revised ed., 12 vols., Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76, abbreviated as "AT", and J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, abbreviated as "CSM".
- 3 Michael Williams, "Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt", in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, chapter 1.
- 4 There is a clear consciousness of rivalry in Hume's definition of perception that "It has been observ'd, that nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions; and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination" (T 3.1.1.2; SBN 456).
- 5 Peter Markie, "The Cogito and its Importance", in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, chapter 2.
- 6 For a representative discussion, see e.g. Louis E. Loeb, "The Cartesian Circle" in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, and James Van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle" in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 7 Jonathan Bennett makes a good case that Descartes' "clear" and "distinct" literally better translated as "vivid" and "clear", though I stick to the conventional translation to avoid confusion in this paper. See Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, Volume 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, chapter 19, section 147. For a good argument regarding the difference between clear and distinct perceptions, see also James M. Humber, "Recognising Clear and Distinct Perceptions" in Georges J. D. Moyal (ed.), *René Descartes: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 204-21.
- 8 Cf. James van Cleve, 1998, Van Cleve asserts that God's role is to establish as the general principle the connection between clear and distinct perception and truth.
- 9 Cf. Alan Gewirth, "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes" in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 79.
- 10 Regarding Descartes' concept of "objective reality", see the entry of "objective reality" in

- John Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary*, Blackwell, 1993, pp. 136-7.
- 11 In accordance with the general practice, references from Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* are inserted into the main text. "T" refers to the David Fate Norton and Mary Norton edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, followed by book, part, section, paragraph number, and "SBN" refers to the L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, followed by page number.
 - 12 We will see the reason Hume makes this dichotomy of externality below. To take the conclusion first, the independent existence applies to material, and independent existence applies particularly to living organs.
 - 13 See T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581-2.
 - 14 Hence I would like to characterise Hume's theory as "manner formalism of perceptions". I argued for this interpretation in my "The General Point of View as the Normative and Unifying Concept in Hume's *Treatise*", Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2005.
 - 15 It is to be noted that no entry to the "external world" is found in the *Treatise*. The Cartesian "corpus" refers to both object and human body.
 - 16 Hume's purpose in the theory of promise is how to explain the same kind of reliable belief in a moral world.
 - 17 There is yet no entry of the adjective "objective" in Hume. *OED* indicates that our use of "objectivity" approximately appears after Kant. However, Hume's theory of external objects as a stable belief anticipates that development.
 - 18 Hume's innovation is apparent when one thinks of the totally different use of the term "objective reality" in Descartes, which means the "representational content" of an idea. See the entry about "objective reality" in John Cottingham, *A Descartes dictionary*, Blackwell, 1993, pp. 136-7.
 - 19 Hume obtained this conviction from the Stoics.
 - 20 Hume apparently has more Locke in his mind than Descartes in the discussion of external object, though Locke's idea owes much to Descartes.
 - 21 Recall Hume's excellent explanation of the conflict between reason and skeptical reason (T 1.4.1.12; SBN 186-87). Donald Livingston discusses Hume's adherence to the distinction between the true philosophy and the false philosophy: see his *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, Chicago University Press, 1998, esp. chapter 2. Jonathan Bennett interprets Hume's theory as a criticism of Lockean materialism: see Bennett, 2000, pp. 305-6.
 - 22 Jean McIntyre indicates that Hume's theory of causation is linked to his discussion of character. See McIntyre, J., "Character: a Humean Account", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 7, 1990, no. 2, pp. 193-206.
 - 23 Jonathan Bennett interprets that Descartes theory attempt to attain stability rather than the truth. If he is right, it means that Hume is the authentic heir of Descartes in his fundamental objective. It is possible to think that Hume develops the Bennett's Cartesian project of "a complex, subtle, new line of thought according to which the entitlement is to be explained in terms of the fact". The difference between the two would be that Hume did it directly and comprehensively by aiming political stability, while Descartes

took a strategic roundabout by focusing on the truth as its means. See J. Bennett, 2000, chapter 20.

24 Don Garret, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, chapters 2 and 3.

25 See J. Bennett, 2000, section 148.

26 I am grateful to Prof. Allan Blondé for his comments on earlier draft of this paper.