Hume on Skepticism (1748)

Skepticism: Hume discusses the skeptical project in his *Inquiry* (12.1). There, he summarizes the concerns that led to Berkeleyan Idealism:

- **Representationalism:** If all knowledge is derived from perception, then: If we ask whether or not our perceptions of reality correspond to reality, we find that we cannot compare the two, since we only ever have access to our perceptions of reality, and never reality itself.

- **Primary-secondary quality distinction:** If secondary qualities are in the perceiver, and not in objects, then: It follows that the PRIMARY qualities are not in objects either, because the same arguments that led to the former can also be used to demonstrate the latter.

- **Matter as an underlying “thing”:** If we try to conceive of the underlying THING that is matter—i.e., the thing that possesses the qualities such as color, size, shape, etc.—by stripping all of those qualities away from the object, we find that there is nothing intelligible left to conceive of.

Although Berkeley claims “in his title-page … to have composed his book against the skeptics … [the] only effect is to cause that momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion which is the result of skepticism.”

Against God as a solution: If we try to refute skepticism by appealing to a God, as Descartes does (by claiming that surely there IS an external world, since God would not let us be deceived) then it seems like we should NEVER be deceived by our senses, because surely a morally perfect God would NEVER deceive us.

Our habit: Hume notes that we intuitively take the existence of an external world for granted, “without any reasoning”. But, philosophical scrutiny reveals that we have no firm reason for doing so. So, we are faced with two options: (1) Believe in an external world, following our natural inclinations but ignoring reason, or (2) Remain agnostic about the external world, ignoring our natural inclinations but following reason. Neither option is very inviting.

The solution: Ignoring skepticism: Hume ultimately “solves” external world skepticism by ignoring it completely. Having admitted that we cannot refute skepticism with certainty, he concludes that we must act AS IF there IS an external world. So, it seems that he takes option (1). He writes, “But it is in vain to ask: *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.” (Treatise on Human Nature, 1.4.2) Interestingly, this is the same way in which most philosophers still treat skepticism today.