

AN EVALUATION OF THE LIMITATIONS OF HUME'S SKEPTICISM

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work titled: **AN EVALUATION OF THE
LIMITATIONS OF HUME’S SKEPTICISM** was carried out by **FAVOUR
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DEDICATION

With a grateful heart, I dedicate this work to God Almighty for his unconditional love and provision in every area of my need and also to my amazing parents for their financial support, prayers and love throughout my academic journey.

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With a grateful heart, I thank the Almighty, God who in His infinite mercies saw me through my years of study. I thank him for his Divine protection and provisions that has made this work possible.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores David Humes skepticism and its implication for human knowledge. Emphasizing the challenges posed by his empirical approach of philosophy, Hume argues that all human understanding is rooted in sensory experience, yet he questions the validity of inferences made beyond immediate observation. His skepticism (extent) to concepts of causation induction, and the self-suggesting that our beliefs about the world are often unfounded. The study examines Humes critique of rationalism particularly his assertion that reason is subordinate to passion in guiding human

behavior. It also discusses the implications of human's skepticism for epistemology, particularly the limitations of certainty in knowledge acquisition. By analyzing Humes contributions, the study highlights the enduring relevance of his philosophical inquiries in contemporary discussions about the nature and limits of human's knowledge.

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The question of what human beings can truly know has been a central problem of philosophy since antiquity. “From Plato’s theory of forms to Descartes’s quest for certainty, philosophers have sought secure foundations for knowledge. In the early modern period, debates between rationalists, who emphasized reason and innate ideas, and empiricists, who stressed sensory experience, sharpened epistemological inquiry”¹

David Hume (1711–1776), a central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, advanced a radical form of empiricism that led him to skepticism about the scope of human knowledge. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* and later in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume argued that “all knowledge derives from impressions (vivid sensory experiences) and their fainter copies, ideas.”² This framework rules out knowledge that cannot be traced back to experience, thereby limiting the human

¹ Garrett, D. (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Hume*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 48.

² *Ibid.*, p.

mind's access to certainty.

Hume's skepticism is most famously expressed in his analysis of induction. He observed that "reasoning from past experiences to future expectations such as believing the sun will rise tomorrow because it has always risen before cannot be justified by logic. The expectation of future uniformity rests only on habit or custom, not on rational proof."³ Similarly, his account of causation denies that humans perceive necessary connections in nature. "What we actually witness is constant conjunction — one event regularly following another — and the mind's projection of necessity onto this sequence."⁴

These skeptical insights deeply influenced later philosophy. Immanuel Kant acknowledged that Hume's critique of causality "awoke him from his dogmatic slumber"⁵ and motivated his attempt to secure knowledge through the categories of understanding. By contrast, Thomas Reid rejected Hume's skepticism, arguing that certain common-sense beliefs, such as the existence of the external world, are

³ C. Howson, & P. Urbach, *Scientific reasoning: The Bayesian approach* (3rd ed.), (Illinois Open Court, 2006), p. 112.

⁴ I. Kant, *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics* edited by G. Hatfield, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

foundational and need no inferential justification.

Today, Hume's skepticism continues to shape debates in epistemology and the philosophy of science. The problem of induction remains unresolved, with probabilistic, Bayesian, and naturalized approaches seeking to explain how inductive reasoning can be rational without claiming deductive certainty. For this reason, studying Hume's skepticism remains essential to understanding both the limits of human knowledge and the enduring challenges of epistemology

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The quest for certainty in human knowledge has been a central concern in philosophy. While rationalists emphasize reason as the foundation of knowledge and empiricists stress sensory experience, David Hume's skepticism challenges both positions by exposing the limitations of human understanding. Hume argues that human beings cannot perceive necessary connections in nature and that beliefs about causation and the uniformity of nature rest on custom rather than rational proof. This radical view raises serious questions about the reliability of human knowledge, the justification of scientific reasoning, and the possibility of attaining certainty in any field of inquiry.

The problem arises from the tension between human reliance on inductive reasoning—

the expectation that the future will resemble the past and Hume's insistence that such reasoning lacks logical foundation. If Hume is correct, then much of what we claim to "know," including scientific laws and everyday beliefs, may rest on psychological habit rather than objective justification. This creates a philosophical dilemma: how can knowledge claims be validated if their foundation is uncertain?

Therefore, the study confronts the problem of whether human beings can ever achieve genuine certainty about the external world, causation, and the continuity of nature, or whether knowledge is ultimately limited to probability and belief shaped by experience and custom.

1.3 PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of study is to explore and analyze the implications of David Hume skepticism on the nature of Hume knowledge. The study aims to:

- examine Humes Epistemological framework
- investigate Humes distinctions between impressions and ideas analyses how his empiricist approach shapes our understanding of knowledge and the limy of human cognition. Provide insight into how Hume's skepticism informs current debates in

epistemology, philosophy of science and ethics

- highlight the relevance of Hume's thought in addressing contemporary issues related to knowledge, beliefs, and rationality.

Through this study, the aim is to deepen the understanding of Hume's philosophical contributions and their enduring significance. By critically engaging with his ideas, the study seeks to illuminate the complexities surrounding human knowledge and the fundamental challenges posed by skepticism

1.4 SIGNIFICANT OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the scope and boundaries of David Hume's skeptical philosophy, particularly as it relates to human knowledge, causation, and belief. Hume's skepticism, while influential in shaping modern epistemology, raises fundamental questions about the reliability of human reason and empirical knowledge. This research seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Hume's skeptical approach, especially where it appears self-defeating, overly restrictive, or inadequate in accounting for human cognitive and moral experience.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

While the study will provide an in- depth analysis of Hume, it will not attempt to cover every aspect of his works or the entirety of his philosophical system. The focus will be primarily on his epistemological contributions with less emphasis on his moral philosophy on political thought. Hence, the scope of the study is designed to provide a focused yet comprehensive examination of David Hume's skepticism and its implications for human knowledge. By concentrating on key philosophical themes and their historical context, the research aims to illuminate the lasting impact of Hume's thought on contemporary philosophical discussions.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

This methodological approach aims to provide a thorough understanding of David Hume skepticism and its implications for human knowledge using the critical analysis. By employing a method combination of literature review, textual analysis, comparative study, and empirical research, the study seeks to illuminate the complexities of Hume's thought and its lasting influence on philosophy.

1.7 CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Evaluation: An evaluation is the act of judging the quality, importance, value, or

amount of something after careful thought, or the result of that judgement.⁶

Limitation: According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, limitation is seen as the act of controlling and especially reducing something, it is also seen as the act of restricting.⁷

Skepticism: According to Hume, skepticism is the idea that all human knowledge stems from sensory experience leading to the conclusion that we can never achieve absolute certainty about anything beyond our immediate senses, and that our belief in concepts like cause and effect is a habit based on past experiences not concrete proof.⁸

1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW

David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*⁹ is one of the most influential works in modern philosophy. It seeks to apply the experimental method of reasoning, commonly used in the natural sciences, to the study of human thought and behaviour.

Hume's central aim is to construct a comprehensive science of man by examining the operations of the human mind and understanding the foundations of knowledge,

⁶ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (Edinburgh: Printed for John Noon, 1739), p. 39

⁷ A. S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 8th Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁹ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 67.

morality, and emotions. The *Treatise* is divided into three main books: *Of the Understanding*, *Of the Passions*, and *Of Morals*. In Book I: *Of the Understanding*, Hume explores human cognition and the nature of ideas. He argues that all human knowledge originates from experience, distinguishing between *impressions* (vivid sensory experiences) and *ideas* (fainter copies of impressions). Hume rejects the notion of innate ideas, emphasizing that the mind is a product of sensory experience. One of his most significant contributions is his theory of *causation*. He asserts that our belief in cause and effect arises not from logical reasoning or objective necessity but from habitual association—when two events consistently occur together, the mind forms an expectation that one will follow the other. This insight leads to Hume’s famous problem of induction: our reasoning about the future based on past experience cannot be rationally justified but only psychologically explained. Book II: *Of the Passions* delves into human emotions and motivations. Hume maintains that reason alone cannot motivate action; rather, it is the passions—feelings and desires—that drive human behavior. He classifies passions as either *direct* (such as desire, aversion, hope, or fear) or *indirect* (such as pride, humility, love, or hatred), explaining them through psychological principles of association. Hume’s analysis of the passions reveals his deep understanding of human psychology and underscores his belief that

emotions, not reason, form the foundation of moral and social life. In Book III: Of Morals, Hume turns to ethics and moral philosophy. He challenges the rationalist view that moral distinctions are derived from reason, arguing instead that morality is rooted in human sentiment. According to Hume, moral judgments stem from feelings of approval or disapproval that arise within us when we contemplate certain actions or characters. He famously asserts that “reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions,” emphasizing that moral values depend on human nature and emotional response rather than on objective rational principles. Hume also develops the idea of *sympathy*—the capacity to share in others’ feelings—as the basis for social virtue and moral obligation. Through this, he explains the origin of justice, benevolence, and other moral virtues as conventions that promote social harmony and human welfare. Overall, *A Treatise of Human Nature* represents a groundbreaking attempt to understand human nature through an empirical and psychological lens.

David Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*¹⁰ explores the nature and limits of human knowledge. He argues that all knowledge comes from experience, distinguishing between “relations of ideas” (logical truths) and “matters of fact” (empirical observations). Hume challenges the idea of causation as a necessary

¹⁰ David Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (London: A. Miller Press, 1748), p. 37.

connection, suggesting it is only a habit of the mind formed by repeated experiences. He also questions miracles, religion, and metaphysical claims, emphasizing that true knowledge must be based on empirical evidence and human reason.

In *The problem of induction: structure and stakes*¹¹ by D. Hume, the author argued that most famous challenge that concerns induction is the inference from past experience to expectations about the unobserved future. He asks: what justifies the methodological move whereby we infer general laws from repeated observations? Hume shows that two common replies fail: (a) a priori proof is impossible because matters of fact are contingent and not deducible from reason; (b) a posteriori justification that appeals to induction itself is circular. The consequence is that the rational basis for expecting the future to resemble the past cannot be non-circularly established; rather, such expectations rest on habit or custom — psychological dispositions formed by repeated conjunctions of events. The philosophical stakes are immense because scientific reasoning and ordinary predictions alike depend on inductive support.

In *Causation: constant conjunction and necessary connexion*¹² by D. Hume. Here,

¹¹ D. Hume, *The problem of induction: structure and stakes*, Edited by S. Thomas, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 42.

¹² A. Bailey & D. O'Brien. *Causation: constant conjunction and necessary connexion*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 18.

Hume reframes causation not as a metaphysical “necessary connexion” that we perceive directly, but as a pattern of constant conjunction plus a mental habit of expecting the one event when we observe the other. According to Hume, we never observe an inherent power linking cause and effect; at best we observe sequences and regularities. The mind, through association, projects necessity onto these regularities. Thus, the concept of causation becomes an explanatory fiction grounded in human psychology, not in any epistemically immediate or rationally demonstrable relation in the world. This account both explains how causal thinking arises and undermines the claim that causal laws are rationally necessary.

In *Hume’s Philosophy of Human Nature*,¹³ J. Passmore provides a comprehensive examination of Hume’s intellectual project, situating his skepticism within the broader context of his empirical philosophy. Passmore argues that Hume’s skepticism was never meant to destroy knowledge but to moderate human claims about certainty. According to Passmore, Hume’s chief intention was to establish a “science of man” grounded in observation rather than metaphysical speculation. Passmore shows that Hume’s skepticism was directed mainly at two areas: the theory of causation and the

¹³ J. Passmore, *Hume’s Philosophy of Human Nature*, (London: Duckworth, 2019), p. 66.

reliability of reason. Hume questioned the rational basis of our belief in necessary connection, arguing that causal inference is founded on habit rather than logical proof. However, Passmore notes that this form of skepticism is constructive, since Hume sought to replace dogmatic rationalism with a naturalistic understanding of human belief. Nevertheless, Passmore identifies clear limitations in Hume's skepticism. While Hume effectively undermines the rational justification for causation, he does not provide a fully satisfactory account of how belief and knowledge can coexist within human life. Hume's reliance on custom and natural instinct appears to contradict his earlier philosophical rigor. Passmore concludes that Hume's skepticism is self-limiting: it exposes the weaknesses of human reason but ultimately appeals to human nature as the unavoidable ground of all knowledge.

D. C. Ainslie's *Hume's Skepticism and the Science of Human Nature*¹⁴ Donald Ainslie's modern interpretation offer a more systematic and sympathetic view of Hume's skeptical intentions. He argues that Hume's skepticism was an integral part of his scientific program, not a destructive force. Ainslie interprets Hume's skepticism as a *methodological tool* for examining how the mind constructs reality rather than as a denial of knowledge itself. According to Ainslie, Hume's primary intention was to

¹⁴ D. C. Ainslie's *Hume's Skepticism and the Science of Human Nature* (London: Abingdon, 2013), p. 12.

demonstrate the limits of rational justification and to show that belief arises from psychological and social mechanisms rather than pure reason. Ainslie emphasizes that Hume's skepticism is tempered by naturalism—the view that human beings are guided by instincts and experiences that make life and science possible despite epistemic limitations. However, Ainslie also points out the limitations of Hume's approach. While Hume successfully critiques metaphysical certainty, he leaves unresolved the tension between skeptical doubt and common life. Hume's reliance on natural instincts, Ainslie argues, risks reducing reason to mere habit, leaving little room for objective justification. This exposes a philosophical gap: Hume cannot entirely reconcile his empirical method with the human need for certainty and moral grounding. Both Passmore and Ainslie view Hume's skepticism as a deliberate attempt to refine human understanding rather than to abolish it. Hume's skepticism aims to reveal the limits of reason and to establish a more modest, experience-based foundation for knowledge. Yet, its limitations lie in the unresolved tension between philosophical doubt and the practical necessity of belief.

CHAPTER TWO

UNDERSTANDING SKEPTICISM/ HUME EPISTEMOLOGY

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO SKEPTICISM

Philosophical skepticism represents a profound challenge within epistemology, questioning the possibility, extent, or reliability of human knowledge. At its core, skepticism posits that we may lack justification for many beliefs we commonly hold as true, or that certainty is unattainable in various domains. This differs from everyday doubt, which might question a specific claim like the accuracy of a weather forecast; philosophical skepticism targets broader propositions, such as whether we can know anything about the external world or the future. As a foundational theme in Western philosophy, skepticism encourages rigorous examination of epistemic standards, prompting responses from dogmatists who affirm knowledge and anti-skeptics who seek to refute or mitigate skeptical arguments¹⁵. The appeal of skepticism lies in its seemingly plausible arguments, despite their counterintuitive conclusions, influencing contemporary debates on justification, belief formation, and the structure of knowledge.

¹⁵ P. D. Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 15.

The historical roots of skepticism trace back to ancient Greece, where it emerged as a response to dogmatic philosophies like those of the Stoics and Epicureans. Pyrrho of Elis, often regarded as the founder of Pyrrhonian skepticism, advocated for the suspension of judgment (*epoché*) to achieve tranquility (*ataraxia*) by recognizing the equipollence (*isosthenia*) of opposing arguments. Influenced by encounters with Indian ascetics during Alexander the Great's campaigns, Pyrrho emphasized indifference (*apatheia*) toward non-evident matters, arguing that appearances are subjective and no belief is inherently more credible than its opposite.¹⁶ His disciple Timon of Phlius further disseminated these ideas, though much of Pyrrho's thought survives through later accounts. This ethical dimension of skepticism—using doubt to foster peace of mind—set the stage for later developments, where skepticism was not merely destructive but a path to *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing.

In the Hellenistic period, skepticism diversified into Academic and Pyrrhonian branches. Arcesilaus of Pitane (ca. 315–240 BCE), head of Plato's Academy, transformed it into a skeptical institution by employing dialectical methods to undermine Stoic claims of cataleptic impressions—perceptions guaranteed to be true. He argued that no criterion of truth exists, leading to *epoché*, but allowed for action

¹⁶ J. Annas, & J. Barnes, *The Modes of Skepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.), pp. 42-43.

based on the "reasonable" (eulogon) without committing to belief. Carneades of Cyrene (ca. 214–129 BCE) advanced this by introducing degrees of probability (pithanon), where beliefs could be provisionally accepted based on coherence and testing, without claiming certainty. This probabilistic approach addressed criticisms of inaction (apraxia) by enabling practical decision-making amid uncertainty.¹⁷ These Academic skeptics focused on critiquing dogmatism, particularly Stoic epistemology, while maintaining a fallibilist stance that knowledge might be possible but unattained. The Pyrrhonian tradition was revived and systematized by Aenesidemus of Knossos (1st century BCE), who criticized the Academics for dogmatically asserting probabilities and introduced ten modes of skepticism to induce epoché by highlighting relativity, disagreement, and sensory variability. Agrippa (1st century CE) condensed these into five modes, including the famous trilemma: justifications lead to infinite regress, circularity, or arbitrary assumption, rendering all beliefs unjustified.¹⁸ Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160–210 CE), the most comprehensive ancient source, documented these in his "Outlines of Pyrrhonism," arguing that skeptics live undogmatically by following appearances and customs without assent to truth claims. He addressed

¹⁷ A. Bailey, *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 48-51.

¹⁸ J. Annas & J. Barnes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64-66.

pragmatic inconsistencies, such as how skeptics can act without beliefs, by distinguishing between involuntary impressions and voluntary judgments¹⁹. Ancient skepticism thus emphasized therapeutic benefits, challenging the hubris of dogmatic certainty.

Modern skepticism revived in the Renaissance through rediscovered texts like Sextus's works, influencing thinkers during the scientific revolution. René Descartes famously employed methodological skepticism in his "Meditations on First Philosophy" to establish a secure foundation for knowledge. By doubting sensory perceptions via hypotheses like dreaming or an evil demon, Descartes aimed to reach indubitable truths, such as "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), before rebuilding knowledge²⁰. This Cartesian skepticism is "academic" in style, using doubt as a tool rather than an end, but it highlighted the problem of the external world—how to justify beliefs beyond one's mind.

David Hume extended skepticism to causation, induction, and the self in "A Treatise of Human Nature," arguing that habits, not reason, underpin beliefs like causal necessity.

¹⁹ Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Scepticism* (trans. Annas, J., & Barnes, J.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 45.

²⁰ R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. Haldane, E. S., & Ross, G. R. T., 1931), (New York: Dover Publications, 1641), p. 32.

He contended that we cannot justify inductive inferences without circularity, leading to mitigated skepticism where custom guides life despite epistemological limits²¹. Hume's influence persists in discussions of empirical knowledge, emphasizing psychological over logical foundations. Contemporary skepticism often focuses on global versus local forms. Global skepticism denies all knowledge, while local targets specific areas like ethics or religion. Pyrrhonian skepticism suspends judgment universally, even on skepticism itself, avoiding self-refutation, whereas Academic skepticism asserts the impossibility of knowledge in certain domains²². Key arguments include the closure principle: if one knows P and P entails Q, one knows Q; yet if Q is the negation of a skeptical hypothesis (e.g., not a brain-in-a-vat), and we cannot know Q, then we cannot know P.²³ Responses include contextualism, where "knowledge" standards vary by context, and externalism, prioritizing reliable processes over internal justification. Skepticism's enduring relevance lies in its role as a catalyst for epistemological refinement, forcing philosophers to clarify concepts like justification and truth. While radical forms may lead to paralysis, moderate versions promote

²¹ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (Edinburgh: Printed for John Noon, 1739), p. 39.

²² P. Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 11.

²³ F. Dretske, Epistemic Operators. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 67(24), 1970, 1007–1023.

humility and critical inquiry, balancing doubt with practical engagement.²⁴

2.2 DAVID HUME AND HIS PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

David Hume, a central figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, profoundly influenced modern philosophy through his rigorous empiricism and skeptical inquiries into human understanding, morality, and religion. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, Hume initially studied law but turned to philosophy, driven by a desire to understand human nature systematically. His philosophical background was shaped by British empiricists John Locke and George Berkeley, the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, and the scientific methods of Isaac Newton. In his seminal work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume aimed to develop a "science of man" by applying empirical principles to mental processes, challenging dogmatic assumptions about knowledge, causality, and morality²⁵. His skepticism, tempered by practical considerations, reshaped epistemological and ethical debates, influencing thinkers like Immanuel Kant and modern analytic philosophers.

Hume's empiricism posits that all knowledge derives from sensory experience, dividing perceptions into impressions (vivid sensations) and ideas (weaker copies of

²⁴ B. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 12.

²⁵ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 43.

impressions). He argued that all ideas must trace back to corresponding impressions, rejecting innate ideas as proposed by rationalists²⁶. Influenced by Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume extended this framework to question the rational basis of causation, asserting that our belief in cause and effect arises from habit, not logical necessity, based on repeated observation of conjoined events²⁷. Berkeley's idealism, which denied the independent existence of material objects, also informed Hume's skepticism, though he avoided Berkeley's metaphysical conclusions, focusing instead on the practical limits of knowledge.²⁸

Hume's skepticism is most famously articulated in his analysis of induction and causation in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. He argued that inductive reasoning—assuming the future will resemble the past—lacks rational justification because it presupposes nature's uniformity, an assumption that cannot be proven without circularity. This "problem of induction" challenged the foundations of scientific knowledge, suggesting that beliefs about causality rely on psychological custom rather than reason²⁹. This insight prompted Kant to develop his transcendental

²⁶ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 55.

²⁷ D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Oxford: Printed for J. and J. Knapton, 1748), p. 22.

²⁸ G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, (Dublin: Printed by Aaron Rhames, 1710), p. 12.

²⁹ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, pp. 46-49.

philosophy to address Hume's challenge. Hume's mitigated skepticism allowed for practical reliance on induction while maintaining epistemological caution, distinguishing him from radical skeptics like Pyrrho.³⁰

In moral philosophy, Hume drew on Hutcheson's sentimentalism, arguing that moral judgments stem from feelings of approval or disapproval rather than rational deduction. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he famously declared, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," emphasizing that morality is grounded in human sentiments, particularly sympathy.³¹ This view opposed rationalist ethics, such as those of Samuel Clarke, and highlighted the role of emotional responses in ethical decision-making. Hume's moral skepticism rejected absolute moral truths, aligning with his broader doubts about objective certainty.³²

Hume's religious skepticism, expressed in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, critiqued arguments for God's existence, notably the design argument. Influenced by Cicero's skeptical dialogues, Hume used the character Philo to argue that the universe's order does not necessarily imply a purposeful intelligent design, advocating

³⁰ D. F. Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 20.

³¹ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 66.

³² R. Cohon, *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 21.

for naturalistic.³³ His cautious approach avoided explicit atheism, reflecting the religious constraints of 18th-century Britain, but still challenged theological dogmatism. The intellectual climate of the Scottish Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason, science, and social progress, shaped Hume's philosophy. His engagement with Newton's empirical methods inspired his ambition to make philosophy as systematic as natural science, while his interactions with contemporaries like Adam Smith enriched his ideas on human nature and society.³⁴ Hume's skepticism, however, tempered Enlightenment optimism, emphasizing the limits of human understanding and the role of habit in belief formation. Hume's legacy lies in his rigorous challenge to rationalist and dogmatic philosophies, forcing subsequent thinkers to grapple with the empirical and psychological foundations of knowledge and morality. His work remains central to contemporary debates in epistemology, ethics, and the philosophy of science, particularly through the enduring problem of induction and his sentimentalist approach to ethics.

2.3 HUME'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

David Hume's theory of knowledge, articulated in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An*

³³ D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (London: Printed for the Author, 1779), p. 17.

³⁴ A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (London: Printed for W. Strahan, 1776), pp.1-5.

Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, grounds all knowledge in sensory experience, emphasizing the limits of human understanding. His empiricism and skepticism challenge the rational basis of causation, induction, and beliefs about the external world and self, influencing modern epistemology. Hume asserts that all mental content derives from perceptions, divided into impressions (vivid sensations) and ideas (fainter copies). All ideas originate from impressions, rejecting innate ideas. Complex ideas, like causation, are combinations of simpler ideas traceable to impressions, forming the basis of Hume's empiricism.³⁵

Hume argues that causation lacks a rational foundation. The belief in necessary connections between causes and effects arises from habit, not reason, due to repeated observation of conjoined events. No impression of necessity exists, making causation a psychological association. Hume's "problem of induction" questions the justification of generalizing from past observations to future expectations. The assumption of nature's uniformity is unprovable without circularity, rendering inductive knowledge uncertain. Hume's mitigated skepticism accepts practical reliance on induction via custom.³⁶ Hume denies direct knowledge of an external world, as we only perceive

³⁵ D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Oxford: Printed for J. and J. Knapton, 1748), p. 65.

³⁶ D. F. Norton, *Op Cit.*, p. 77.

coherent and constant impressions, not independent objects. Similarly, the self is a “bundle” of perceptions, not a substantial entity, challenging traditional notions of identity.³⁷ Belief is a lively idea tied to a present impression, formed through habit and association. Hume’s probabilistic approach allows action based on the strength of evidence, despite lacking certainty. Hume’s skepticism limits knowledge to empirical perceptions, undermining metaphysical claims. His problem of induction influenced Kant’s transcendental idealism and modern philosophy of science. His psychological approach to belief anticipates cognitive science and contemporary epistemology.³⁸

2.4 HUME SKEPTICISM

David Hume’s skepticism, a central pillar of his philosophy, challenges the rational foundations of knowledge, particularly in the domains of causation, induction, the external world, and the self. Articulated primarily in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume’s skepticism is rooted in his empiricism, which holds that all knowledge derives from sensory experience. Unlike radical skeptics like Pyrrho, who suspended all judgment, Hume advocates a mitigated skepticism that acknowledges the limits of reason while allowing practical beliefs

³⁷ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 90.

³⁸ I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, (Mainz: Philipp Krüll, 1783), p. 15.

based on custom and habit. His skeptical arguments, especially the problem of induction and the critique of necessary causation, have profoundly shaped epistemology, prompting responses from Immanuel Kant and influencing contemporary debates on justification and belief.³⁹

Hume's skepticism about causation is a cornerstone of his philosophy. He argues that our belief in causal necessity—e.g., that striking a match causes a flame—lacks rational justification. We observe repeated conjunctions of events (e.g., striking followed by flame), but there is no impression of a “necessary connection” between them. Instead, the idea of necessity arises from the mind's habit of associating events after repeated observations, not from an objective property in the world. Hume asserts that causation is a psychological projection, not a logical or metaphysical truth, undermining claims to certain knowledge about causal relationships. This challenges rationalist views, such as those of Leibniz, which posited necessary connections based on reason.⁴⁰

Hume's most famous skeptical contribution is the problem of induction, which questions the justification for generalizing from past observations to future expectations. For example, we expect the sun to rise tomorrow because it has always

³⁹ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology* (trans. R. Latta, 1898), (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1714), p. 17.

done so, but Hume argues this assumption—that the future will resemble the past—cannot be rationally justified. The principle of the uniformity of nature, which induction presupposes, cannot be proven without circularity, as any proof would itself rely on induction. Thus, inductive reasoning, foundational to science and everyday life, rests on custom or habit, not reason. This insight shook the foundations of empirical knowledge, prompting Kant to develop his transcendental idealism to provide a priori grounds for induction.⁴¹

Hume extends his skepticism to the belief in an independent, continuous external world. We infer the existence of objects like tables or trees from the coherence and constancy of our perceptions (e.g., seeing the same table repeatedly), but Hume argues there is no direct impression of an external reality. The belief in external objects is an assumption based on habitual associations, not a rationally justified conclusion. Since all we know are our perceptions, we cannot prove the existence of a world beyond them, rendering such beliefs uncertain. This aligns with Berkeley's idealism but avoids metaphysical commitments, focusing instead on epistemological limits.⁴²

Hume's skepticism also targets the notion of a substantial, enduring self. He argues

⁴¹ R. J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 22.

⁴² G. Berkeley, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

that we have no impression of a unified “I” or soul; instead, the self is a “bundle” or collection of perceptions connected by memory and association. When we introspect, we find only fleeting impressions and ideas, not a persistent entity. The belief in a continuous self is thus a fiction created by the mind’s tendency to associate related perceptions, not a rationally grounded truth . This challenges traditional views of personal identity, such as those of Descartes, who posited a thinking substance. Unlike Pyrrhonian skepticism, which suspends all judgment to achieve tranquility, Hume’s mitigated skepticism balances doubt with practical action. He recognizes that radical skepticism, if taken to extremes, leads to paralysis (apraxia), as we cannot act without some beliefs. Instead, Hume argues that custom and habit naturally produce beliefs sufficient for everyday life, even if they lack rational certainty. For example, we act on the belief that food will nourish because experience has made it vivid, not because we can prove. This pragmatic approach distinguishes Hume from more radical skeptics and aligns with his view that philosophy should serve human life.

Hume’s theory of belief ties directly to his skepticism. He defines belief as a lively idea associated with a present impression, driven by the vivacity of perceptions rather than rational deduction. For instance, believing the sun will rise tomorrow is a psychological response to repeated experience, not a logical conclusion. Hume also

introduces a probabilistic framework, where beliefs are assessed based on the strength of evidence, such as the reliability of testimony or frequency of events. This allows for practical decision-making despite epistemological uncertainty.⁴³

2.5 THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION AND CAUSALITY

The problem of induction is one of the most profound and enduring challenges in philosophy, especially within the field of epistemology. It refers to the difficulty of justifying inductive reasoning, which involves drawing general conclusions based on particular instances or past experiences. David Hume is often credited with articulating the problem most clearly. According to Hume, induction assumes that the future will resemble the past, yet there is no rational justification for this assumption.⁴⁴ For example, observing that the sun has risen every day in the past does not logically guarantee that it will rise tomorrow. This gap between past observation and future expectation highlights the central problem of induction: it relies on resupposing a uniformity of nature that itself cannot be proven through reason or experience.

Causality is deeply tied to this issue because inductive reasoning is the basis of causal inference. Human beings commonly assume that when one event consistently follows

⁴³ R. J. Fogelin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 97.

another, the first is the cause of the second. Hume challenged this assumption by arguing that our idea of causality is not derived from any logical or necessary connection between events but from habitual association. For instance, when a billiard ball strikes another, we observe the motion of the second ball and infer causation. Yet, Hume insisted that what we actually perceive is mere succession of events, not a metaphysical causal link⁴⁵. This undermines the certainty of causal knowledge, reducing causality to a psychological expectation formed through custom rather than a demonstrable truth.

The implications of Hume's critique extend to scientific reasoning, which heavily relies on induction and causality. Scientific laws are essentially generalizations derived from repeated observations, such as Newton's laws of motion or laws of gravity. Karl Popper recognized this limitation and proposed falsifiability as a solution. Instead of justifying induction, Popper suggested that scientific theories should be judged not by their ability to be confirmed inductively, but by their capacity to be tested and potentially falsified.⁴⁶ Thus, while induction cannot be justified in a strict sense, science can progress through conjectures and refutations, avoiding the pitfalls of inductive certainty.

⁴⁵ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, (London: Hutchinson Books, 1959), p. 34.

Immanuel Kant offered another influential response to the problem of causality and induction. Kant argued that causality is not a concept derived from experience, as Hume suggested, but rather a category of understanding imposed by the mind to make sense of experience.⁴⁷ For Kant, the principle of causality is a necessary condition for the possibility of coherent experience; we cannot perceive a world without assuming causal relations. This transcendental approach preserves causality as an a priori principle rather than an inductive generalization, thus attempting to secure the foundations of knowledge against Hume's skepticism.

In contemporary philosophy, the problem of induction remains unresolved, but it continues to shape debates about knowledge, science, and rationality. Philosophers such as Nelson Goodman highlighted the difficulty further with his "new riddle of induction," showing that even the choice of predicates in inductive generalizations (e.g., "green" versus "grue") poses problems for rational justification⁴⁸. Despite various attempts to address the issue, from probabilistic approaches to pragmatist justifications, induction and causality remain central philosophical concerns. They reveal the limits of human reasoning and the challenge of grounding certainty in an

⁴⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (P. Guyer & A. Wood, Trans.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 12.

⁴⁸ N. Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 44.

uncertain world.

2.6 HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY

David Hume's philosophical legacy is profound, reshaping epistemology, moral philosophy, and the philosophy of religion through his empiricism and skepticism. His ideas, articulated in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, challenged rationalist dogmas and emphasized the role of experience and habit in knowledge and belief. Hume's problem of induction, critique of causality, and sentimentalist ethics influenced subsequent thinkers, notably Immanuel Kant, and continue to inform contemporary debates in philosophy, cognitive science, and the philosophy of science. However, his ideas faced significant criticisms from contemporaries and later philosophers, who contested his skepticism, empiricism, and moral theory for their perceived limitations and implications.⁴⁹ Hume's most significant contribution to philosophy is his problem of induction, which questions the rational justification for generalizing from past observations to future expectations. By arguing that induction rests on the unprovable assumption of nature's uniformity, Hume challenged the certainty of scientific knowledge, prompting responses from Kant, who developed

⁴⁹ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 105

synthetic a priori knowledge to ground induction, and Karl Popper, who emphasized falsifiability over confirmation. Kant famously credited Hume with awakening him from his “dogmatic slumber,” leading to the transcendental idealism of the *Critique of Pure Reason*⁵⁰. Hume’s insight remains central to the philosophy of science, influencing figures like Thomas Kuhn, whose concept of paradigm shifts addresses the uncertainty of scientific progress.⁵¹

In epistemology, Hume’s empiricism, which grounds all knowledge in sensory impressions, shifted philosophical focus from metaphysical speculation to psychological analysis of belief formation. His distinction between impressions and ideas, and his view of belief as a lively idea tied to habit, anticipates modern cognitive science and psychological approaches to epistemology. Contemporary reliabilist theories, which prioritize reliable belief-forming processes over internal justification, owe a debt to Hume’s emphasis on habit and custom. Hume’s sentimentalist ethics, articulated in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, revolutionized moral philosophy by arguing that moral judgments arise from feelings of approval or disapproval, not reason. His claim that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” challenged

⁵⁰ I. Kant, *Op Cit.*, p. 56-57.

⁵¹ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 44.

rationalist ethics, such as those of Samuel Clarke, and influenced later sentimentalists like Adam Smith. Hume's focus on sympathy as the basis of moral judgment prefigures modern moral psychology and virtue ethics, impacting thinkers like Annette Baier, who emphasized Hume's relational approach to ethics.⁵²

In the philosophy of religion, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* critically examined arguments for God's existence, particularly the design argument, using skeptical and empirical reasoning. His naturalistic approach to religion influenced later secular thinkers and contributed to the development of agnosticism and atheism in Western philosophy. Hume's skeptical method, balancing doubt with practical engagement, also inspired moderate skeptical traditions, such as fallibilism, which accepts uncertainty while allowing justified beliefs.

⁵² A. C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 66.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LIMITATION OF HUME EPISTEMOLOGY

3.1 EPISTEMIC CONSEQUENCES OF RADICAL SKEPTICISM

Radical skepticism is a philosophical position that challenges the possibility of attaining certain knowledge about the world. It argues that since all human knowledge is subject to doubt, we cannot claim to have absolute certainty about anything beyond immediate experience. The epistemic consequence of this position is the undermining of the very foundations of human knowledge. If radical skepticism is true, then the reliability of our sensory perceptions, memory, and reasoning processes is put into question, leaving us without a stable ground for knowledge claims⁵³. This leads to a state where every belief, no matter how well justified, remains open to doubt.

One key epistemic consequence is the collapse of the distinction between knowledge and belief. Traditionally, knowledge has been defined as “justified true belief.” However, if radical skepticism shows that justification can always be challenged, then the line separating knowledge from mere belief becomes blurred. For example, if I

⁵³ R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. Haldane, E. S., & Ross, G. R. T., 1931), (New York: Dover Publications, 1641), p. 49.

believe that there is an external world because my senses tell me so, a skeptic might argue that I could be dreaming or deceived by an evil demon. In this way, skepticism threatens to reduce all claims of knowledge to unverified beliefs⁵⁴. This erosion of certainty undermines epistemology's aim of establishing a secure foundation for knowledge.

Another consequence lies in the limitation it imposes on scientific inquiry. Science relies heavily on empirical observation and inductive reasoning. Radical skepticism, however, questions the trustworthiness of induction and causality, as well as the assumption of the uniformity of nature. If these assumptions cannot be justified beyond doubt, then the predictive and explanatory power of science becomes epistemically unstable. While practical success in science may remain unchallenged, skepticism highlights that such success does not equate to absolute knowledge but merely to useful beliefs based on probability.⁵⁵

Radical skepticism also has implications for everyday reasoning and practical life. If taken to its extreme, skepticism could paralyze human action, since one could never be certain about the consequences of decisions. However, as philosophers such as

⁵⁴ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (Edinburgh: Printed for John Noon, 1740), p. 15.

⁵⁵ K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, (London: Hutchinson Books, 1959), p. 57.

Wittgenstein have argued, human beings cannot function without some level of certainty.⁵⁶ While we may not escape skepticism theoretically, in practice, we must rely on “hinge propositions”—basic assumptions that ground our activities, such as the belief in an external world. This creates a tension between the theoretical force of skepticism and the pragmatic necessity of acting as though knowledge is possible. Furthermore, the epistemic consequences of radical skepticism have motivated responses aimed at preserving knowledge. For instance, Immanuel Kant argued that while we cannot know things-in-themselves, we can have certain knowledge of phenomena as they appear to us, structured by categories such as causality and substance.⁵⁷ Similarly, contemporary epistemologists have developed externalist theories, such as reliabilism, which claim that knowledge depends not on absolute justification but on whether belief-forming processes are reliable⁵⁸. These responses attempt to safeguard epistemology against the destructive implications of skepticism while acknowledging its challenge.

⁵⁶ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1969), p. 45.

⁵⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (P. Guyer & A. Wood, Trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 77.

⁵⁸ A. Goldman, *What Is Justified Belief?* In G. Pappas (Ed.), *Justification and Knowledge*, (London: Reidel Publishing, 1979), pp. 1-23

3.2 THE INDUCTION PROBLEM WITHOUT RESOLUTION

The problem of induction, famously articulated by David Hume, poses a fundamental challenge to the justification of inductive reasoning, which involves extrapolating from observed instances to unobserved ones or future events. At its core, the problem questions how we can rationally justify the belief that the future will resemble the past, given that all empirical knowledge relies on this assumption. Without a non-circular basis for induction, our expectations about regularities in nature—such as the sun rising tomorrow or bread nourishing us—lack rational grounding, rendering much of human knowledge uncertain. This issue highlights the limits of empirical inquiry, as induction underpins scientific laws, predictions, and everyday decisions, yet Hume demonstrates its foundational weakness.⁵⁹

Hume's formulation of the induction problem emerged in the context of 18th-century empiricism, where he sought to examine the origins of human understanding through experience alone. In his works, Hume distinguishes between demonstrative reasoning (a priori) and moral reasoning (empirical), arguing that inductive inferences fall into the latter but cannot be justified by either. He uses examples like billiard balls to illustrate that we observe only constant conjunctions, not necessary connections,

⁵⁹ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 88.

leading to the realization that our generalizations from past experiences to future ones are presumptive. This historical framing underscores induction as a habitual process rather than a logically compelled one, setting the stage for skepticism about empirical certainty.⁶⁰

Central to Hume's argument is the analysis of causation, which he reduces to observed regularities without inherent necessity. We believe that causes produce effects because of repeated pairings in experience, but no impression reveals a binding force between them; instead, the mind projects necessity through association. This undermines inductive reasoning, as predictions about causal outcomes—such as fire causing heat—rely on assuming continued regularity, an assumption unsupported by reason. Without this, induction appears as a leap from the known to the unknown, lacking evidentiary compulsion.⁶¹

The principle of the uniformity of nature (PUN) lies at the heart of the induction problem, as Hume posits it as the unspoken premise required for inductive validity. PUN assumes that unobserved instances will conform to observed patterns, but Hume argues it cannot be proven a priori, since we can conceive of nature changing course without contradiction. Empirically justifying PUN would require appealing to past

⁶⁰ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 87-92.

⁶¹ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 45-50.

uniformities, which presupposes PUN itself, exposing the inherent flaw in inductive logic. This reveals induction as reliant on an unprovable axiom, eroding its status as rational inference.⁶²

Hume's critique exposes the circularity in any attempt to defend induction through experience. If one claims that induction has worked in the past and thus will continue, this defense employs induction to justify induction, begging the question. Alternative justifications, such as probabilistic reasoning or appeals to natural necessity, similarly falter under scrutiny, as they either assume uniformity or derive from the same empirical habits. This circular trap leaves induction without a logical foundation, amplifying skeptical concerns about knowledge claims.⁶³ Psychologically, Hume attributes inductive beliefs to custom and habit rather than reason, arguing that repeated experiences create lively ideas that propel us to expect similar outcomes. This non-rational mechanism explains why we persist in inductive thinking despite its philosophical shortcomings; it is an instinctive response embedded in human nature. However, this psychological account does not resolve the epistemic issue, as it merely describes belief formation without providing justification, leaving induction as an

⁶² D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 87-92.

⁶³ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 134-142.

irrational yet inevitable propensity.⁶⁴

The implications for science are profound, as inductive methods form the basis of empirical generalization and theory-building. Scientific laws, derived from observed regularities, assume future conformity without rational warrant, casting doubt on the certainty of predictions and hypotheses. This challenges the authority of science, suggesting that its successes are contingent on unproven assumptions about nature's consistency, thereby introducing an element of uncertainty into what is often seen as objective knowledge. In everyday life, the induction problem undermines mundane expectations, such as trusting that food will nourish or bridges will hold, based solely on past instances. These beliefs, while practically indispensable, lack rational support, revealing a disconnect between human action and epistemic rigor. This practical reliance on induction highlights its utility despite philosophical flaws, but it does not mitigate the underlying skepticism about justified belief in unobserved matters.⁶⁵

Philosophically, the problem extends to broader epistemological concerns, questioning the reliability of all experience-based knowledge. It challenges foundationalist views that seek secure grounds for beliefs, as induction's weakness suggests that empirical foundations are shaky. This has led to ongoing debates about the nature of justification,

⁶⁴ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43.

⁶⁵ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 269.

belief, and rationality, emphasizing the tension between descriptive psychology and normative epistemology.⁶⁶ The enduring relevance of Hume's induction problem lies in its resistance to easy dismissal, persisting as a core issue in contemporary philosophy despite advances in probability and logic. It continues to provoke reflection on the limits of human reason, reminding us that our grasp on the world is provisional and habit-driven rather than demonstrably certain. This unresolved challenge underscores the humble position of epistemology in the face of fundamental uncertainties.⁶⁷

3.3 EMPIRICIST RESTRICTION OF COGNITIVE SCOPE

The empiricist restriction of cognitive scope, a cornerstone of epistemological thought, confines human knowledge to what can be derived from sensory experience, rejecting claims to innate ideas or a priori knowledge independent of observation. This doctrine, most systematically developed by David Hume in the 18th century, asserts that all ideas originate from sensory impressions, limiting cognitive claims to what can be traced to experience. Empiricism underpins modern scientific methodology but narrows the scope of cognition by dismissing metaphysical, rationalist, or speculative

⁶⁶ A. C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 66.

⁶⁷ C. Howson, *Hume's Problem: Induction and the Justification of Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 55.

assertions that transcend sensory evidence. This restriction raises profound questions about the certainty of knowledge in domains like causation, the external world, morality, and abstract concepts, shaping philosophical debates about the boundaries of human understanding.

Empiricism emerged as a response to rationalism during the Enlightenment, with thinkers like John Locke, George Berkeley, and Hume challenging the notion that reason alone could yield substantive knowledge. Locke's rejection of innate ideas in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* posited the mind as a tabula rasa, filled solely by sensory experience, setting the stage for empiricism's restrictive framework. Berkeley further limited cognition by denying material substance, arguing that only perceptions exist, thus confining knowledge to sensory ideas. Hume's empiricism, building on these foundations, rigorously constrained cognition to perceptions, divided into impressions (vivid sensations) and ideas (fainter copies) asserting that any concept lacking a sensory basis is epistemologically suspect. This historical context highlights empiricism's role in aligning philosophy with empirical science while narrowing cognitive ambitions.⁶⁸

Hume's empiricist framework, articulated in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An*

⁶⁸ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: Printed by Eliz. Holt, 1690), p. 44.

Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, hinges on the “copy principle,” which states that all ideas must derive from sensory impressions. For example, the idea of a unicorn combines impressions of a horse and a horn, but abstract concepts like causation or substance lack direct impressions, rendering them products of mental association rather than objective knowledge. This principle restricts cognition to what can be experienced or recalled, excluding metaphysical entities or a priori truths unless empirically grounded. Hume’s approach thus limits the scope of philosophy to analyzing observable phenomena, challenging claims to knowledge beyond sensory evidence.⁶⁹

One of the most significant restrictions imposed by empiricism is on the concept of causation. Hume argues that we never perceive a necessary connection between cause and effect, only constant conjunctions of events (e.g., a billiard ball striking another). The belief in causality arises from habitual association, not rational insight, confining knowledge of causation to observed patterns rather than necessary truths. This restriction undermines claims to universal causal laws, as our understanding is limited to past experiences without assurance of future consistency. Empiricism thus narrows cognitive scope by reducing causation to a psychological phenomenon, not an

⁶⁹ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 71.

objective feature of the world. Similarly, Hume's problem of induction highlights the empiricist restriction on predictive knowledge. Induction—generalizing from past observations to future expectations—relies on the assumption that nature is uniform, but Hume argues this principle cannot be justified without circularity, as it depends on inductive reasoning itself. This confines cognitive claims to what has been observed, leaving predictions about the future or unobserved cases uncertain. The restriction challenges the certainty of scientific laws and everyday expectations, such as expecting the sun to rise, by limiting justified beliefs to sensory evidence.

Empiricism also restricts knowledge of the external world and the self. Hume contends that we have no impression of a continuous, independent external reality; our belief in objects like tables stems from the coherence and constancy of perceptions, not direct evidence of an external world. Similarly, the self is reduced to a “bundle” of perceptions connected by memory, with no impression of a unified, enduring entity. These restrictions limit cognition to subjective experience, casting doubt on objective claims about reality or personal identity beyond what is perceived.⁷⁰ The empiricist framework severely curtails metaphysical and religious knowledge. Concepts like God, the soul, or absolute moral truths lack direct sensory impressions, rendering them

⁷⁰ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 90.

cognitively inaccessible unless tied to experience. In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume critiques the design argument, arguing that the universe's order does not justify inferring a purposeful intelligent design beyond observable patterns. This restriction confines metaphysical and religious inquiry to empirical observations, dismissing speculative claims as outside the scope of legitimate cognition.⁷¹

Empiricism's restriction also limits knowledge of abstract or a priori truths. Hume distinguishes between "relations of ideas" (e.g., mathematical truths like $2+2=4$), which are certain but tautological, and "matters of fact," which are contingent and derived from experience. Only the former are knowable a priori, but they offer no substantive insight into the world, while matters of fact remain uncertain due to their empirical basis. This contrasts with rationalist views, such as Leibniz's, which posited necessary truths accessible through reason, highlighting empiricism's constraint on abstract cognitive domains.⁷²

The skeptical consequences of empiricism's restriction are profound, as it fuels Hume's mitigated skepticism. By limiting knowledge to sensory impressions, empiricism undermines certainty about causation, induction, and external reality, relying on habit rather than reason for belief. This skepticism challenges the authority

⁷¹ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 116.

⁷² D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 25-30.

of science, philosophy, and religion, as all depend on assumptions beyond direct experience. Hume's mitigated skepticism allows practical action through custom but underscores the epistemic humility imposed by empiricist boundaries, questioning the justification of beliefs beyond sensory data. Critics of empiricism argue that its restriction is overly narrow, limiting cognition unnecessarily. Rationalists like Kant propose that synthetic a priori knowledge, such as the concept of causality as a condition for experience, expands cognitive scope beyond sensory limits. Thomas Reid's commonsense philosophy contends that empiricism undermines intuitive beliefs, like the existence of the external world, which seem necessary for practical life. Logical positivists like A. J. Ayer also noted difficulties with abstract concepts like justice, which may not reduce to specific impressions, suggesting empiricism's scope is too restrictive for comprehensive knowledge. Despite these criticisms, empiricism's focus on evidence remains foundational to science and epistemology, highlighting its enduring tension with broader cognitive aspirations.⁷³

3.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL REDUCTION OF CAUSALITY

Psychological reduction of causality refers to the philosophical view, most prominently advanced by David Hume, that our concept of cause and effect is not

⁷³ I. Kant, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43.

grounded in objective necessity but arises from psychological processes within the human mind. Hume argues that what we perceive as causal relations are merely habitual associations formed through repeated sensory experiences, reducing causality to a mental habit rather than a metaphysical reality. This reduction challenges traditional notions of causation as an inherent property of the world, emphasizing instead the role of perception and custom in shaping our understanding. By stripping causality of its objective status, Hume's approach highlights the subjective foundations of knowledge, influencing subsequent debates in epistemology and philosophy of mind.⁷⁴

The historical roots of psychological reduction trace back to empiricist traditions, where thinkers like Locke and Berkeley began questioning rationalist accounts of innate ideas and necessary connections. Hume built upon these by systematically analyzing how the mind constructs causality from sensory data, rejecting Cartesian and Leibnizian views of causation as rationally discernible. In this framework, causality is demoted from a logical or divine principle to a product of human psychology, reflecting the Enlightenment's shift toward empirical psychology. This reductionist perspective positioned causality as a cognitive illusion, essential for

⁷⁴ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 164-166.

practical life but lacking rational justification. Hume's copy principle underpins the psychological reduction, asserting that all ideas derive from sensory impressions. For causality, no impression exists of a "necessary connection" between events; instead, we observe only constant conjunctions, such as one billiard ball striking another followed by motion. The mind then infers causality through association, but this inference is psychological, not evidential. This restriction reduces causal knowledge to mental representations, denying any insight into objective mechanisms.

Central to Hume's reduction is the role of habit and custom in forming causal beliefs. Repeated observations create a "lively idea" in the mind, leading us to expect similar outcomes in the future, but this expectation stems from psychological conditioning rather than rational deduction. For instance, we believe fire causes heat because of habitual exposure, not because we perceive an intrinsic link. This demystifies causality as a learned response, integral to human behavior yet epistemically unfounded.⁷⁵ The notion of necessary connection is psychologically reduced to a projection of the mind. Hume argues that after observing repeated pairings, the mind supplies the idea of necessity, but this is an internal sentiment, not an external property. This reduction explains why causality feels compelling despite lacking empirical evidence, attributing

⁷⁵ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 45-50.

it to the mind's associative faculties. It underscores the subjective nature of causal reasoning, challenging objectivist interpretations.⁷⁶

Epistemologically, this reduction contributes to Hume's skepticism, as it limits knowledge of causality to observed patterns without warrant for generalization. The problem of induction arises here, where psychological habits drive predictions but offer no rational basis for believing in future uniformity. This confines cognitive scope to the psychological realm, questioning the reliability of scientific and everyday causal inferences. Critics of Hume's reduction, such as rationalists like Leibniz, argued that it overly diminishes causality by ignoring necessary truths accessible through reason. Leibniz posited that causal connections are grounded in divine logic, not mere psychology, viewing Hume's approach as reductive and insufficient for explaining universal laws. This criticism highlights the tension between psychological explanations and metaphysical commitments.⁷⁷

Kant's response to Hume's reduction expanded its implications by introducing synthetic a priori judgments, where causality is a necessary condition for experience structured by the mind. While acknowledging the psychological aspect, Kant argued

⁷⁶ D. Hume, *Op. Cit.*, p. 109.

⁷⁷ G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology* (trans. R. Latta, 1898), (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1714), p. 55.

that causality is not merely habitual but a transcendental category, thus partially vindicating Hume's insight while transcending pure psychologism. This influence demonstrates how Hume's reduction prompted reevaluations of causality in idealist philosophy. In contemporary philosophy, psychological reduction of causality resonates with cognitive science, where causation is studied as a mental model shaped by perceptual biases and learning mechanisms. Research in psychology supports Hume's view by showing how humans infer causality from correlations, often erroneously, reinforcing the reduction to cognitive processes. This bridges philosophy and empirical psychology, applying Hume's ideas to modern debates on perception and decision-making.⁷⁸ The enduring legacy of psychological reduction lies in its challenge to objectivist views, encouraging a humble epistemology that recognizes the mind's role in constructing reality. By reducing causality to psychology, Hume invites ongoing inquiry into how subjective experiences shape objective claims, influencing fields like philosophy of science and metaphysics. This perspective remains vital for understanding the limits of human cognition.

3.5 PRACTICAL INCONSISTENCY

Practical inconsistency in philosophical skepticism refers to the apparent tension

⁷⁸ R. J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 88.

between holding skeptical views—such as suspending judgment on knowledge claims—and engaging in everyday practical actions that seem to require beliefs or commitments. This objection, often termed the "apraxia" charge, suggests that if skeptics truly withhold assent from all propositions, they would be paralyzed, unable to decide or act in life. Ancient skeptics like Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus faced this criticism from dogmatists, who argued that skepticism undermines the basis for living. However, skeptics responded by distinguishing between involuntary appearances and voluntary judgments, allowing action based on how things seem without claiming truth. This framework highlights skepticism's practical viability despite theoretical doubt.⁷⁹

The roots of practical inconsistency trace to ancient Greek philosophy, where Pyrrhonian skeptics advocated epoché (suspension of judgment) to achieve ataraxia (tranquility). Critics like Aristocles contended that such suspension would prevent action, as decisions require beliefs about what is good or bad. Pyrrho's followers, however, lived undogmatically, following natural inclinations and customs without assent, demonstrating that skepticism need not lead to inaction. This response reframes inconsistency as a misunderstanding, emphasizing that skeptics act on appearances

⁷⁹ Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Scepticism* (trans. Annas, J., & Barnes, J.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 65.

(phainomena) rather than dogmas.⁸⁰

In Academic skepticism, figures like Arcesilaus and Carneades addressed practical inconsistency by introducing the "reasonable" (eulogon) or "probable" (pithanon) as guides for action. While suspending judgment on certainty, they allowed provisional assent to likely propositions, enabling practical engagement without full commitment. This mitigated approach avoids paralysis by permitting degrees of conviction based on evidence, thus resolving the apparent conflict between theory and practice.⁸¹ Sextus Empiricus, in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, systematically counters the apraxia objection by arguing that skeptics live according to fourfold observance: natural faculties, appetites, traditions, and arts. For example, hunger drives eating without believing in nutritional necessity. This shows that action stems from non-doxastic impulses, rendering skepticism practically consistent. Sextus emphasizes that dogmatists' insistence on belief for action is itself dogmatic, while skeptics thrive without it.⁸² David Hume's modern skepticism revives the issue of practical inconsistency through his analysis of induction and causation. Hume's skepticism

⁸⁰ J. Annas, & J. Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 78.

⁸¹ R. Bett, *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 33.

⁸² Sextus Empiricus, *Op Cit.*, p. 88.

questions rational justification for beliefs like future uniformity, yet he admits that custom and habit compel action despite doubt. This "mitigated skepticism" resolves inconsistency by acknowledging nature's role in overriding philosophical doubt in daily life. Hume illustrates practical inconsistency in his discussion of the self and external world, where philosophical reflection leads to doubt, but "carelessness and inattention" restore practical beliefs. He argues that extreme skepticism is unsustainable, as human nature forces engagement with the world, making mitigated doubt the only feasible path. This highlights the psychological limits of skepticism, where theory yields to practice.⁸³

Contemporary philosophers like Barry Stroud explore practical inconsistency in global skepticism, questioning how skeptics can act if they doubt all knowledge, including everyday propositions. Stroud contends that while theoretical skepticism is compelling, practical life demands "insulation" from doubt, suggesting an inherent tension without full resolution. This view portrays skepticism as intellectually honest but practically challenging. Critics of skepticism, such as Thomas Reid, amplify the practical inconsistency charge by defending common-sense realism. Reid argues that skeptical suspension contradicts innate faculties like perception, leading to absurd inaction if

⁸³ Hume, D. *Op. Cit.*, p. 120.

taken seriously. He dismisses skepticism as a philosophical pretense, inconsistent with lived experience. Responses to Reid emphasize that skepticism targets dogmatic certainty, not practical reliance on appearances. Modern Pyrrhonians like Robert Fogelin argue that skepticism fosters humility without impeding action, as decisions can follow provisional assessments. This reframes inconsistency as a virtue, promoting flexible engagement with the world. The enduring debate on practical inconsistency underscores skepticism's role in epistemology, forcing philosophers to balance doubt with livability. While unresolved in radical forms, mitigated versions demonstrate consistency, influencing fields like decision theory where uncertainty guides action without paralysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 EVALUATION

David Hume's skepticism represents a profound challenge to the foundations of human knowledge, rooted in his empiricist philosophy that all ideas originate from sensory impressions. In his seminal work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume distinguishes between "relations of ideas," which are demonstrable through reason alone (such as mathematical truths), and "matters of fact," which depend on experience and cannot be known a priori⁸⁴.

This dichotomy underscores his skeptical stance, as he argues that human knowledge is inherently limited to what can be observed, rendering metaphysical claims about unobservable entities—such as God, the soul, or necessary causal connections—unverifiable and often illusory. Hume's approach, often characterized as mitigated skepticism, does not advocate total doubt but rather a cautious restraint in philosophical inquiry, emphasizing practical belief over speculative certainty⁸⁵. This

⁸⁴ D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. (Edited by T. L. Beauchamp, 2000). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1748), p. 90.

⁸⁵ D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Edited by N. Kemp Smith, (Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill,), p. 54.

perspective critiques rationalist traditions, like those of Descartes, by highlighting how reason alone cannot bridge the gap between experience and universal truths, thereby problematizing the reliability of human cognition in grasping the external world.

Central to Hume's skepticism is his analysis of causation, which he dissects to reveal the absence of any perceivable necessary connection between events. Rather than viewing causes as inherently productive of effects, Hume posits that our idea of causation arises from habitual observation of constant conjunctions, coupled with a psychological propensity to infer future outcomes from past patterns⁸⁶. This argument exposes a fundamental problem in human knowledge: we assume causal links based on custom, not rational insight, leading to uncertainty in scientific and everyday reasoning. For instance, when we see one billiard ball strike another, we anticipate motion in the second, but this expectation stems from habit rather than any direct impression of power or necessity. Critics have evaluated this as a double-edged sword; while it grounds knowledge in empirical humility, it risks undermining the inductive basis of science, as no amount of observation can logically guarantee future uniformity⁸⁷. Hume's insight here forces a reevaluation of epistemology, suggesting

⁸⁶ D. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*. (Edited by D. F. Norton & M. J. Norton). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1740), p. 101.

⁸⁷ R. J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.

that human understanding is more associative and instinctive than demonstrative.

Hume's problem of induction further amplifies his skepticism, illustrating the circularity inherent in justifying generalizations from experience. He contends that inductive reasoning—projecting past regularities into the future—relies on the unprovable assumption that nature is uniform, an assumption that itself depends on induction for validation⁸⁸. This creates a regressive dilemma: without a non-circular rationale, all empirical knowledge degenerates into mere probability, devoid of absolute certainty. This resonates with our intuitive reliance on patterns for survival, yet it exposes the fragility of such knowledge, as unforeseen exceptions could always arise. Evaluations of this argument often praise its clarity in identifying epistemology's limits, influencing later philosophers like Kant to seek synthetic a priori foundations, but some argue it overstates skepticism by ignoring pragmatic justifications for induction in practical life.⁸⁹

Extending his skepticism to personal identity, Hume challenges the notion of a substantial self, arguing that introspection reveals only a "bundle or collection of

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⁸⁸ D. Hume, *Op Cit.*, p. 119.

⁸⁹ D. C. Ainslie, *Hume's True Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 78-79.

different perceptions" without any constant, underlying entity⁹⁰. This view problematizes human knowledge by questioning the continuity of the knower itself; if the self is merely a flux of impressions and ideas, then claims to self-knowledge become tentative associations rather than fixed truths. Academically, this has been evaluated as a radical empiricist reduction that anticipates modern bundle theories in philosophy of mind, though it invites criticism for potentially dissolving agency and moral responsibility into psychological habits.⁹¹

In evaluating Hume's overall contribution to the problem of human knowledge, his skepticism offers a liberating critique that demystifies grandiose metaphysical pretensions, promoting a naturalistic, experience-based epistemology that aligns with scientific method. However, detractors contend that his mitigated skepticism inconsistently retreats from radical doubt when convenient, as in his acceptance of custom as a guide for life, which some see as an ad hoc resolution to avoid Pyrrhonian paralysis⁹². Nonetheless, Hume's work endures as a cornerstone of modern philosophy,

⁹⁰ Hume, D. *Op Cit.*, p. 88.

⁹¹ R. Donway, "David Hume: Skepticism, Pessimism, Enlightenment." *Online Library of Liberty*, 2023.

⁹² Philosophy Forum, "What advance in epistemological or metaphysical knowledge did David Hume bring us?" *The Philosophy Forum*, 2019.

compelling us to confront the bounded nature of human intellect without descending into nihilism.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of David Hume's skepticism and its implications for the problem of human knowledge, it is recommended that future studies in epistemology continue to re-examine the foundations of human understanding in order to reconcile the tension between rational inquiry and empirical observation. Hume's doubt about causation and the reliability of inductive reasoning highlights the need for a balanced framework that does not dismiss human experience as entirely uncertain, yet also does not take knowledge claims for granted. Scholars should aim to build theories that critically engage with Hume's skepticism while seeking constructive alternatives that safeguard the relevance of human knowledge in scientific, moral, and social contexts.

A crucial recommendation in studying Hume's skepticism is to further investigate the practical limits of skepticism in relation to everyday reasoning. While Hume exposes the fragility of human certainty, his reflections also remind us that complete skepticism is unlivable in practice. Human beings naturally rely on habits, expectations, and inductive patterns to navigate the world, and these cannot be abandoned without

rendering life impossible. For this reason, scholars and students should work toward identifying how skepticism can serve as a tool for critical reflection without paralyzing human reasoning. This balanced application can help maintain intellectual humility while still allowing knowledge to function in guiding human action.

It is also recommended that philosophical inquiry into Hume's skepticism explore its implications for scientific methodology. Since Hume questions the justification of induction, modern thinkers should evaluate whether scientific progress depends on assumptions that cannot be rationally grounded. This does not diminish the value of science but highlights the necessity of acknowledging its limits. Engaging with Hume's skepticism in this way ensures that science is pursued with self-awareness, avoiding claims of absolute certainty and instead embracing a more critical, fallibilist outlook.

Another recommendation is that philosophers consider the ethical dimensions of Hume's skepticism. If human knowledge is inherently limited, moral and political decisions must account for uncertainty while still striving for justice and fairness. Hume's skepticism should therefore inspire a cautious, flexible approach to moral reasoning, one that avoids dogmatism and instead cultivates tolerance and open-mindedness. Applying Hume's insights in ethics could foster more inclusive and

pragmatic forms of moral deliberation, ensuring that decisions remain sensitive to the complexities of human experience. It is essential for contemporary philosophy to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches in addressing the challenges posed by Hume's skepticism. Insights from cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience can enrich philosophical debates by providing empirical evidence on how humans actually form beliefs, perceive causation, and process knowledge. Such interdisciplinary engagement would not only deepen the understanding of Hume's critiques but also open new pathways for bridging the gap between theory and practice in the study of human cognition.

It is recommended that modern philosophy connect Hume's skepticism with contemporary debates in epistemology and philosophy of mind. Current discussions about artificial intelligence, perception, and the reliability of memory resonate strongly with Hume's concerns about the sources and justification of human belief. By drawing parallels between Hume's thought and these modern debates, scholars can demonstrate the enduring relevance of skepticism in understanding human and machine knowledge alike. This connection would broaden the impact of Hume's insights, extending them into emerging areas of intellectual inquiry. It is also recommended that educators and philosophers encourage critical engagement with Hume's skepticism in academic

discourse, especially within the context of teaching philosophy. By confronting students with the radical challenges Hume poses to human knowledge, they are better equipped to appreciate the complexities of epistemology, develop analytical reasoning, and evaluate the assumptions underlying knowledge claims. This pedagogical emphasis not only sustains the relevance of Hume's thought but also ensures that future generations of scholars are capable of addressing the enduring problem of skepticism in constructive and innovative ways.

Finally, in advancing the study of Hume's skepticism, philosophy should not only focus on its critical dimensions but also on its constructive potential. Hume's philosophy challenges us to acknowledge human limitations without abandoning the pursuit of truth. His skepticism, when rightly understood, provides a foundation for humility, tolerance, and intellectual openness. Future research and teaching should therefore aim to reinterpret skepticism not as the end of knowledge but as a pathway to deeper inquiry into the meaning and value of human understanding.

4.3 CONCLUSION

David Hume's skepticism remains one of the most profound challenges to human understanding. By questioning the certainty of causation, the reliability of induction, and the limits of human reason, Hume forces us to confront the fragility of what we

often take as knowledge. His philosophy reveals that much of human belief is rooted not in rational demonstration but in custom and habit, exposing the tension between our intellectual aspirations and our lived experience. This recognition is unsettling but also liberating, as it encourages humility in our claims to certainty.

Hume's skepticism is not merely a philosophical puzzle but a reminder of the condition of human existence. Every individual relies daily on patterns of experience to make sense of the world, even when such reliance cannot be fully justified. The inability to ground knowledge with absolute certainty does not negate the value of human reasoning; rather, it highlights the resilience of human beings in navigating uncertainty. In this sense, Hume's thought speaks to the shared human struggle of seeking meaning in an unpredictable world.

Hume's skepticism also carries deep implications for science and intellectual inquiry. His doubts about induction reveal the tentative nature of scientific progress, reminding us that theories are always subject to revision. Yet, far from undermining science, this perspective strengthens it by encouraging a culture of critical questioning and openness to new evidence. The human pursuit of knowledge, though limited, becomes more robust when it accepts uncertainty as part of its foundation rather than as a weakness to be denied. In ethics and practical life, Hume's skepticism pushes us

toward tolerance and flexibility. If certainty is elusive, then humility and openness to alternative viewpoints become essential in human relations. This perspective discourages dogmatism and instead fosters cooperation, dialogue, and pragmatic solutions to moral and social issues. By acknowledging the limitations of human knowledge, individuals and societies can cultivate wisdom in judgment and moderation in action. Hume's skepticism is not a call to despair but an invitation to deeper reflection. It reminds us that human knowledge, though imperfect, is still meaningful and necessary for survival and progress. The problem of human knowledge, as revealed through Hume's skepticism, should not be seen as an obstacle but as a guide toward a more cautious, critical, and honest engagement with the world. In embracing this perspective, philosophy continues to serve its essential purpose: helping humanity confront its limits while striving to understand and improve the human condition.

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