

David Hume's Skepticism - Expression of the Late Baroque

Marius DUMITRESCU¹

¹ “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași,
Romania; e-mail:

dumitrescu.marius66@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The early Baroque, characterized by the skeptical spirit of the 16th century, reaches its peak in the following century with Descartes' hyperbolic doubt. The purpose of this paper is to analyze two of Hume's works, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding in order to place the philosopher in the tradition of Baroque thought. First of all, we will show that David Hume pushed skepticism far beyond its ancient or Cartesian limits, attacking even our way of formulating sentences, which is a subjective one, the result of some psychological factors that cannot be the basis of science. Secondly, we will demonstrate that Hume's skepticism belongs to the late Baroque and is, by its radical character, a form of metaphysical denial of any universal certainties. In conclusion, Hume's skeptical spirit, manifested in relation to the authority constructed by the post-Westphalian ideology, overcame the past, which was at the time denied, and represents, from a philosophical point of view, the origin of the revolutionary spirit of the second half of the 18th century.*

Keywords: *David Hume's skepticism; expression of the Late Baroque; skeptical spirit.*

How to cite: Dumitrescu, M. (2024). David Hume's skepticism - expression of the late Baroque. *BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 15(2), 113-121. <https://doi.org/10.18662/brain/15.2/567>

Introduction

If from Antiquity until the Middle Ages the geocentric theory of the solar system proposed by Ptolemy was kept intact, beginning with the 15th century, scientists from the 16th and especially the 17th century, such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brache, Johannes Kepler or Galileo Galilei, demonstrated that the Earth revolves around the Sun, that the universe is infinite and contains a multitude of suns, around which countless planets revolve. Thus, a new artistic and philosophical expression structuring the spirit of Western Europe between the Renaissance and modern Classicism emerged and we now call it the Baroque.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze two of Hume's works, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in order to place the philosopher in the tradition of Baroque thought.

The genesis of Baroque skepticism in the 16th and 17th centuries

At its beginning, the Baroque was related to the religious experience of a man living in an era marked by a crisis that disturbed the Renaissance humanism. Before the Copernican and Lutheran revolutions, the universe was considered to be marked by the presence of the Creator and everything was a sign from God, but after these moments Europe's elite was looking for a solid landmark. In the 17th century, however, people developed the belief that the world of nature and that of divine grace have become external to each other. The Baroque man presents himself as a pessimist, because he has the feeling of searching for God without finding him. God is present, but inaccessible. He gives Himself to man only in ecstasy or in a dream, but even so He is obscure, He becomes a *Deus absconditus*. God seems to be playing with man, placing him in a space of ambiguity between idolatry and internalization.

At the opposite pole, the devil has also been charged with certain ambivalence as he, in turn, appears as a character who can offer man advantages that, under the normal conditions of life, he will never be able to obtain. The Baroque captures this tension between a coherent world and the forces that threaten it, behind which one can read a certain mistrust and suspicion of God (Cordoneanu, 2016).

The Baroque creates the model of *homo duplex*, an ambiguous, extremely contrasting being, which, depending on the angle from which it is viewed, can be the exact opposite of what was initially captured. Faced with

the infinite universe, man is divided between a rational intellect, capable of spontaneous participation in divine wisdom and will, and a sensory nature, which plunges humanity into all the consequences of a radical skepticism. *Homo duplex* is a particular way of the Baroque man of relating to himself as a being capable of pure rational intuition and self-governance, but disturbed by sensory inclinations and desires.

The radical skepticism of the late Baroque

With Isaac Newton's discoveries, it seemed that the Baroque thought paradigm, based on doubt and ambivalence, could no longer be justified. Newton's physics, through universal attraction, discovered the law that could provide the royal path to a universal truth received at the cosmic level, which left no room for doubt. Thus, Francis Bacon's dream of creating an empire of science seemed to confirm itself, and the Royal Society was finding its intended purpose.

In this context in which post-Cartesian modernity seemed to have freed the human spirit from Baroque doubts and ambivalences, however, the Scottish David Hume pushed skepticism far beyond its ancient or Cartesian limits by attacking our very way of formulating sentences, which is a subjective one, resulting of psychological factors, which cannot be the basis of science.

In the fourth section, part I, of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume introduces the idea of skeptical doubt about the operations of the intellect.

Seeking to identify the mysterious element that causes us to give evidence and certainty to knowledge based on relationship between facts, Hume discovers it in the association between cause and effect (Hume, 2011). This type of correlation, considered by Aristotle to accommodate necessity and universality, was seen as the fundamental element of the foundation of the scientific spirit. For Aristotle, the cause was not alien to its effect, which presented itself as a necessary development or extension of the first. Hume turned to precisely this kind of necessary connection between cause and effect, where he found, however, that there was nothing to bind them together. The deduction of a necessary connection between them thus proves to be completely unfounded.

Hearing an articulate voice and meaningful speech, in the dark, assures us of the presence of a person. Why? Because the voice and speech are the effects of the human constitution and build and are closely related to it (Hume, 2011). But there is also the case of auditory illusions or hallucinations, which are an exception to this rule.

The causal relationship captures only simple succession reports, without being able to explain the transmission of movement, which remains one of the greatest enigmas in the universe (Hume, 2011). The causal relationship, the Scottish thinker shows, cannot be acquired through a priori reasoning, but is born entirely from experience; it is the result of our being accustomed to certain sequences in nature that have been repeated. The conclusion is that all the laws of nature and the actions of bodies, without exception, are known only through experience.

It is never possible for the spirit to find the effect in its supposed cause, not even by the most exact research and examination. For the effect is entirely different from the cause and cannot, therefore, ever be discovered in it. A stone or piece of metal raised in the air and left there unsupported falls at once; but if we examine things a priori, is there anything, in this situation, which can give rise to the idea of a downward motion rather than an upward, or any other motion of stone or metal? There are even concrete situations where in certain places the laws of gravity are reversed, such as those hills where it is difficult to descend them. Every effect is an event distinct from its cause, it cannot be discovered in the cause, and what we could invent and think about it first, a priori, must be entirely arbitrary.

The epistemological limits of post-Cartesian rationalism

Rationalism, by trying to identify order in the world, did nothing but project onto reality an order that belongs more to our consciousness than to the world we discover through experience. Without having even the faintest idea of the reasons why the world presents itself as it is, the rationalists believed that we could explain its essence, that we could identify the internal mechanisms by which it is regulated.

Moreover, Mathematics do not help us at all, considers Hume, because it only gives us quantitative data and, in no case, qualitative data regarding the real nature of things. Geometry helps us in the application of the laws, by giving us the exact dimensions of the parts and figures which can constitute any kind of device, but the discovery of the law itself we owe only to experience, and all the abstract reasoning in the world could not lead us even a step forward towards its knowledge (Hume, 2011). The force of gravity can be measured, but not understood, and this is true for all physical laws - from Archimedes' law to Boyle Mariotte's.

Among the ideas that appear in Metaphysics, for Hume, none are more obscure and uncertain than those of power, force, energy or necessary connection (Hume, 2011). When we look around us at external objects, and consider the action of causes, we are never able, by considering only one

case, to discover any necessary force or connection, any quality which binds the effect to the cause, and makes one the infallible consequence of the other. We will only note that the effect actually follows the cause. The impulse of one billiard ball is followed by the movement of the second. This is all that appears to the external senses: a simple succession report. The spirit feels no inner experience or impression arising from this succession of objects. There is, therefore, in no singular case of relation between cause and effect, anything which can suggest the idea of necessary force or connection.

Hume develops a radical skepticism about the possibility of understanding how the soul communicates with the body (Hume, 2011). In his view, the movement of our body follows the command of our will, and therefore we are conscious at every moment. But as to the means by which this movement is effected, or the energy by which the will performs such an extraordinary operation, we are so far from being directly aware of it, and so these actions will always escape our most zealous researches. Commanding our arm to rise and asking the moon to stand still represent the same impenetrable mystery of the human mind. Causality is the product of our habituation to successions of objects and what usually accompanies them (Hume, 2011). The same skepticism that appears in connection with the idea of causality can be caught in Hume's philosophy when the status of the ego is analyzed. The thinker does not deny its existence, but only its character as a principle, being established by Cartesian philosophy. Moreover, the *Impressions*, considered by Hume as the only certainty of the self, throws us into the deepest skepticism in that, for the Scottish philosopher, its origin does not matter, because it can be from God, from an objective reality or simply a product of human imagination (Hume, 1956a).

David Hume criticizes the mystique of the causal relationship that would be able to accommodate necessity and universality in the plan of history by the fact that we cannot precisely identify the final cause in a strictly speculative way, but we can only make a philosophy of history or give meaning and significance to past facts, and our predictions usually have a much too high degree of probability to be able to slide into the field of science, therefore of the necessity and the universality.

Descartes creates the possibility of applying the mathematical model to physical reality, developing in his *Meditations* a true theistic vision of the world, which finds a guarantee of coherence in the idea of a Creator as a Perfect Being, who, in this capacity, would be impossible to be deceitful. The Divine Intellect becomes for Descartes the guarantee that we live in the best of the possible worlds, an idea that will ignite the minds of Spinoza and Leibniz. Spinoza believed that there is an order *sub specie aeternitatis*, which is

guaranteed by the Divinity, and Leibniz argues, starting from this, that we must live in the best of all the possible worlds, governed by a pre-established harmony guaranteed by a sufficient reason, which makes things to be as they are and not otherwise. The idea of a sufficient reason, however, inevitably sends us into the deepest mysticism.

For Hume, Mathematics cannot capture the essence of sensible things, as Descartes once believed, but only measures the data that comes into experience; it has a strictly quantitative dimension, not a qualitative one, which explains why it happens this way and not otherwise. Mathematical measurements that capture repeatability, constancy, in the universe, do not offer their understanding. Thus, based on these measurements, the necessity and universality of the causal relationship cannot be guaranteed.

For the Scottish philosopher, such a vision has nothing philosophical, being founded on mysticism, on blind faith in a transcendental principle, which would govern the world and which we would reach definitively only through faith.

The disenchantment of the world or epistemic realism in Hume's philosophy

In the face of rationalists' arguments, Hume constantly remains on the tolerant positions of a skepticism that accepts causality, but he diminished its mystical aura that gave it necessity and universality. The Scottish philosopher approaches science and its products in a cautious manner, considering that man should never trust them in an absolute manner. We must be prepared for anything: for causes that produce totally opposite effects, for effects whose cause is of a totally different nature. Past experience can be an argument for a possible anticipation of events, but we have no guarantee that they will unfold in the future as they have unfolded so far.

Causality is related to a psychological factor, namely to our pattern of certain sequences that are constantly repeated. Pattern does not belong to logic, to a priori, to reason, but to experience.

Descartes' suspicion at the end of the *First Meditation* (Descartes, 1980) that the world may be a figment of an evil genius with which, for psychological comfort, we have to get used to it is very similar to Hume's principle of Custom or Habit (Hume, 2011), considered as the criterion of a relative truth, which has no way to test its absolute value because our experience takes place *hic et nunc*, here and now, and a trans-temporal truth, which transcends sensible experience, is, from his point of view, impossible to demonstrate.

The solution to this problem, however, is totally different from the point of view of these two philosophers. Descartes capitulates and, beginning with the *Second Meditation*, introduces the *cogito*, discovering a universe of eternal truths that lead him to the authority of a God who, as a Perfect Being, is a guarantor of the order in the world. Instead, David Hume remains consistent with the skeptical spirit of Descartes' *First Meditation* and takes doubt into that space patronized not by an evil genius, but by a God who can do everything, including changing all those truths that seem at first glance to be eternal. What scared Descartes, namely the free possibility that God has to create eternal truths, becomes for Hume a potential one because we have no firm rational criterion for ascribing necessity and universality to the causal relation.

The Scottish philosopher does not deny the causality and *status-quo* of the world, but he deprives them of the magical quality that would allow them to accommodate necessity and universality. No one can guarantee us that things will not look different in the future. In this skeptical terrain, faith is the strong element, and religion becomes a natural matter for the human being, the only animal that can have access to the future.

Thus, one can speak of an early Baroque, characterized by the skeptical spirit of the 16th century, which reaches its peak through the hyperbole-type doubt that Descartes stages in his first *Meditation*, but there is also a late Baroque, as we encounter especially in David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

In the context of the late Baroque, David Hume notes the ambivalence of man when he mentions an alternative of attitudes, between the tendency to return to idolatry, as a product of human fears and weaknesses, which is opposed by excessive theistic confidence, born from the power of the intellect to get detached from the sensible.

In Hume's view, a religion of superstition is degrading for the idea of God and for man. Such a religion devoid of any kind of philosophical dimension is based on idol worship and is founded eminently on the force of tradition, having a great inconvenience: it can authorize "any practice or opinion, however barbarous or corrupted" it may be (Hume, 1956b).

At the end of the work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume would nevertheless state that the theistic philosophers, as this tradition was introduced by the post-Cartesians, especially by Spinoza and Leibniz, who nurture or at least try to nurture ideas conforming to the divine perfections are preferable to those who blindly abandon themselves to superstitions (Hume, 1779). However, the royal way through which man can relate to God remains, in Hume's view, the skeptical one, which is practiced by a

small sect of brave philosophers who can take the risks of solitude. Hume's conclusion is that: "For a man of letters, the first and most important step to the sound faith of the true Christian is to begin by being a skeptical philosopher" (Hume, 1779).

On a philosophical level, an attitude specific to the early baroque spirit is taking shape that belongs to the great skeptics, such as Pierre Charron, Michael de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, but also to the fine analysts of error and doubt, such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes, or of human ambivalences, as they are presented in the work of William Shakespeare. However, with Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the transition is made from mystical contemplation to intellectual meditation (Cordoneanu, 2016), which inevitably must first face the test of doubt, which both in the case of Descartes and Hume, acquires hyperbolic accents.

All these skeptical perspectives, however, reach their peak with the radical doubt of David Hume, present in a late Baroque period, in which the conflict is no longer with superstitions and scholastic worldviews, but with the authority of a rational theistic theology, marked by post-Cartesianism and the philosophical implications of Newtonian physics.

Conclusion

David Hume's skepticism is, by its radical character, a form of metaphysical denial of any universal certainties, preparing the ground for that laugh of Voltaire in *Candid*, whose eponymous character discovers firsthand what it means to live in the best of all possible worlds, governed by a preordained harmony.

We consider that the late Baroque, marked by the radical skepticism of David Hume, indicated, from a philosophical point of view, the origin of the revolutionary spirit of the second half of the 18th century. This skeptical spirit towards authority built by post-Westphalian ideology began with the American Revolution and culminated in the French Revolution, when all values centered on peace between Catholics and Protestants were overcome by another perspective, in which the past was this time denied and not assimilated in an alchemical manner.

References

- Cordoneanu, I. (2016). Descartes or the origins of modern thinking. *Annals of Philosophy, Social and Human Disciplines*, 2(1):53-65.
- Descartes, R. (1980). *Meditations on first philosophy*. In R. Descartes, *Discourse on method and meditations on first philosophy*. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Hume, D. (1779). *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, no. II, a new edition, with a preface and notes, which bring the subject down to the present time. Thomas Scott.
- Hume, D. (1956b). *The Natural History of Religion*. Adam & Charles Black.
- Hume, D. (2011). *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Hume, D. (1956a). *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in two volumes. Introduction by A. D. Lindsay. London: J. M. Dent & Sons LTD; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co Inc.