David Hume, “Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses”

Hume thinks that it is senseless to ask whether there is an external world, because we must presuppose that there is to reason about anything whatsoever.

However, he doesn’t think that it is senseless to ask what causes us to believe in the existence of the external world.

It is this question that he takes up in the present selection.

**He breaks this question down into two parts:**

First, he asks why we attribute continued existence to objects;

second, he asks why we attribute distinct existence to objects.

**The two notions, those of continued and distinct existence, are clearly related.**

Hume admits that they each might imply the other, but they are nevertheless independent questions.

The idea of continued existence is the idea that the same object persists over an interval of time.

And the idea of distinct existence is the idea that objects are completely independent of our perceptions.

Based on Hume's system that he has developed elsewhere, the answer to the question of what causes us to attribute continued and distinct existence to objects must be either the **senses, reason, or the imagination.**

**Hume first argues that the cause can’t be our senses.**

Part of what we are talking about when we talk about continued existence, for example, is whether objects continue to exist even when we are not perceiving them.

But clearly, then, our idea of continued existence can’t be caused by our senses, as that would imply that our senses cause us to believe that objects exist even when we aren’t sensing them, which is nonsense.

At the same time, **Hume argues that the cause can’t be reason,** because we certainly don’t need to consult any rational principles to determine whether to believe in the external world—even children do it, and they don’t give any thought to principles at all.

**Thus, Hume concludes that the cause must be imagination.**

He then goes on to examine in detail how the imagination causes us to believe in the external world.

His explanation has much to do with the fact that **our perceptions are both constant and coherent.**

Because of these two features, we intuitively think that our perceptions have continued existence.

But then upon reflection, we realize that new perceptions must be coming into existence at every moment.

The only way out of this contradiction is to posit the double existence of internal perceptions, on the one hand, and external objects, on the other.
CONSTANCY

We are, according to Hume, predispositioned to regard successive impressions as constant, which leads us to regard interrupted perceptions as the same because we ignore the numerical differences, such as time and place, between them.

We consider these impressions to be the same on account of their resemblance.

The interruption we perceive is contrary to a perfect, ongoing, existence.

We perceive that the first impression is annihilated and a second impression is newly created.

This is a difficult concept for the human mind and we resolve this by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are created by a real existence.

COHERENCE

Hume writes that constancy has to be combined with coherence in order to be able to explain our propensity to believe in the existence of external objects.

Our internal impressions have a certain regularity—an internal coherence—in their appearances.

Hume argues that the mind postulates external objects in order to explain this regularity in our experiences.

The mind makes extended assumptions based on our partial observance of the world.

Hume gives the example of him hearing a squeaking sound and after a short while seeing a porter with a letter for him.

From these two facts his mind deduces that the porter opened the front door, walked up the staircase and entered his study.

He believes these events to be facts, although he has not actually perceived them.

Hume argues that the perceived events only make sense if he assumes that the door exists, even when he does not perceive it: ‘I am led to regard the world as something real and durable and as preserving its existence, even when it is no longer present to my perception’.

In the end, Hume leaves us with a skeptical and defeatist attitude, pointing out not only that positing double existence is ridiculous, but also that we can’t help it.