"Of Skepticism with Regard to the Senses"

David Hume
General Points about Hume’s Project

❖ The rationalist method used by Descartes cannot provide justification for any substantial, interesting claims about the world.

❖ We can come to know trivial, a priori truths through reasoning, like “All bachelors are unmarried”; but we cannot discover anything of true interest that way.

❖ Hume argues that some important beliefs about the world cannot be justified either by reason or by experience.

❖ These include beliefs about the future; beliefs in the form of universal generalizations and the belief that causality (the relationship of cause-and-effect) is real. As we will see, Hume defends a form of skepticism about such beliefs.
We have these important beliefs, not because they are supported by evidence, but because the human mind works in such a way that we cannot help but to believe them.

Such beliefs cannot be given a philosophical justification, but they can be given a psychological explanation.

An explanation of why we believe them, even if we are never justified in doing so.
Hume distinguished between the “vulgar opinion”—the common sense belief that perception and external objects are the same—and the philosophical view, in which perception and the perceived object are distinct from each other.

Hume believes that the philosophical view of representative realism is worse than the naive realism of the common sense view, because the philosophical view takes no stand on whether our perceptions are continued, identical and independent or whether they are dependent, interrupted and different.

The philosophical view tries to justify the belief in external objects on these contradictory assumptions, which results in a ‘system of double existence’.
Hume argues that Locke’s view of the external world is a “system of double existence”.

There is an extra-mental entity that is represented by the mental entity, and which resembles the mental entity, at least in those qualities that Locke calls “primary,” such as shape, size and relative spatial position.
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.
What causes us to believe in the existence of the external world?

- He breaks this question down into two parts:
  - **First**, he asks why we attribute continued existence to objects
    - The idea of continued existence is the idea that the same object persists over an interval of time.
  - **Second**, he asks why we attribute distinct existence to objects
    - 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.
Hume argues that the cause can’t be reason

- 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.
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.
- Hume expresses much dismay at any system that posits such double existence, and he goes onto explain why, according to his system, there can be no connection between external objects and internal perceptions, even if we suppose that external objects do exist.