

Chapter One

Epistemological Humility and Its Other

Descartes

The happiness [the Utilitarians] meant was not a life of rapture, but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures . . . and having as the foundation of the whole not to expect more from life that it is capable of bestowing.

—John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

I

“Epistemology” is the study of different theories of knowledge, of how we know things and how we can know when we know them. The philosophy of science, for instance, is a kind of epistemology that studies knowledge claims in the sciences. Epistemological humility would then be humility about the nature, extent, and reliability of human knowledge. The intrinsic link between that kind of humility and ontological humility should be clear: to think we can have absolute knowledge, even absolute knowledge that no knowledge is possible, is to deny human limitation, at least as regards our knowledge of the world. Conversely, epistemological humility, taken seriously enough, can become the grounds for ontological humility where it might not otherwise have developed, especially in philosophers who were not necessarily humble as human beings. One of the main lessons Harry Potter learns in the final book of the saga, as we have seen, is that he must surrender his “need to be sure, to know *everything*.”¹

Much of “modern” philosophy (philosophy roughly between 1600 and 1800) focuses mainly, although certainly not exclusively, on the need “to know *everything*,” at least in part in response to the major

scientific advances that were made during that time. The philosophers we will look at in this chapter represent three different major schools of thought about the nature and sources of human knowledge. This look backward to these three epistemological approaches will provide the historical context for the debates about knowledge, ontology, and humility in the twentieth century. At the same time, it will also offer some interesting examples of how different philosophical views can lead to a similar degree of humility and how similar philosophical views can lead to different attitudes toward what is implied in those philosophies about that which transcends human existence.

The epistemological focus of modern philosophy has its deepest roots in the work of René Descartes. He begins his “Discourse on Method” (1637) with what might appear to be appropriate epistemological humility: “. . . the power of forming a good judgment and of distinguishing the true and the false, which is properly speaking what is called Good Sense or Reason, is by nature equal in all men” (PWD-I 81). The impact of his words is weakened, however, when one learns that this sentiment was a common one in seventeenth-century philosophical writings. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, writes in *Leviathan* (1668) that “Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that . . . when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he.”² More doubt is cast on the epistemological humility of either Descartes or Hobbes when they go toe-to-toe in the acrimonious and unproductive debate in the “Objections and Replies” to Descartes’s “Meditations” (PWD-II 60–78).

Similarly, Descartes’s seeming epistemological humility (“the nature of man, in as much as it is composed of mind and body, cannot be otherwise than sometimes a source of deception” [PWD-I 198]) takes on a different tone when examined more closely. In proving God’s existence in the Third Meditation, he says of his parents that,

although all I have ever been able to believe of them were true, that does not make it follow that it is they who . . . [are] the authors of my being in any sense, in so far as I am a thinking being; since what they did was merely to implant certain dispositions in that matter in which the self—i.e. the mind, which alone I at present identify with myself—is by me deemed to exist.

He goes on to say that “For from the sole fact that God created me it is most probable that in some way he has placed his image and similitude

upon me, and that I perceive this similitude . . . by means of the same faculty by which I perceive myself” (PWD-I 170). Some argue that this means Descartes’s existence as a mind or “self” is due directly to God—a far from humble claim.³ Moreover, this passage implies not only that he created in the image of God, but also that he knows God (already a strong epistemological claim) in the same way that he knows himself.

If we can conclude from the prologue that religious belief is not a necessary condition for ontological humility, because even Kierkegaard believes such humility can exist outside of faith, our first lesson here may be that religious belief is not a sufficient condition for ontological humility either, since it seems to coexist in Descartes with a fairly high level of epistemological (and thereby ontological) arrogance. We noted in the prologue, too, what could be considered another dimension of Descartes’s lack of ontological humility: his abandonment of Aristotelian final causes in favor of measuring the existence of a thing exclusively in terms of human needs because our inability to know the “[inscrutable] ends of God” means such final causes have “no useful employment” in science.⁴ Descartes asserts instead that once he has proven the existence of God, “I have the means of acquiring a *perfect* knowledge of an infinitude of things,” including “those which pertain to corporeal nature in so far as it is the object of pure mathematics,” so long as that knowledge does not depend on whether whatever it is knowledge about actually exists or not (PWD-I 185, my emphasis).

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But what good is knowledge that has nothing to do with the actual existence of things? (One hears echoes of a common accusation against Descartes in Hagrid’s complaint about the centaurs from the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts who, he tells Harry, aren’t “interested in anything closer’n the moon.”⁵) Descartes represents, and epitomizes, one major epistemological school in modern philosophy, Rationalism. Rationalism is the view that all knowledge must come from reason alone and not from our perception of actually existing things, since all perceptions can be doubted as possible illusions, dreams, or worse. For instance, Descartes concludes the Second Meditation by saying that “even [physical] bodies are not properly speaking known by the senses . . . , but by the understanding only” (PWD-I 157). He argues for this by showing that every sensory quality we experience in a piece of beeswax (color, shape, smell, consistency, etc.) changes when it melts, yet we know that it remains the same piece of wax. Since we cannot know this by anything our senses tell us (because they tell us different things in the

two situations), Descartes concludes that we can only know it through reason, which provides us with the concept of a single physical substance that underlies all the changes in sensory qualities of the wax. The general argument of the first two Meditations leads Descartes to the conclusion that sense experience can always be doubted and so cannot be the basis of the absolutely certain knowledge he is seeking.

This search for absolutely certain knowledge, for certainty not beyond a reasonable doubt but beyond any possible doubt, or at least the belief that such certainty can be obtained, is the mirror opposite of epistemological humility. Such certainty might be found in fields such as logic or mathematics because they are self-contained abstract systems. Descartes's greatest scientific achievement was, of course, the invention of analytic geometry, and his fellow Rationalist Baron von Leibniz developed calculus independently of Sir Isaac Newton. What these Rationalists then do is to apply the standards and the methods of their success in mathematics to the very different problem of how we know the physical world around us.

But how could science work on the Rationalists' principle? Descartes offers several examples in Part V of "Discourse on Method." In discussing the human circulatory system, for instance, he assumes that the heart cannot be a muscle, since it never rests, and also that it has two chambers, like the lungs, rather than the four we now know it to have. On these bases, he considers the heart to be a relatively passive organ, again like the lungs, that is driven by heating and cooling of the blood. In general, science in this period tends to start with theories about how things work, often borrowed from Aristotle or others of the ancient philosopher-scientists, and derive applications or experiments from those theories, as opposed to the modern understanding of science as working in the opposite direction to develop theories out of experimental observations.⁶ Alchemists knew the properties of gold, for instance, and used various methods to attempt to discover how to create it out of baser metals, but when those experiments failed, they didn't question what they knew about gold, which was part of a long and rich tradition, but rather tried different ways of achieving the same end. Despite their contributions to our knowledge of the chemical and physical world, they failed to question what they knew and how they had come to know it, that is, they lacked epistemological humility.

By taking the certainty and methods of mathematics as the basis for their epistemology, the Rationalists severed our knowledge of the world from that world itself because they underemphasized, or denied, the role of sense experience in how we know things. That some of them made great scientific advances in this way easily obscured the basic lack

of ontological humility they showed in assuming that absolute certainty was not only the goal of human knowing, but was also obtainable by human minds. Even Spinoza, a Rationalist who, as a person, has the reputation of being one of the kindest and most humble of philosophers, wavers between the very strong epistemological claim, on the one hand, that he knows the nature of God and, on the other hand, the ontological humility to acknowledge that this knowledge reveals that God has an infinite number of attributes about which humans can have no knowledge at all.

There is no such ambivalence in Descartes. His philosophical stance is entirely compatible with the personality one might expect of a man who was fully aware that he had made one of the greatest mathematical advances in roughly two thousand years. While it is true that he does say things such as “we must confess that the life of man is very frequently subject to error in respect to individual objects, and we must in the end acknowledge the infirmity of our nature,” note the limitation of this humility to “individual objects,” that is, the everyday things around us, as opposed to the broader metaphysical truths he believes he has proven with absolute certainty. Moreover, he limits such humility to “the exigencies of action [that] often oblige us to make up our minds before having the leisure to examine matters carefully” (PWD-II99). In mathematics, science and philosophy, by contrast, where such exigencies don’t exist, he implies that we can examine matters carefully enough to avoid any possible error. His limited humility here is a matter of practical limitations, not the inescapable humility in principle found in Spinoza.

III

In order to carry out the comparisons that are central to this chapter, we must focus on the three main metaphysical certainties Descartes believes his “method” can establish without any doubt. Up until now, however, the word “metaphysics” has only appeared here as something analytic philosophers were against. Since ontology is technically a species of metaphysics, a positive definition of metaphysics would seem to be required. Briefly, metaphysics can be understood as what must be known before one can do physics or any other kind of science, or as what is beyond (*meta-*) nature (*physis*): it is the study of the ultimate nature of reality and so also the study of what transcends reality. The three classic subdivisions of metaphysics—ontology, psychology, and theology—correspond to three core elements of Descartes’s philosophy. This is not an accident, but rather one sign of Descartes’s lack of ontological humility. Despite his insistence that he rejects “as false *everything* to which I

could imagine the least ground of doubt” (PWD-I 101, my emphasis), he recapitulates many of the fundamental structures of the Aristotelian thought he is otherwise eager to toss aside.

There are deeper reasons, however, why Descartes, who begins by doubting everything, ends up showing neither epistemological nor ontological humility. Consider what the claim to doubt everything really means. Descartes bases this doubt on the fact that what the senses tell us can be false because of various illusions or because we are dreaming, and even what reason tells us could be false if there were an all-powerful “Evil Demon” determined to deceive us. The only thing he finds that he cannot doubt in this way is his own existence, from which he rebuilds a world knowable by reason due to the goodness of God. But could a human being every truly doubt *everything*? Descartes’s defenders might object, as Hume does, that his doubt is “methodological,” not a real doubt at all. If that is so, what must he assume about his method that gives it precedence over all the knowledge, philosophical or otherwise, that had been accumulated in the tradition up to his time? And what must he assume about himself?

Moreover, Descartes draws conclusions on the basis of his doubt that are not only often similar to traditional philosophical tenets, but also constitute very strong metaphysical and epistemological claims. One of Descartes’s first distinctions in the “Meditations” is between himself as a “thinking thing” and his body (PWD-I 153). This generates a dualistic ontology (that is, the belief that there are two and only two kinds of being) based on a strict division between minds and material bodies: “because, on the one side, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other, I possess a distinct idea of body, inasmuch as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that this I is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body and can exist without it” (PWD-I 190).

Genevieve Lloyd and many others have commented on the specific forms of the oppression of women that arise from such a sharp divide between the mind (always identified with men) and the body (subordinate to the mind and always identified with women).⁷ It is also noteworthy that J. K. Rowling often invokes the distinction between mind (or soul) and body in the Harry Potter books, but she also has a concept of the mind that is at least partially material—think of the gray gas/liquid that reveals people’s memories in Dumbledore’s Pensieve.

Descartes’s dualist ontology results in the sharply dualistic epistemology described above. Our knowledge of material bodies is subject to doubt insofar as it comes to us through the senses, which might deceive us. On the other hand, our knowledge of material things insofar

as they exist in three-dimensional space, that is, insofar as they are the objects of mathematical and geometrical knowledge, has “some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable” since these ways of knowing are purely rational and cannot, in the ordinary order of things, be doubted (PWD-I 147). With regard to human reason itself, moreover, our knowledge can be absolute: “I see clearly that there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my mind” (PWD-I 157).

Much of Descartes’s theology is likewise allied with very strong metaphysical claim that becomes a key issue in modern philosophy, the nature of causal necessity. Aristotle tells us that it is necessary for everything that happens to have a cause, and necessary for the effect to occur once the causal event happens. Despite his claim to doubt everything, Descartes accept this traditional understanding of causality without question, including some of the less obviously true corollaries to it found in Scholasticism. In proving the existence of God in the Third Meditation, for instance, he posits without further argument, “that there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect” (PWD-I 162). He uses this premise to prove that, if he has the idea of an infinite substance, that is, God, then that idea must be caused by an infinite substance, and therefore God must exist.

He uses a similar causal principle in the argument referred to earlier in which he establishes that whatever caused his own existence must have “every perfection of which [he possessed] any idea,” and would thus be God (PWD-I 168). Together these two arguments not only prove God’s existence, but establish the divine nature as infinite and perfect, and, hence, incapable of the kind of deception that earlier, in the form of the “Evil Demon,” made Descartes doubt that he was capable of knowing anything at all. After his meditations, by contrast, he is in a position to assure the Sacred Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne that the proofs in the Meditations “are such that I do not think that there is any way open to the human mind by which it can ever succeed in discovering better” (PWD-I 135).

Does Descartes’s lack of ontological humility make any difference in the contemporary world? His role in the last 400 years or so of world history could be understood as similar to the role Salazar Slytherin played in the rise of Lord Voldemort, his last heir, as recounted in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Slytherin made the Dark Lord’s work easier by championing “pure blood” witches and wizards against the “half-bloods” and “mudbloods”; he also created the Chamber of Secrets and apparently left in it the basilisk that nearly destroyed Harry. Similarly, Descartes created a philosophical mindset focused on certainty and ignored the pitfalls it created for his followers, arguably including

Spinoza, on the path to ontological humility. We already saw, in the discussion of Frye's article, Descartes's contribution to the creation of "the arrogant eye." Another way we can see how his views make a difference is the way they set up terms and conditions of the philosophical conversation over the next 200 years that we will discuss in the rest of this chapter. A third way is the precedence of epistemology in later philosophy, precedence not only over what might be considered the more basic questions raised in metaphysics, but also over ethical and political concerns. Yet another way is the very starkness of the doubt with which he begins, which encourages skepticism, and defenses against it, as a primary philosophical preoccupation.

Finally, Descartes is in some ways indirectly responsible for the attitude that many people these days have about philosophy. Ask most older people who took a philosophy course while they were in college what they remember most about the course. Most likely, their response will be something along the lines of "The professor tried to convince the class that the table wasn't there." This probably isn't exactly what the professor said. Their instructor was more likely trying to re-create Descartes's doubt, which would lead to the conclusion that the students couldn't be *certain* the table was there. What people remember about the course, and about philosophy in general, however, is that it is nothing more than a mind game meant to confuse nonphilosophers, so that the professor (and ultimately Descartes) could look smart.

Hume

When we run over libraries, persuaded by these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

—David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

I

Where Descartes begins with doubt and moves to certain knowledge, David Hume can be said to begin with a certain kind of knowledge and move toward increasing doubt. He begins *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) with the unequivocal statement that "All perceptions of the

human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call Impressions and Ideas.”⁸ By the end of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), he has reached the epistemological humility to speak of human beings “who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations . . .” (ECHU 111). His ontological humility is even clearer in “Of the Immortality of the Soul” (published posthumously in 1777):

Nothing in the world is perpetual. Every thing, however seemingly firm, is in continual flux and change: The world itself gives symptoms of frailty and dissolution: How contrary to analogy, therefore, to imagine, that one single form . . . is immortal and indissoluble? What a daring theory in that! How lightly, not to say how rashly, entertained!⁹

Indeed, one could argue that no one in the European philosophical tradition has a keener sense of the limits of human knowledge than David Hume.

He achieves this by pushing the epistemological position opposed to Rationalism, Empiricism to its logical, if radical, conclusion. The first quotation above clearly describes the basic tenet of Empiricism, that our mental contents consist only of the “impressions” made on our senses when we perceive the world and the “ideas” that we form based on those impressions (although the exact terms used may vary among different Empiricist philosophers). One of Hobbes’s complaints in his objections to Descartes’s “Meditations,” for instance, is directed against the contrary claim made by the Rationalists that our knowledge is based on reason alone: “But what shall we now say, if reasoning chance to be nothing more than the uniting and stringing together of names or designations by the word is?” Hobbes asks (PWD-II65). That is, many Empiricists would argue against Rationalism that logic, reason, might depend on, and reflect, our language, rather than the nature of reality. Interestingly, one trait that marks the Harry Potter saga as a thoroughly British story is the consistent and diligent Empiricism that seems to be the hallmark of a Hogwarts education. Lessons in magic are shown as exercises in experimental method, for instance, and everyone (including Rowling) takes a somewhat condescending attitude toward Professor Trelawney’s purely abstract, generally useless, and most often illusory gift of prophecy.

The Empiricists were especially concerned to deny the possibility of the “innate ideas” of God, causality and the Self on which Descartes

built his Rationalism. Although the most thorough refutation of innate ideas appears in the first book of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*¹⁰ (1704), Hobbes had already challenged Descartes as to "whether the minds of those who are in a profound and dreamless sleep yet think. If not, they have at that time no ideas. Whence no idea is innate, for what is innate is always present." To this Descartes replied, "when I say that an idea is innate in us, I do not mean that it is always present to us. This would make no idea innate. I mean merely that we possess the faculty of summoning up the idea" (PWD-II 72–73), but he doesn't explain how we can know we have these innate ideas before we summon them in order to do so.

The seeds of Hume's theological humility, as we will see, are also laid by Hobbes's version of Empiricism when he objects, against Descartes, that "we have no image, no idea corresponding to [the most holy name of God] . . . Hence it appears that we have no idea of God," although in Hobbes's case he goes on to offer a brief version of his own causal proof of God's existence in the same paragraph (PWD-II 67). The Empiricist commitment to basing knowledge only on sense perception leads even Hobbes, whom his King referred to as "the great bear," to the edge (at least) of a form of ontological humility. Hume's more radical question is whether Empiricism can provide the basis for any knowledge at all, or whether it collapses into a skepticism that, as Hume says of the arguments of George Berkeley, "*admit of no answer and produce no conviction*" (ECHU, 107 fn).

II

Primary among Hume's arguments is the denial that we can have knowledge based on causal necessity. While he acknowledges that we have strong, even compelling, causal beliefs, Hume believes that they are based on nothing more than a habitual way of thinking that grows out of the constant conjunction of two successive events in our experience, leading us to expect the second event to follow whenever the first event occurs (ECHU 25–37). Therefore, causality cannot provide the grounds for philosophical arguments, most notably for Descartes's (and Hobbes's) proofs of the existence of God. Hume's basic argument about causality appears in essentially the same form both in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, but here we will follow the version found in the latter work.

There Hume starts with the question of how we come to know anything that is not part of our present sensory experience or our memory of past experience. The answer is that we claim to know things about the world outside our experience through cause and effect reasoning.

Such reasoning, however, is not logical in nature, because the negation of a true causal claim is not logically impossible, but merely false. Logically, the sun *could* fail to rise tomorrow, although it won't. In addition, one can never infer what will occur in the future solely from perceiving the present causal conditions, the way one can follow a logical chain of implications. So, Hume concludes, our reliance on causal reasoning must be based on experience. That experience, however, is limited to our past and present sense experience. On what basis can we use causal reasoning to make inferences about events outside our experience? Only by using cause and effect reasoning, which is why this argument is often called "Hume's circle" (ECHU 15–25).

By reducing our reliance on causal reasoning to something analogous to the process whereby "animals, as well as men learn many things from experience, and infer, that the same events will always follow from the same causes" (ECHU 70), Hume both undermines Descartes's proofs that God exists and expresses a profound epistemological humility, even if in an arguably arrogant tone. He goes on to argue that, not only is causal belief not a result of reasoning in either humans or animals, but that it is "nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power, that acts in us unknown to ourselves; and in its chief operations, is not directed by any such relations or comparisons of ideas, as are the proper objects of our intellectual faculties." Over a hundred years before Darwin, Hume put human "experimental" reasoning on a par with the instincts that teach birds how to sing (ECHU 72).

He goes further, however, by undermining even the starting point for Descartes's proof, the claim cited above that Descartes knows himself, with absolute certainty, to be only a knowing thing or mind. Hume is more indirect about this claim in the *Enquiry*, but quite explicit in the appendix to the *Treatise*: "When I turn my reflexion on *myself*, I never can perceive this *self* without some [*sic*] one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. 'Tis the composition of these [perceptions], therefore, which forms the self" (THN 634, his emphasis). One might say that for Hume the mind is like a camera—it can create pictures (ideas) of other things, but can never take a picture of (or know) itself except as it might be reflected in a mirror, in which case the picture is not of it, but of its reflection. If the self, the mind, is only a composite of our perceptions and thoughts, it offers no basis for certain knowledge or for our concept of God.

By denying the possibility of innate ideas with the other Empiricists, and undermining the Cartesian concepts of Self, Causality, and God, Hume seems to leave us right where Descartes purports to begin. A claim to know that nothing can be known, however, is still a claim of

absolute knowledge. Part of Hume's humility is his refusal to make that claim. He dismisses extreme, or "Phyrrhonian" skepticism because "all human life must perish, were [these] principles universally and steadily to prevail." He recommends instead a "mitigated" skepticism that would limit "our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding" and confine itself to "common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience, leaving the more sublime topics to the embellishments of poets and orators, or to the arts of priests and politicians" (ECHU 110–112). This is why Hume concludes the *Essay* with the sweeping statement quoted at the beginning of this section—no claim to knowledge outside the realms of human experience and abstract reasoning, including Descartes's concepts of causality, God and a substantial Self, can be justified by merely human reason. One might as well, he implies, believe in miracles—or magic.

III

Hume's ontological humility, however, can be found in more than his epistemological claims. It is equally evident in his often-ignored work on morality and in his more noted work on rational theology in the post-humous "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion." While Descartes, as already noted, tried to avoid moral questions, the other Rationalists, including Spinoza, joined Hume in offering a complete account of human psychology and morality as part of their work.¹¹ Hume's interest in, and unique approach to, moral issues is evident even in the *Essay*, which focuses primarily on epistemological questions. There he offers as an example of something that can be known directly through the definition of the terms it contains the claim that "where there is no property, there can be no injustice" (ECHU 113). This is because, for Hume, the state, and hence law and justice, were established to protect property. It is in the *Treatise*, however, and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), that his ethical views are fully developed, and his ontological humility most fully on display, albeit in a form that might seem, 200 years later, more equivocal than it does in the context of the mid-eighteenth century.¹²

He begins the third book of the *Treatise* by saying that "Morality is a subject that interests us above all others. . . . What affects us, we conclude can never be a chimera; and as our passion is engag'd on the one side or the other, we naturally think the question lies within human comprehension . . ."; then he adds an ironic, "Without this advantage I should never have adventur'd upon a third volume of such abstruse philosophy," although it is unclear how far that irony is meant

to extend. His first question is the Empiricist one of how our judgments of right or wrong are related to sensory experience. Having already argued in the second book that reason cannot influence our emotions and, hence, our actions, he quickly concludes that “The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason” (THN 455–457). He also supports his claim by noting that, from an objective point of view, there is no difference between incest in humans and in animals, so the moral difference between the two cannot be a matter of experiential fact (THN 467–468). “Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg’d of . . .” (THN 470).

More specifically, according to Hume, actions we judge to be good are ones we associate with pleasure, actions we judge to be bad ones we associate with pain. Thus, Hume is a Utilitarian, but of a somewhat different stripe than John Stuart Mill.¹³ Hume says that “We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous” (THN 471). There is a role for theory here, however, as noted above with regard to injustice. Justice is, for Hume, an “artificial” virtue in the sense that it arises out of “the circumstances and necessity of mankind,” but he adds that, although the rules of justice may be “*artificial*, they are not *arbitrary*” (THN 477–478). Unlike Hobbes, who believed humans sacrificed a large part of their right of self-determination to their king in exchange for the protection of civil society, Hume believes it is only the right to claim or control the goods of others that our ancestors surrendered as the condition of living in peace with their neighbors, who would otherwise have been in constant competition with them for the limited material goods the world provides. As Hume said in the *Inquiry*, once property rights are established, “there immediately arise the ideas of justice and injustice” (THN 490).

What has happened to pleasure and pain here? As Hume explains, “*Thus self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends that virtue*” (THN 499–500). He then gives a detailed account of how this sympathy works, both in the case of justice and in other moral virtues. With regard to justice, the argument relies on the inherently social nature of human beings. “As much as we value our own happiness and welfare, [so] much must we applaud the practice of justice and humanity,” he tell us, “by which alone the social confederacy can be maintained, and every man reap the fruits of mutual protection and assistance.”¹⁴ Justice promotes the social good, which promotes our happiness. In cases that don’t directly affect us, we make judgments of approval or disapproval based on our ability to sympathize with those

whose happiness is directly affected, which again makes it a matter of our own pleasure or pain: “wherever we go, whatever we reflect on or converse about, everything still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breast a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness” (HE 221). This is the basis of all morality for Hume.

The important thing to note, however, is that he never takes the step that is central to Utilitarianism—Hume never says “pleasure is good.” This is what makes him arguably a Knight of Infinite Resignation—he understand, as Harry Potter comes to, that we must make moral choices without any way to be certain of their goodness. Hume’s is a purely descriptive form of Utilitarianism that attempts to stay firmly on the side of facts in the fact/value distinction that he helped to establish. Values, for him, are matters of emotion, whereas his enterprise is one of reason, or rather, one of exploring the limits of reason. Reason can only describe how the human mind and human passions work; it cannot tell us how we should act, merely on what principles we will decide which acts are good and evil. And the conclusion of this impassive reason is that “there never was any quality recommended by any one, as a virtue or moral excellence, but on account of its being *useful*, or *agreeable* to a man *himself*, or to *others*” (HE 336).

Hume’s ontological humility, it is worth noting, brings out what might be called a “proto-feminist” aspect to his work. Annette Baier argues that he could be labeled both a “women’s moral theorist”¹⁵ and a “reflective women’s epistemologist.”¹⁶ She doesn’t cite anything like humility as the reason (perhaps because she seems to have a rather narrow sense of humility [HRWE 28]), but rather his outsider status as a member of a conquered nation writing in another nation’s language that made him, “if you like, an unwilling virtual woman” (HRWE 22). Not that he favored the views of “bluestockings,” although Baier cites the relatively liberal attitudes toward women reflected in his ideal commonwealth (HRWE 29) and some of his later essays (HRWE 35). Rather, as we saw earlier, there is an intrinsic link between the refusal of absolute knowledge and the search for absolute mastery, on the one hand, and ways of thinking that are culturally coded for us as “feminine,” on the other. As Baier says, “Hume’s epistemology . . . is like the moral epistemology he goes on to articulate, fallibilist and cooperative” (HRWE 31), much like the views put forward by Code, Frye, and other contemporary feminist philosophers.

In the last work Hume prepared for publication, “The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religions,” he carries his epistemological humility, and perhaps his irony, to new heights. Heights so high, one commen-

tator notes, that he can be credited with the nineteenth-century “fideism,” or religious belief against all reason, that reached its own height in Kierkegaard (although probably without Hume’s influence in that case).¹⁷ Scholars even remain uncertain which of the three main characters in the “Dialogues” speaks for Hume himself. Most rule out Demea, the orthodox Christian whose views tend to remind the reader of Berkeley, but remain undecided between Philo, the skeptic who echoes much of what Hume says elsewhere, and Cleanthes, whom Pamphilus, the “recorder” of the “Dialogues,” credits at the end of the dialogues with being “still nearer to the truth” (DCNR 89).

Cleanthes offers a proof of the existence of God that was common among intellectuals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He describes the world as a great machine, then says, “Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble, and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work he has executed” (DCNR 15). Much of the rest of the “Dialogues” is spent attacking this argument, but Hume himself espoused this view earlier in a footnote to the appendix of the *Treatise*.¹⁸ “The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind.” This could be taken as an attempt to lessen the skeptical impact of the earlier work, except that it is appended to the radical denial that I have any idea of “self.” The footnote merely notes that, although this denial of a substantial self undermines any possibility we might have an idea of God, “this can have no effect on either religion or morals” because of the obvious truth of [the above] argument” (THN 633). Still, scholars remain divided on Hume’s religious views, proving perhaps that his humility is so complete he even stays out of the spotlight in what he knew would be his final work.

Kant

This deduction . . . was the most difficult task ever undertaken in the service of metaphysics . . .

—Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

I

Immanuel Kant credits Hume with awakening him from his “dogmatic slumber”¹⁹ and setting him on the course that made Kant one of the most influential philosophers in the modern period, second only to

Descartes. Kant's project was to rescue philosophy from Hume's skepticism and to synthesize Rationalism and Empiricism into a single system that respects the role of perception and reason alike. Some might consider him to be a thinker like Spinoza, one whose ultimate position of humility was based on the assumption that he could, and did, have certain knowledge about the nature of reality. Certainly the quotation above has the tone of someone closer to Gilderoy Lockhart than to Dumbledore. Kant's philosophy, however, does not require knowledge of the nature of either God or reality, but rests on a respect for the limits of human knowledge that, I would argue, almost approaches Hume's. This is because Kant focuses, not on what we can or do know, but on the form our knowledge must take.

The "must," of course, suggests that Kant's position is also more complex than Hume's, since it allows for a necessity that is not strictly logical. As we've seen, Hume divides our knowledge into empirical claims and logical ones. His concept of logic depends on the concept of analytic truth, that is, truth based on the definitions of the terms involved, such as "All bachelors are unmarried men" and, on Hume's account, the claim that without private property there is no civil state, hence no justice, hence, also no injustice. For him, this is why causal claims aren't matters of "abstract reasoning" because the occurrence of an effect cannot be inferred from the occurrence of its cause and the relevant definitions alone. As we saw, he also notes that it is not a logical contradiction to say that a cause might fail to produce its usual effect. What motivated Kant was his conviction that this apparently unremarkable reliance on traditional logic was the fatal flaw that led to Hume's skepticism. More importantly, Kant thought he knew what was wrong with the traditional way of thinking.

Kant's basic argument is that mathematics and geometry are not analytic in the way Hume believes. Kant says we cannot deduce the geometrical truth that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line from the definitions of the terms involved (and some twentieth-century mathematicians would say it may not even be true). Similarly, he claims there is nothing in the definitions of the numbers 7, 5, and 12 and the words *plus* and *equals* that would lead to the conclusion that $7 + 5 = 12$ without a further "intuition" of the number of points represented by 7 and 5. (The German word he uses, *Anschauung*, means literally a contemplation or perception, but not necessarily of an empirical object—it doesn't have the connotation the English "intuition" has of a nonrational way of knowing.) Kant believes mathematics is based on the pure intuition of time (think counting) and geometry on the pure intuition of space, where "pure" means empty of any specific con-

tent, an intuition merely directed at moments in time or lines in space. This experience remains “a priori,” or independent of our experience. Even if our experience were radically different than it is—magical, for instance—it would still occur in time and space. But the knowledge pure intuitions yield is also “synthetic,” as opposed to analytic, because that knowledge was not already present in the definitions of the terms (PAFM 14–16).

The possibility of “a priori synthetic” knowledge is what ultimately allows Kant to “remove Hume’s doubt” (PAFM 53), but it is also the weakest link in his argument because it is always possible simply to deny that such a thing as a priori synthetic knowledge exists. This is the source of the contemporary split between “Continental” and “Anglo-American philosophy” discussed in the Prologue. “Continental” philosophers consider Hume’s skepticism to be a *reduction ad absurdum* argument against Empiricism because they believe his arguments prove that no knowledge at all can be based purely on our sensory experience. Since they share the Empiricists’ rejection of innate ideas, they see the priori synthetic as the only possible way to ground knowledge. Even those “Continental” philosophers who might reject a foundationalist project retain the belief that all philosophy before Kant is what they call “precritical” and, therefore, seriously flawed. English language philosophers, on the other hand, generally reject Kant’s arguments with regard to a priori synthetic knowledge and do philosophy largely within the confines of Hume’s “mitigated skepticism,” which is why it remains primarily “analytical.” This philosophical position does raise perplexing questions about the nature of mathematical and geometrical truths, but philosophers in that tradition solve them by asserting that they are, in fact, analytic or arguing that they are high-level empirical generalizations. They consider these positions easier to defend than Kant’s claim to have found an entirely new kind of knowledge.

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While mathematics and geometry prove the existence of a priori synthetic knowledge for Kant, its real importance is in metaphysics. He claims to have replicated Hume’s argument about causality with other metaphysical concepts and concludes that “metaphysics consists altogether” of a priori synthetic concepts (PAFM 6). The question then is, What are the objects of the intuitions underlying metaphysical concepts that correspond to time and space in mathematics and geometry? Those objects, Kant tells us, are the empty forms of the judgments we make about sensory objects: “judgments of experience take their objective

validity, not from the immediate cognition of the object (which is [as the Rationalists said] impossible), but merely from the conditions of the universal validity of empirical judgments . . .” (PAFM 42). Perception will never give us the concept of a material substance that persists through every change in the sensory qualities of Descartes’s piece of wax. Since the Empiricists have proven the impossibility of an innate idea of such a substance, Kant’s solution is that “*the understanding does not derive its laws (a priori) from, but prescribes them to, nature*” (PAFM 62). That is, we don’t perceive substance, but must assume it exists in order to make sense out of our perceptual experience. (Similarly, Harry Potter never considers the possibility of something like his friend Hermione’s Time-Turner, even when he sees her effectively in two places at once, because the Time-Turner’s ability to move her backward in time and live through the same hour twice violates the way time forms our experience.²⁰)

Thus, concepts such as causality and substance, like time and space, are not part of the world as it exists in itself, but part of how we perceive the world, ways in which we must organize perceptions so they can serve as a basis for our interaction with the physical world. At least since Descartes, philosophers had recognized that some properties of sensory objects (those Locke called “secondary qualities,” such as color, smell, taste, and sound) clearly vary between perceivers of the same object at the same time, and between a single person’s perception of the same object at different times (e.g., under different light conditions). They were called secondary because Locke assumed that they were caused by the interaction of the primary qualities of objects (today’s equivalent would be their molecular properties) and human sense organs. Later, Berkeley argued that it was impossible to determine which sensory qualities are primary and which secondary in this sense. Kant pushes this argument a step further by saying everything we know about an object is a result of interaction between the “thing-in-itself” and the human mind. He differentiates his view from Berkeley’s “mystical and visionary idealism” because he doesn’t deny the existence of things-in-themselves outside of experience (PAFM 37).

According to Kant, when we encounter an object there occurs something like an instantaneous process that can be broken down into two discrete sets of questions that we in effect ask about it in order to situate it in reality as we know it. The first set contains the questions that place the object in time and space: Where is it? and When is it? These “forms of the intuition” (time/number and space) are, as we have seen, the basis of geometry and mathematics. The second set of questions move the perception beyond intuition to understanding, or

everyday public knowledge. They ask of the object such questions as Where does it fit in the causal chain of empirical reality? Is its existence necessary or just a matter of fact? Is it a single thing or many? and Is it really there? Once we have answers to these questions and the others in this set (there are twelve categories of the understanding in all), we can be said to know the object completely insofar as it is part of our experienced world (PAFM 46). This makes science possible. Since the behavior of human beings is part of our experienced world, it also makes the social sciences possible, and they owe their existence in the form we know them today largely to Kant.

What this doesn't make possible is any knowledge of things, whether material objects or human minds, as they are in themselves. This is where Kant avoids Spinoza's arrogance (although in every way as human beings he was reportedly the more arrogant of the two). Everything Kant has said about our knowledge of the experienced world, he points out, is validated by our everyday knowledge of objects, along with the a priori synthetic sciences of mathematics, and geometry. Reality makes rational sense to us. Hume has proven that it shouldn't, if matters of fact and abstract reasoning are our only sources of knowledge. Therefore, there must something else that grounds our understanding of the world, that is, there must be a priori synthetic knowledge based on the pure forms of our experience of sensory objects. Our knowledge, however, stops there for Kant. His four antinomies, or apparent paradoxes, show that there is no one answer to traditional metaphysical questions about the ultimate nature of the experienced world (Is the world limited or unlimited? Is it simple or composite? Do we have free will? Is there a God?) because our reality is not self-sufficient, but depends on the existence of unknowable things-in-selves, including our own minds (PAFM 80). Human knowledge is, at best, limited and partial. This is what contemporary philosopher Rae Langton has called "Kant's humility."²¹

Kant bases his metaphysical and epistemological humility on a powerfully dualistic ontology, but one very different from Descartes's. In place of Descartes's division of reality into minds and bodies, Kant divides both minds and bodies in two, giving each of them an existence as part of human reality and an existence independent of our experience. He draws a sharp line between the experienced world and what he calls the "intellectual world," where those things we must assume exist but cannot experience have their being. These include the material things-in-themselves that cause our perceptions; our own substantial selves insofar as they are the source (as opposed to the object) of our conscious experience and, by extension, the concept of substance per se; causal necessity and, by extension, the idea of the natural world as a

unified causal system with God as its source. These three Ideas of pure reason are not objects of our knowledge, but its limiting conditions. Even the idea of God remains an empty one. Kant concludes, “We must therefore think an immaterial [realms of things in themselves], a world of understanding, and a Supreme Being, . . . because in them only, as things in themselves, reason finds . . . completion and satisfaction . . .” (PAFM 95). For Kant, the ultimate knowledge can only be of the limits of what we can know.

DESCARTES

<u>Mind</u> perfectly known	<u>Body</u> imperfectly known through the senses, except insofar as known through math and geometry
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KANT

<u>Intelligible World</u> mind and body [and God] in themselves and so not known	<u>Experienced World</u> mind and body known in terms of time/space and the categories (substance, cause)
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A further advance that Kant claims to have made over Hume is the ability, based on his sparse ontology, to derive an absolute basis for moral judgment. The fact/value distinction, the sharp divide between what we can know from sensory experience and abstract ideas, and the passions that guide our actions, follows from the Hume’s Empiricist assumptions about both knowledge and the emotions. Nothing in bare perception gives us moral qualities, and reason cannot move us, Hume tell us, so the only possible moral theory is a descriptive Utilitarian one. By introducing the possibility of a priori synthetic knowledge, however, Kant opens up the possibility of a logic that could speak, if not to our empirical selves, perhaps to our wills as entities in the intelligible world. This, in turns, opens the possibility of a universal, absolute ethical system free of any religious basis.

For Hume, since causes and effects are as closely tied together in human behavior as they are in the material world, the necessity we attribute to physical causation is present in human actions as well (THN 405). This means there is no free will, and our sense of having a choice as to how we act is an illusion. For Kant, causality has its place only in