

Hume on the Belief in the External World

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Like Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley before him, Hume propounds a theory of the external world, or of what, in his case, is better called the belief in the existence of body. The success or failure of his discussion rests not any conclusion reached about the status of this belief—its reasonableness or unreasonableness, or its truth or falsity, but only on whether, in accordance with his purpose of providing a “science of MAN,” his explanation of why we have the belief is convincing. Further, Hume identifies *two* versions of the belief: an ordinary or “vulgar” version that we all hold until we confront the arguments that demonstrate its falsity, and a “philosophical” version that we are driven to by those arguments but that has no rational foundation. This paper analyzes Hume’s treatment of both versions, and offers an internal criticism as well as some criticism from the standpoint of contemporary analytic philosophy.