

External Objects in Hume and James  
Yumiko Inukai

In Book One of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume uses the term ‘object’ to refer to different things in various contexts: impressions, ideas, perceptions, and bodies. This usage seems to suggest that Hume acknowledges the existence of both internal and external worlds, in which objects, perceptions and bodies respectively, exist. An important question arises here: does Hume affirm the existence of extra-mental bodies, as his use of the term ‘external bodies’ implies? He seems directly to affirm it at the beginning of the section, “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” when he says, “We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but ’tis in vain to ask, *whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings” (T 1.4.2.1, SBN 187). The question regarding Hume’s position on the existence of external bodies becomes particularly pressing in light of his clear statement at 1.2.6.8 about the impossibility of our even conceiving of external existence specifically different from perceptions. If it is Hume’s contention that we could not even conceive any kind of existence, but that of perceptions, how could he take it for granted that external bodies exist? Is Hume just inconsistent here? In these lectures, we will take a close look at some passages in the *Treatise* (especially those in 1.2.6 and 1.4.2) to understand what “external” objects could possibly be for Hume. We will also read William James’ account of physical objects to illuminate some subtleties in Hume’s position.

Readings:

Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book One, Part 2, Section 6 (“Of the idea of existence, and of external existence”) & Part 4, Section 2 (“Of scepticism with regard to the senses”)

James, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*