

#### Task 4

**«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*».**

The quote above by David Hume expresses a common view among people in the modern world. When asking if any divinity or school metaphysics can give us any sufficient knowledge, Hume claims that due to the lack abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number, and experimental reasoning concern matter of fact and existence, it is nothing but sophistry and illusion. However, is it so that metaphysics and divinity only contain illusions? This we will examine in this essay.

#### Problems with Scientism

First off, let us examine carefully the quotes assumptions. As mentioned above, Hume criticizes metaphysics and any divinity due to the lack of ability for abstract reasoning concerning quantity, number, and experimental measurements as well as existence, meaning the absence of modern science. In essence what this quote does, is taking the view of *scientism*. Scientism is when you presuppose and assume that anything that cannot be measured by the modern science, cannot be known or be true. Only that which is *scientifically* proven, through observation, testing, and experiments of the world, can be true. The biggest problem with taking such a view, is that the view itself self-contradictory. To begin with, it is not in itself scientific to claim that only scientific measurements and observations can be the source of knowledge. It is impossible by observing and measuring the modern world alone, to conclude only from what you see, that we cannot know anything for sure except from what we see from the instruments we use. The data itself only tells us how the world presents itself to us to that specific instrument or observation, not absolute truth about reality in itself. It is like using a microscope and say that only what I see in the microscope here, is all there is. As we know, modern science deals only with the natural world we see around us, and not by metaphysical and philosophical questions, such as: Why does the world appear in this way, instead of any other? What is the ultimate cause for the observations we see here, or even of everything? Is there a God who caused it? Many people, due to the view of scientism, throw up their hands and say “Well, that we cannot know, because science has not told us the answer yet”. However, this does not make sense as science is, by definition, limited to the observable world, and not what is beyond it. Questions regarding what is beyond the world as we observe it, must involve metaphysics and philosophy.

Second point of where scientism is self-refuting is because scientism already presupposes philosophical principles, such as the world or reality around us is actually observable, and of course, real at all. All scientific experiments follow this presumption, otherwise any scientific experiment would be pointless. If we could never know if we observed reality or not, why bother study science? Further, we must interpret the scientific data which we receive, in order to know what it means and how to apply new knowledge to it. Scientific data and discoveries are not self-explanatory. As we can see here, any scientific experiment we do follow philosophical assumptions, which is beyond what modern thinkers would even call “scientific” as science in their view, is limited to what can be observed and measured. Therefore, we do not only rely in the observations and measurements alone, but also philosophy and metaphysical assumptions and interpretations.

### **Hume’s first objection**

Now as we have illustrated where the view of scientism fails, let us examine more of the critique Hume makes about any divinity and metaphysics itself. Let us look at the first objection Hume makes: “(...) Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No”. Now, as mentioned earlier, there is a distinction between what science in essence is aimed at, and what metaphysics in essence, is aimed at. They are trying to answer different questions. Therefore, metaphysics will not use concepts such as quantity or numbers in the same way as modern science does, because metaphysics is not aimed at measuring things. Metaphysics will always aim at what is *beyond* the world we observe, to the deeper meaning and questions of reality. A good example of a metaphysical question which includes numbers or quantity, is the possibility of an infinite number of things. The famous thinkers of scholastic metaphysics such as Aristotle and later St. Thomas Aquinas, would argue that it is a *metaphysical impossibility* to have an infinite amount of something in a causal series. Meaning, that when asking what ultimately caused anything that exists here and now, there cannot be an infinite number of causes to explain it, because it is absurd to think that in order to get to the very thing we are asking the ultimate cause for, we must count an infinite number of things before we get to it. It is like saying that you can come over to my house, if you ask a random stranger first. Then when you ask the random stranger the question, the stranger replies you need to ask another stranger instead. And then further, the other stranger says the same thing. Let us assume that there were an infinite number of strangers. Then you could never come over to my house, because for eternity you would be asking strangers. Same would go for having an infinite number of causes to explain something’s existence here and now.

### **Hume’s second objection**

Then, let us look at the second critique Hume makes: “*Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No*”. Here Hume is more accurate in saying that metaphysics does not directly deal with *experimental reasoning* as metaphysics do not use a specific laboratory or an instrument when discussing ideas. However, it can also be discussed what is meant by “experimental reasoning”. One could say that metaphysics through reason and logic, can “test” an idea, and “experiment” to see wherever it is reasonable and logically sound. Even in the daily language we have the term “a thought experiment”. A thought experiment could be what I did earlier, with discussing wherever it is possible to have an infinite number of causes in a causal series. Here I assumed an infinite number of things

did exist, and through an example, showed why it is an illogical idea. In a way, I “experimented” the premise of infinity to see if it was reasonable to be true in reality. In this perspective, you can say that metaphysics does experiment, but not in a laboratory, as it is not aimed at observing the world, but that which is beyond it. However, if by “experimental”, we mean observing something for instance in a laboratory, then Hume is correct. Though we see that he asks the question of reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence, which I would say, is more applicable to metaphysics than the modern science. Modern science as mentioned presupposes that something exists and can be observed, and base “matter of fact” from it. Metaphysics on the other hand, can give us a logical foundation to accept the observations in the first place, and helps us establish facts through this. In this way, I will argue that metaphysics is actually a better option than modern science for discovering existence in itself.

### **What about divinity?**

The last point Hume also made which I want to look at, is the *divinity* that he also included with metaphysics, when he said, “If we take in our hand, any volume – of *divinity* or school metaphysics”. By volume of divinity, it is possible that Hume is referring to religious texts, that speak of a divine existence, such as God. He may be criticizing religious texts for not containing any traits of modern science, but as we have seen to this point, we see naturally that any question of a divinity, and wherever that can give us any sufficient knowledge, touches metaphysics and philosophy, and not modern science. The classical definition of anything *divine* is always that it is *beyond* or *outside* the natural world, wherever it is some mystical force, or a God. Since most religious texts presuppose that divinity exist, then the question of if a divinity does exist is left up to metaphysics and philosophy to discuss. As I have illustrated, metaphysics is something, even the supporters of scientism use, though they are not willing to admit it. Therefore, Hume’s conclusion that metaphysics or the divine is sophistry and illusion, is not itself scientific, and already assumes that anything that does not contain reasoning concerning quality or number, or experimental reasoning (in modern science), is an illusion. The moment you claim such things, you are immediately discussing metaphysics and philosophy, and not modern science. Also, only because the question of the divine is not up to modern science to discuss, does not immediately mean the idea is an illusion. The example previously of the illogical of idea of an infinite number of causes, can be taken further to argue for a first cause, or a necessary cause that the causal series end with and has caused the things we observe in this world. Such a “first cause” is what many famous thinkers would regard as “God”, which is based upon cause and effect in the world. Even though this argument would be rejected, it illustrates how metaphysics contribute to achieving knowledge about deeper truths about the reality.

### **Summary**

So, to summarize, what this discussion boils down to is wherever we can use metaphysics and divinity to get sufficient knowledge. As many people like to think today, the only secure source of knowledge is modern science, because that can be scientifically proven, and is therefore an objective truth. Others may take it further and say we cannot know validate or know anything for sure, but you rarely deny your own existence due to it’s illogical paradox,

and to deny the world as we observe it, you will also have to use metaphysics to argue for it, as science is out of the picture due to its presupposition of the world being real. As I have shown above, there are metaphysical principles that underlies even in the criticism of metaphysics, making it an undeniable fact that regardless of your view, wherever you believe in the idea of scientism, and “rejects” all metaphysics and divinity, or would believe in God and metaphysics, we all use and subscribe to ideas which are beyond modern science itself. Metaphysics can illustrate through logic and reason, why something can or cannot be true. If we deny metaphysics as a tool for truth, then we ultimately have to reject logic and reason altogether, in which case there would be a total relativism, in case we know nothing. Yet still would the fact that we know nothing be an objective truth. Therefore, if we all already have ideas, we take to be objectively true, that is not ultimately based upon modern science, does not that show that metaphysics can give us objective answers either way?