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HUME'S ARGUMENT CONCERNING INDUCTION – SKEPTICAL OR EXPLANATORY?

- Paweł Miech -

1.

Hume's problem of induction has played a major role in modern epistemology and in the philosophy of science. It has provided an inspiration for various philosophers who intend to refute the allegedly skeptical conclusion included in the Hume's works. Interestingly, though, in contemporary Hume research the claim that Hume was skeptical about induction is vigorously challenged. It is claimed that he meant his argument to be only an explanation of causes of our inductive reasoning. Hume appears to be, on that reading, a kind of naturalistic epistemologist who inquired into the mechanisms of our inductive reasoning. He assumed that some mechanisms of our mind are producing beliefs about causal links and he posed the question: how do we come to have that kind of beliefs? What is the source of our beliefs about causal links? His research led him to discover that the beliefs about causal links are not determined by any piece of abstract reasoning but by nature, custom and imagination. It is important to note that he was not trying, on this interpretation, to refute validity or justification of induction, he was not skeptical about it. That main line of interpretation is represented by Don Garrett, David Owen, Anette Baier, Stephen Hetherington Jonathan Bennet¹.

The second tradition of understanding the problem holds exactly that claim that is denied by the anti-skeptical reading, namely that Hume wanted to undermine the legitimacy of probable reasoning, in other words, that he was skeptical about induction. On this reading Hume wanted to show that our probable inferences concerning matter of facts lack the evidential grounds and therefore that they are in a way irrational and unwarranted. Although it is true that he also wanted to explain the main causes of our coming to have some particular beliefs about causation, nonetheless commentators state that Hume's main field of interest was the question concerning the justification of our probable inferences. This

¹ Garrett [1997], Owen [1998], Baier [1991], Hetherington [2008], Bennet [2001].

line of thought has among its proponents some philosophers who wanted to solve the allegedly Hume's paradox of induction, most notably Kant and Popper. Among contemporary commentators that position is defended by Peter Millican and Kevin Meeker².

In this paper I would like to take part in the discussion by siding with the second (skeptical) tradition of reading Hume's famous argument. I believe that this paradigm of understanding Hume can provide us with a more accurate account of Hume's thoughts on inductive inferences. Apart from its historical adequacy, the skeptical reading of the argument has also an important philosophical merit. If by means of Hume's doubts our belief in the validity of induction was inevitably shattered then the challenge of providing us with a reasonable way of solving the problem still remains. In other words it still may be a task worth pursuing for contemporary epistemologists (even though they often seem to be more interested in cognitive science than in classical problems of epistemology).

My argumentation will proceed in a following way. First I will provide a sketch of the main tenets of Hume's argumentation in order to show what is actually being discussed by the commentators. Then I will proceed to the main topic of the paper, mainly to a discussion of the challenges posed to the skeptical interpretation of the argument by proponents of "anti-skeptical" or "explanatory" tradition of reading Hume's argument. In discussing the objection posed I will proceed in a clear dialectical fashion. First I will describe the challenge, then I will propose my response to described challenge.

2.

In order to set the scene for the following discussion I will provide the outlines of skeptical interpretation of the argument. My presentation of the argument is based mainly on its version which can be found in "Enquiry", Section 4; later on I will consider also some elements of argumentation from "Treatise". It is important to note that my presentation is just a sketch of most important elements of the arguments³.

The argument starts with a distinction between two types of reasoning, reasoning concerning relations of ideas and reasoning concerning matter of fact. The former deals with relations that are discovered without the help of experience, the outcomes of the reasoning concerning relations of ideas are independent of any

² Millican [1995, 1998, 2001, 2008], Meeker [1998].

³ For most detailed till now analysis of all premises and logical relations see Stove [1972], Millican [1995], or Winkler [2001].

questions of real existence of objects about we reason in such a way. The latter type of reasoning concerns real relations in the world; therefore we need experience in order to validate them. In Hume's terms we can say that reasoning concerning matter of fact is founded on experience. After clearing these issues the philosopher asks: what is the foundation of conclusions that we draw from experience? Hume's answer states that they are based on relations of cause and effect. It is this relation alone that enables us to proceed from observed objects to objects that cannot be observed in the moment. We receive impressions from one object and by means of causal reasoning we infer that it was caused by something, or that it will have specific effects. That inference is based on our past experience of conjunction of events of one type. We have observed that watches were always produced by humans in the past; therefore when we find watch on a desert we infer that a human was on that desert. In reasoning of this kind we associate a present impression with an idea of something experienced in the past. We can also think about causation when we do not experience something directly, then we are associating two ideas that we have in our memory. The thrust of Hume's argument consists of observation that the whole above described process of reasoning is based on an assumption that all future observations of causal links will be similar to those already observed in the past. The essence of reasoning concerning causality can be expressed in a simple way:

- All till now observed events x where causally connected with event y.
- Future will resemble past.
- Therefore: All future events x will be causally connected with y.

The second premise expresses a Uniformity Principle, a rule which states that the course of nature will remain constant and will not change, that there will be no anomalies or miracles.

The remaining parts of Hume's argumentation are intended to show that precisely this premise is ungrounded. It is ungrounded because we cannot prove it either by means of demonstrative or by reasoning concerning matter of fact. It cannot be grounded by demonstrative reasoning because we can easily imagine that the course of nature will change. The idea that billiard ball will stop after the clash with another ball is equally intelligible as the idea that it will roll. If we can conceive of the alternative of something then it is not demonstrably provable. So the Uniformity Principle cannot be founded on demonstrative reasoning. In that situation it can be founded only on reasoning concerning matter of fact. But it cannot be founded on that kind of reasoning. Since all arguments about matter of fact assume precisely that premise which we intend to prove, and trying to prove it by means of these arguments would be a logical mistake, namely a *petitio principii*.

Therefore Hume's argument proves that we cannot find a reasonable justification of our reasoning concerning matter of fact.

3.

The presented version of the argument may seem quite simple and indisputable. One can suppose that students of philosophy should be quite well acquainted with this understanding of Hume's reasoning. After all, it can be found in various introductory books to epistemology or philosophy of science. The skeptical interpretation of the argument led to ascribing to Hume the so-called Hume's Problem of Induction. Some (Kant, Popper) pretended to solve the problem. The seemingly unproblematic appearance of the above presented interpretation may suggest that it is not even worth discussion. Interestingly, though, the aforementioned understanding of the argument has been challenged in recent years in various fascinating and inspiring works in Hume scholarship (most notably in: Garrett [1997], Owen [1998], to some extent Baier [1991]).

The main point of the new interpretation consists of serious doubts against treating Hume's argument as a skeptical refutation of the legitimacy of induction. It is suggested, on this reading, that Hume's project should be treated mainly as an explanatory enterprise; its goal being not undermining the justification of our probable inferences but rather explaining the way we come to have beliefs about causal links in the world (Garret, Owen) or refuting the misconceived rationalistic concept of agency (Baier). Some opponents of the skeptical interpretation (Garret) argue that Hume's project has a lot in common with modern cognitive science, and it is roughly compatible with Quine's project of naturalized epistemology. Similar to the program of naturalized epistemology proposed by Quine, Hume neither asks about the normative foundation of our beliefs nor tries to undermine them, but seeks after the natural causes of them. He assumes that we have a propensity to form conclusions about unobserved instances of some events, and he tries to explain what makes the process possible. The outcomes of Hume's undertaking involve the reflection that reasoning concerning matters of fact is not determined by any kind of higher order reasoning about the procedure of causal reasoning. When Hume is saying that reasonings concerning matter of fact are not founded on reason he means then that they are not the outcome of reasoning, that they are not caused by reason but by nature. The crucial term in Hume argument "founded on reason" is on this reading understood not as "devoid of rational justi-

fication” but rather “not causally determined by reason” , “not caused by a higher order reasoning”⁴, or even “not being the activity of the faculty of reason”⁵

In my opinion the arguments raised by critics of skeptical interpretation present a serious challenge for the skeptical reading of Hume’s argument. They cannot be just downplayed or ignored by anyone who tries to understand the argument better. If we want to gain a better and more adequate interpretation of the argument we have to either refute the doubts expressed by the proponents of the New Interpretation or accept them and relinquish the skeptical reading. In the following pages I will try to go the former way - I will try to respond to the challenges presented by anti-skeptical reading. I will proceed in a clear dialectical fashion. First I will describe an argument against skeptical reading then I will give my own answer to the argument. I will start with the most general argumentative framework of anti-skeptical reading and then proceed to particulars of that account.

3.1.

The main advantage of anti-skeptical interpretation results from proposing a reading of the argument that seems to be more globally consistent with the whole of Hume’s work. By avoiding attribution of inductive skepticism to Hume proponents of that interpretation can reconcile his famous argument with the rest of Hume’s statements. Especially they can show that his argument concerning induction is compatible with the fact that Hume in other places of his works apparently endorsed induction as a best way of gaining knowledge and pursued (by means of inductive experiment) his own positive philosophical project aimed at explaining human nature.

It is argued that if the skeptical reading would be true then Hume would have to relinquish his own project which he is pursuing in the *Treatise* and in other works. As Annete Baier puts it: “If Hume really distrust causal inference, and the inductions on which, if he is right, it rests, then he must distrust his own treatise”⁶.

Similar doubts are raised by Jonathan Bennett and Don Garrett:

Hume is sometimes described as a skeptic about causation, but that is wrong. His famous essay on miracles rests firmly on the premise of universal causation, or

⁴ Garrett [1997].

⁵ Owen [1998].

⁶ Baier [1991] p. 55.

something like it; his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* regularly assume that whatever is the case is caused to be so.⁷

[The Skeptical reading] cannot reconcile Hume's conclusion with the manner of his pursuit of his stated positive project – namely that of establishing the science of man by experimental method. After the famous argument, Hume continues to pursue his project enthusiastically in the *Treatise* without even mentioning the topic of skepticism until many pages later.⁸

An argument which is hidden under the three different cited formulations can be stated as follows:

- Hume's works form a coherent whole. (Or: they should at least be treated as such).
- The whole is subordinated to the pursuit of one goal (explaining human nature).
- Induction is a means to that goal.
- Hume is not skeptical about induction.

The first premise of the argument may be identified as an interpretative principle of charity towards the interpreted text. According to that principle we should strive for sympathetic interpretation of the historical philosopher, we should seek the coherence in his view even if it seems that it is hard to find it there. Hasty accusations of contradiction are considered violations of that rule. In general I agree with this principle. After all, since the authors of great philosophical works are usually not with us today, there have to be someone who instead of them defends and justifies their grounds for their having held the views that they held. Without the sympathetic commentators the arguments of philosophers would be probably treated as outmoded falsehoods without any value for us today, as such they would be largely forgotten. That would be certainly destructive for liveliness of philosophical debates. But apart from my general acknowledgment of the usefulness of the principle I think that the principle cannot be applied to Hume without causing serious distortion of his views. In the following pages I will present my arguments for this. If my arguments are true then the above presented argument of Garrett, Baier, Bennett and others is false; its negation is true, by that means skeptical interpretation is saved from the first challenge.

⁷ Bennett [2001] p.276.

⁸ Garrett [2001] p. 187.

In my opinion the fact that Hume's works do not form a coherent whole cannot be considered as an accusation against him; it cannot be understood as a violation of charity principle. What is more, in order to form a sympathetic interpretation of his views we have to acknowledge the fact that he engaged himself in various contradictions. Since contradiction is usually seen as a means of refutation of someone's views, it may at first seem strange, that acknowledgment of contradiction can be seen as something connected to better understanding of someone's intellectual heritage. Nonetheless I think that is the case with Hume.

The best proof for that may be found in his own treatment of one of his most important principles, namely the so called "copy principle". The principle states, that all our ideas are derived from impressions, therefore they cannot be formed by imagination, understanding or other faculties. Shortly after the first formulation of that principle in *Treatise* book 1, section 1 Hume proceeds to discuss the counter example against his own thesis. He invents the situation where someone would be faced with the board where all possible shades of colors with just one shade of blue lacking. According to Hume someone could have invented the idea of that shade of blue without seeing it. Therefore his own "copy principle" would be violated. Although he sees the contradiction quite clearly, nonetheless he still continues to pursue his own project. He uses the doubtful principle in various context to establish other rules of his positive science (it is perhaps also worth noting, that he uses the principle in his account of causation). He seems to be doing exactly that, what is considered implausible by Garret and Baier, namely continuing enthusiastically his positive project without seeing a problem in some difficulties which he himself raised against it. Why not assume that he behaved in like manner in the case of his treatment of induction? An assumption that he did in fact behave in like manner seems to be quite probable.

We make that hypothesis stronger by analyzing some expressions, which Hume uses, when he is introducing the argument at the beginning of his reasoning in the first "Enquiry". Some of them seem to reveal that Hume himself was conscious that his own argument is at odds with his other ambitions. Let us analyze the following passage:

Philosophers, that give themselves airs of superior wisdom and sufficiency, have a hard task when they encounter person of inquisitive dispositions, who push them from every corner, to which they retreat, and who are sure at last to bring

them do dangerous dilemma. The best expedient to prevent that confusion is to (...) discover the difficulty before it is objected to us.⁹

In my opinion the cited passage is a clear sign that Hume knew that his treatment of induction contradicts his positive ambitions. He states that he would like to analyze a difficulty which may be objected to him, and which may be dangerous for his positive ambitions. The fact that he himself plays at one moment the role of the wise philosopher and inquisitive person may appear surprising for some. Yet it seems that the last words of cited fragment suggest just that (“to discover a difficulty before it is objected to us”). “Us” in that formulation is clearly intended to show that Hume identifies himself to some extent with a philosopher who claims that he has some wisdom (“Philosophers who give themselves an airs of superior wisdom”). At the same moment though, he acts as an opponent of the wise philosopher who puts a difficulty or paradox before him. That paradox may be dangerous, and it is indeed dangerous, since it is destructive for the whole construction of the planned science of man. That paradox consists of undermining the justification of induction.

It seems then that evident contradiction or difficulties were not seen by Hume as something which would undermine the value of his own philosophy. Moreover it seems that he is happy to continue the pursuit of his own project even though he showed, that means by which he is pursuing it are unjustified. One may naturally ask, how was that possible for Hume? Why then he does not seem to worry about issues which are so worrying for his commentators?

In order to answer that question it is useful to consider his own conception of philosophy. As various expressions in Hume's works prove, philosophy for him was a kind of natural activity. Consider for example the following passage:

At the time, therefore, when I am tired with amusement and company (...) I feel my mind all collected in itself, and am naturally inclined to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of reading and conversation. I cannot forebear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil (...) and the cause of various passions and inclination which actuate and govern me.¹⁰

As the cited passage clearly states philosophy was for Hume connected with curiosity and passion for truth, and those were for Hume similar to other

⁹ Hume [1997] p. 113.

¹⁰ Hume[1996] p. 333.

natural instincts that drive humans to engage in various activities. If something is natural then it usually does not require any kind of justification in order to be pursued. We can think about other natural instincts and passions to illustrate that point. Our sexual desires, for example, do not need justification in order to be pursued. Possible evidence which proves that we should or should not engage in the practices connected with those desires does not have the power to change them. They still remain in us no matter what our reasoning faculty says about them. Even if we have good reason to see those practices as unjustified, we continue to have propensity to engage in them, and as a result of that propensity we are in fact engaging in them. In my opinion the same point is valid for philosophy according to Hume. We just have a natural propensity or inclination to engage in philosophy, and as a result of that inclination we are discussing philosophical issues and even sometimes creating philosophical systems, or criticizing some other systems, or engaging in a discussions with past philosophers, for example with Hume. As a natural instinct that kind of intellectual curiosity does not need any justification. In fact usually we engage in philosophy without any justification, after all no one knows the justification of philosophy before the beginning of his studies of it, and even if he is studying it he rarely knows why he is doing that. Hume provides us with an interesting explanation of that fact. Philosophy is connected with some natural instinct, a kind of natural curiosity which cannot be changed or tamed by any kind of reasonable justification. We may note, that such understanding of philosophy is quite similar to those advanced by Plato and Aristotle. They both saw quite clearly distinct analogies between philosophy and other passions.

3.2.

Another argument against the skeptical interpretation of Hume suggests that the skeptical interpretation understands the premises and conclusions of Hume's argument wrongly. According to the critics, Hume's language does not suggest that he deals with the problem of evidential value of the belief in induction. His most important expressions concerned with induction namely his statements that it is: "not determined by reason" "not founded on reason" should not be understood as meaning that induction is unjustified. They should be rather treated as explanatory terms that are introduced and used by Hume in order to explain our real daily reasoning behaviors. Hume's thesis, on this reading, assumes that those behaviors do not result from some kind of argument or consideration which would inspire us to think about causal links. We just have a natural and habitual propensity to think in an inductive manner, and that propensity (not some kind of abstract consideration) is in itself a cause of our belief in causal regu-

larities. In order to support that claim Don Garret boldly asserts that Hume's works contain no textual material which would support the skeptical interpretation.

In fact although many commentators have found passages that they believe ought to imply that induction has no evidentiary value, the Treatise contains no passage that manifestly states that claim. Nor do the first enquiry or Abstract contain that claim.¹¹

Skeptical interpretation renders Hume's conclusion ill-suited to his argument, since his argument does not invoke any premises about epistemic warrant or evidential value.¹²

Especially, as Garret later points out, the most important passages when Hume discusses induction, namely Treatise, book 1, III, 6, does not contain any allusions to the topic of skepticism.

In my opinion though we can find quite a lot of passages in the Treatise which are clearly suggesting that induction has no evidential value. They concern the lack of the evidential value of the premises of the inductive reasoning as well as lack of justification of its conclusions. I think, that following passages may well support my claim:

(1.) We suppose, but are never able to prove, that there must be resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those which lie beyond the reach of our discovery.¹³

(2.) As to past experiences it can be allowed to give direct and certain of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time only, which fell under its cognizance: But why this experience should be extended to future times, and to other objects (...) this is the main question on which I would insist.¹⁴

(3.) I would renew my question, why from like experience we form any conclusion beyond those past instances of which we had experience? If you answer this question in the same manner as the preceding, your answer gives still occasion to

¹¹ Garrett [1997] p. 82.

¹² Garrett [2001] p. 187.

¹³ Hume [1996] p. 122.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

a new question of the same kind, even in infinitum; which clearly proves, that the foregoing reasoning had no just foundation.¹⁵

To my mind all the cited fragments prove that Hume had seen that induction lacked an evidential value. In passages 1 and 2 he clearly states that the most important premise of our inductive reasoning, mainly the so called principle of uniformity (future will resemble past) cannot be proved or justified. If the most important principle on which our inductive inferences are based is ungrounded then also the inferences themselves cannot be considered rational. That conclusion is explicitly expressed in the third quote. Expression “just foundation” cannot be, in my opinion, understood differently then: lacking justification, lacking adequate evidential grounds to support it. They simply cannot be treated as expressions of causal determination of our reasoning behavior. The adjective “just” clearly expresses an evaluation of the process involved, it is not a neutral description. If in his conclusion Hume would meant that causal inferences are not caused by reason but by nature (as Garrett states) he would not use expression “just foundation” in that place.

In order to prove my thesis further we can analyze other contexts (other than “founded on reason”) where the phrase “founded on” shows up. As Peter Millican points out in other places it usually means: “derived from something, deriving its evidential authority from something”¹⁶. For example when Hume is saying that “reasoning concerning matter of fact” are founded on relations of cause and effect – he certainly means, that they are in fact legitimated or validated by that relations. Similarly when he states that “reasonings concerning causes and effect are founded on experience”. It is implausible that he means here: “they are caused by experience”, or they “may be explained in a best way by appealing to experience”. It rather seems that he uses the term “founded on” as a expression which indicates a derivation, especially a derivation of authority. As in Locke experience is for Hume a kind of touchstone which proves that something is valid (because it derives itself from experience) or something is illegitimate (because we cannot find its origin in experience). Term “founded on” clearly expresses that point. We have no reason to deny that it has the same meaning in conclusion of his famous argument: inductive reasonings “are not founded on reason” meaning they cannot derive their legitimacy from reason.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

¹⁶ Millican [2001].

4. CONCLUSION

I think that the whole above presented argumentation proves that classical skeptical reading of Hume still can be persuasive even though it has been challenged quite radically in contemporary scholarship. My argumentation shows that we do not have to worry about the problem of reconciliation between Hume's skeptical conclusion of his argument and his wholesale philosophical project. According to Hume contradiction and lack of justification was simply not a disqualifying treat of philosophical statements. We may of course evaluate that position in a various way. Someone may state for example that such an understanding of philosophy is careless and incoherent, and because of that, flawed. In my opinion though it seems to have some value. Since contemporary philosophy quite often relinquishes scientific ambitions of her ancestors and understands itself mainly as a kind of literature, Hume work seems to be roughly compatible with that kind of understanding of philosophical enterprise. On the other side, if we read Hume's argument as a skeptical claim about justification of induction it may still provide some kind of charm for those philosophers who are still eager to resolve the paradox. On the anti-skeptical reading Hume seems to be just an interesting object of the history of (cognitive) science, as such it is hard to imagine what grounds we should have to engage in a discussion with him. If he was saying things similar to those said by modern naturalized epistemologists why should we listen to him rather than to naturalized epistemologists? Surely modern experience-based and theoretical projects in cognitive science are more attractive than experience based project of Hume.

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