

Handout 23: Humean Skepticism I: Unobserved Matters of Fact

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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I TWO TYPES OF PROPOSITIONS

RELATIONS OF IDEAS

Necessary

Knowable “by the mere operation of thought”

Studied by geometry, algebra, and arithmetic

E.g.: Pythagorean Theorem

MATTERS OF FACT

Contingent; “contrary still possible”

Only knowable through experience

Studied by experimental science

E.g. A stone left unsupported immediately drops

2 HUME’S ARGUMENT IN SECTION IV OF THE *ENQUIRY*

1. Let’s say that a matter of fact is “observed” when your belief in it was copied from an impression; e.g., you saw the sun rise this morning and so believe that the sun rose this morning.
2. Let’s define “*U*-propositions” as all those propositions which are:
 - (a) matters of fact, and
 - (b) as yet unobserved.

3. Hume is drawing a skeptical conclusion about our beliefs in *U*-propositions:

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL VERSION: You have no good reason for believing / cannot know any *U*-proposition.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VERSION: Your beliefs in *U*-propositions are not the product of reasoning.

4. We’re going to treat Hume as defending the epistemological conclusion. Philosophically, this is very interesting and important.
5. Viewed as a defense of the psychological conclusion, Hume’s discussion is naive given our current understanding of human psychology.

3 THE ARGUMENT

Let UNIFORMITY = *Unobserved matters of fact resemble observed matters of fact.*

- (1) If p is a matter of fact, then you can only learn p through experience. (From the definition of “matter of fact”.)
- (2) UNIFORMITY is a matter of fact. (From the definition of “matter of fact”, contingency of UNIFORMITY.)
- ∴(3) So, you can only learn UNIFORMITY through experience. (From (1), (2).)
- (4) If p is a U -proposition, you can learn p through experience only if you already know UNIFORMITY.
- (5) UNIFORMITY is a U -proposition. (From the definition of “ U -proposition”, subject matter of U .)
- ∴(6) So, you can learn UNIFORMITY through experience only if you already know UNIFORMITY. (From (4), (5).)
- ∴(7) So, you can learn UNIFORMITY only if you already know UNIFORMITY. (From (3), (6).)
- (8) If you can learn p only if you already know p , then you can't learn p .
- ∴(9) So, you can't learn UNIFORMITY. (From (7), (8).)
- ∴(10) So, if p is a U -proposition, you can't learn p . (From (4), (9).)

- Premise (4) is key. Why believe it?

Here's the basic idea. Experiential knowledge is based on observed matters of fact. But how could observed matters of fact enable you to learn about unobserved matters of fact? Answer: only if you know that what you *haven't* observed resemble what you *have*. Otherwise, knowing how you've observed things to be gives you no reason to believe, much less enables you to learn, how things you haven't observed are or will be. Hence if you don't already know UNIFORMITY, how could experience enable you to learn about things you haven't observed?

- To resist the argument's conclusion, you can:
 1. Deny (1). Maybe some matters of fact can be learned through reason, or are known innately.
 2. Deny (2). Maybe UNIFORMITY is a relation of ideas.
 3. Deny (4). Maybe you can learn about the unobserved through experience even if you don't know UNIFORMITY.
- A version of the argument can be generated that replaces “know” and “learn” with “have / acquire reason to believe”, but it's more cumbersome. This argument has the more radical conclusion that if p is a U -proposition, you can acquire no reason to believe p .

4 HUME'S 'SKEPTICAL SOLUTION'

“Suppose a person [...] has lived so long in the world as to have observed similar objects or events to be constantly conjoined together—what is the consequence of this experience? He immediately infers the existence of one object from the appearance of the other. Yet he has not, by all his experience, acquired any idea or knowledge of the secret power by which the one object produces the other, nor is it by any process of reasoning he is engaged to draw this inference. But still he finds himself determined to draw it. And though he should be convinced that his understanding has no part in the operation, he would nevertheless continue in the same course of thinking. There is some other principle which determines him to form such a conclusion.

“This principle is *custom* or *habit*.” (*Enquiry*, Sec. V)