

Humean Skepticism I: Unobserved Matters of Fact

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
Professor Geoff Pynn
Northern Illinois University

Spring 2018

I HUME'S ARGUMENT IN SECTION IV OF THE *ENQUIRY*

1. Let's say that fact is "observed" when your belief in it was copied from an impression; e.g., when you believe that the sun rose this morning because you saw it rise. In this section, Hume asks what justifies our beliefs about facts we *haven't* observed: "what is the nature of that evidence, which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory" (16)?
2. Such beliefs always rest on "the relation of cause and effect" (17), which is not something we can know about *a priori*, but only through experience. But, Hume argues, "even after we have experience of the operations of cause and effect, our conclusions from that experience are *not* founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding" (21).
3. Hume is drawing a skeptical conclusion. Here are two interpretations of what he is arguing:

 EPISTEMOLOGICAL VERSION: Our beliefs about unobserved facts are unjustified.

 PSYCHOLOGICAL VERSION: Our beliefs about unobserved facts do not result from reasoning.

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

4. Hume's examples of the sorts of beliefs his argument undermines:

 Billiard ball B will move when struck by billiard ball A.

 Bread will nourish me in the future.

 The sun will rise tomorrow.

Note that these beliefs all concern the future. Similar arguments can also be constructed to undermine belief in unobserved facts about the present and past, but it's easier to grasp the argument about the future, and that is Hume's focus, so it will be ours.

2 THE ARGUMENT

Hume's basic insight is that for past experience to justify beliefs about future matters of fact, we must assume that the future will resemble the past. But that assumption concerns a future matter of fact, and so can only be justified by circular reasoning. Hence our beliefs about future matters of fact are unjustified. Here is my attempt to make the argument more precise. First, a distinction between two types of propositions, which Hume takes to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive:

RELATIONS OF IDEAS

Necessary

justifiable "by the mere operation of thought"

E.g.: *The Pythagorean Theorem*

MATTERS OF FACT

Contingent

Justifiable only through experience

E.g. *A stone left unsupported drops*

1. Belief in future matters of fact can only be justified by experience.

"...nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matter of fact" (17).

2. Belief in future matters of fact can be justified by experience only on the basis of the assumption that the future will resemble the past.

"...all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition, that the future will be conformable to the past" (22).

3. So, belief in future matters of fact can only be justified on the basis of the assumption that the future will resemble the past. (1, 2.)

4. That the future will resemble the past is not justifiable *a priori*, so is not a relation ideas but a future matter of fact.

"Let the course of things be allowed hitherto ever so regular; that alone, without some new argument or inference, proves not, that, for the future, it will continue to do so" (24).

5. So, belief that the future will resemble the past can be justified only on the basis of the assumption that the future will resemble the past. (3, 4.)

"To endeavor, therefore, the proof [that the future will resemble the past] ... must evidently be going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question" (23).

6. If belief that p can be justified only on the basis of the assumption of p , then belief that p can't be justified.

7. So, belief that the future will resemble the past cannot be justified. (5, 6.)

8. If a belief that p can be justified only on the basis of an assumption that cannot be justified, then belief that p cannot be justified.

9. So, belief in future matters of fact cannot be justified. (3, 8.)

- To resist the argument's conclusion, you can:
 1. Deny (1). Maybe some beliefs in future matters of fact can be justified through reason, or are known innately.
 2. Deny (2). Maybe you don't need to assume that the future will resemble the past in order for past experience to justify your belief in future unobserved matters of fact.
 3. Deny (4). Maybe that the future will resemble the past is a relation of ideas.
 4. Deny (6). Maybe some beliefs can be justified by circular reasoning.
 5. Deny (8). Maybe some beliefs can be justified on the basis of unjustified assumptions

3 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)