Hume

1711-1776

HUME: AN OVERVIEW

SOME INITIAL DISTINCTIONS

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS:

- Impressions:
  - Impressions of sensation
  - Impressions of reflection
- Ideas:
  - From memory
  - From imagination:
    - From fancy
    - From understanding (reason):
      - Involving relations of ideas
      - Involving matters of fact

FACULTIES:

The *Faculty of Imagination* breaks apart and combines ideas by means of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. It comes in two varieties:

The Faculty of Fancy

The Faculty of Understanding (Reason): It relies on mathematical demonstration and factual prediction.

Reasoning concerning *Relations of Ideas* or *Truths of Reason* (which yields demonstration):

It includes Resemblance, Contrariety, Degrees in quality, and Proportions in quantity or number

Reasoning concerning *Matters of Fact* (which yield judgments of probability):

It includes Identity, Relations in Time and Place, and Causation.

The *Faculty of Memory* repeats ideas based on experiences as they happened. (In the *Inquiry* he claims that, like the faculty of understanding, this faculty also can combine ideas by means of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.)

Two Major Theses in Hume:

All ideas are ultimately copied from impressions. (This is referred to as *The Copy Principle*.) This empiricist requirement will entail that any philosophical idea that is not derived from an impression is without meaning.

Impressions are characterized by the fact that they are livelier than ideas.

His strategy for handling philosophical problems:

He skeptically argues that we are unable to gain complete knowledge of some important philosophical notion under consideration.

He shows more positively how the understanding gives us a very limited idea of the notion under consideration.

He explains how some erroneous views of that notion are grounded in the fancy, and he accordingly recommends that we reject those ideas .

His Method:

He claims that traditionally philosophers have employed definitions of their terms, but this method leads to philosophical confusions by substituting synonyms for the original term and never breaks out of a “definitional circle”.

Instead, he suggests proceeding as follows:

Consider the idea that the term is supposed to refer to.

If there is no such idea, the term has no cognitive meaning.

On the other hand, if there is such an idea, then if it is complex, break it up into the simple ideas that compose it, and trace these back to the original impressions

If the idea does not refer back to corresponding impressions, then it is a term without cognitive content.

CHALLENGES TO HIS TRUTHS OF REASON VS. MATTERS OF FACT DISTINCTION

Are there synthetic (i.e. contingent)/*a priori* truths?

Kant: “Every event has a cause” or “No object can be completely red and completely green at the same time.”

Kripke: Where stick S refers to the standard meter stick, “Stick S is one meter” is a contingent *a priori* claim. It is contingent because it might not be that length, but it is *a priori* because we know this independently of experience.

Wittgenstein, in contrast, maintains that “One can say neither that it [the standard meter] is one meter long nor that it is not one meter long.”

Note that for Kant the necessary/contingent distinction is an epistemological distinction. But this is because he is interested in what is necessary for human knowledge. Also, Hume doesn’t use the analytic/synthetic distinction. This set of terms was invented by Kant.

Are there analytic (i.e. necessary)/*a posteriori* truths?

Kripke: Goldbach’s Conjecture (viz. Every even integer > 2 can be expressed as the sum of two primes.)

A QUICK SUMMARY OF *BOOK I* OF THE *TREATISE* AND OF THE *INQUIRY*

Having made these points, *Book I* of the *Treatise* goes on to consider the following philosophical problems:

Space

Time

The Necessary Connection Between Cause and Effect

External Objects

Personal Identity

Our selection in the text deals with this last topic. Hume has some very interesting and important things to say about identity and personal identity and we will consider them later.

A Very Quick Overview of the 12 Sections of the *Inquiry*:

1. Of the Different Species of Philosophy: In this section he describes two styles of philosophical writing: an easy-reading philosophy grounded in common life, and a difficult-reading philosophy grounded in abstract concepts. He explains the value of both and proposes to mix elements of the two styles.

2. Of the Origin of Ideas: In this section he argues that ideas differ from impressions only by being less lively, and that all ideas are copied from impressions. He concisely states his test for meaning: to see if "a philosophical term is employed without any meaning ... we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived*?"

3. Of the Association of Ideas: He argues that the only three principles of association of ideas are resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. Unlike in the *Treatise*, which describes these as principles of the imagination, here Hume states more generally that they apply in the operations of both the memory and imagination.

4. Skeptical Doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding: Hume notes that the objects of the faculty of understanding (or reason) are either relations of ideas or matters of fact. He devotes this section to uncovering the foundations of our reasoning concerning matters of fact. Such reasoning is based on cause and effect relations, which in turn are based on experience, without the aid of reason or our imagination (that is, the fancy). This in turn raises the question of how we make inductive generalizations in experience.

5. Skeptical Solution of these Doubts: Hume proceeds to argue that inductive generalizations in experience result from the principle of "custom or habit". He examines how belief arises. Belief, he thinks, is a more vivid conception of an object than we would otherwise have through the imagination (that is, the fancy) alone. The ideas we believe become more "intense and steady" through habit and custom. He concludes by showing how the principles of association can intensify an idea and thus produce belief.

6. Of Probability: He explains the difference between chances and probability. Chances involve situations where there are at least two possible outcomes, each of which may occur equally. Probability, on the other hand, entails that we have experienced one event to occur more frequently than another. He then shows how belief arises with both.

Our initial concern will be with his discussion of Induction on pp. 499-509 and probability pp. 512-514. We will then turn to his discussion of Causality, in Section 7.

7. Of the Idea of Necessary Connection: Hume explains the origin of our idea of causal power using his copy thesis. He argues that necessary connection does not arise from either an outward sense impression or from an internal impression. Specifically, it does not arise from reflecting on willed bodily motions encountering a resistive physical force, the willed creation of thoughts, or the experience of God as the true cause (as the Occasionalists claim). Ultimately, the idea of causal power is based on the "customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual [i.e., constantly conjoined] attendant." He concludes by offering two definitions of causality based on his notion of causal power.

We will focus on Hume's discussion of causality in this section.

8. Of Liberty and Necessity: Hume argues that all human actions are caused by antecedent motives. He offers several illustrations of the connection between motives and actions that fit his two definitions of causality. He reconciles necessity with liberty by defining liberty as "a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will" - which is similar to Locke's definition. He notes the criticism that necessity undermines morality since it eliminates moral choice. In response he argues that we rely on necessity to link a person's actions with his motives and thus pass moral judgment on the person's actions. He also notes the criticism that necessity forces us to trace all evil human actions back through a causal chain to God. He suggests possible solutions to this problem, but concludes that it is a mystery that human reason is not fit to handle.

9. Of the Reason of Animals: In this section Hume argues that what he has said about cause and effect, induction, habit and belief is confirmed by observing the same processes in animals.

10. Of Miracles: Hume argues that empirical judgments--including those based on testimony--involve weighing evidence for and against a given claim. The empirical testimony of uniform laws of nature will always outweigh the testimony of any alleged miracle. He notes four factors that count against the credibility of most miracle testimonies: the witnesses lack integrity; we have a propensity to sensationalize; miracle testimonies abound in barbarous nations; and miracles support rival religious systems. However, even the most credible miracle testimonies are outweighed by the evidence of consistent laws of nature. Although people typically see miracles as the foundation of their religion, He argues that this is unreasonable. He suggests that Christianity in particular is better founded on faith, rather than on miracle testimony. Christianity indeed requires belief in miracles, but such belief should involve an act of faith and not reason.

11. Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State: This section presents a fictional conversation in which two characters examine some of the traditional philosophical arguments about the nature and existence of God. The skeptical character principally attacks the design argument and the argument that God rewards or punishes human actions either in this life or the next.

12. Of the Academical or Skeptical Philosophy: Hume describes different kinds of skepticism, defending some types and rejecting others. He associates Pyrrhonian skepticism with blanket attacks on all reasoning about the external world, abstract reasoning about space and time, or causal reasoning about matters of fact. He argues, though, that we must reject such skepticism since "no durable good can ever result from it." Instead, Hume recommends a more moderate or Academic skepticism that tempers Pyrrhonism by, first, exercising caution and modesty, and, second, restricting our speculations to abstract reasoning and matters of fact.

We will close our discussion of Hume by discussing this section.

HUME'S ARGUMENT CONCERNING INDUCTION AND PROBABILITY

A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE ARGUMENT

All probability (I.e., inductive) arguments rest on the assumption that the future will be like the past. (Hume refers to this assumption as the Uniformity Principle). But this assumption cannot be proved *a priori*, since it is possible for it to be false. (The future doesn't ever have to be like the past.) So the Uniformity Principle must, if it is rationally justifiable, rest on an argument that is *a posteriori*, and so, is itself only probable. But in this case the Uniformity Principle can only be justified by appealing to the Uniformity Principle itself, and that is viciously circular. So the Uniformity Principle cannot be rationally justified. Its basis, therefore, can only be custom or habit, a non-rational instinct.

HUME’S ARGUMENT

FIRST PART:

P1) No probable arguments are based solely on the evidence of our senses.

P2) Only the relation of cause and effect can take us beyond the evidence of our memory and senses.

C1) All probable arguments (moral arguments and reasoning concerning matter of fact) are founded on the relation of cause and effect. [From P1 and P2]

P3) The sensible qualities of objects do not reveal their causes or their effects, and there is no known connection between an object's sensible qualities and its "secret powers".

P4) Any effect is quite distinct from its cause and many alternative effects are equally conceivable.

C2) Causal relations cannot be known *a priori*, but can only be discovered by experience (of constant conjunctions). [From P3 and P4]

C3) All probable arguments (moral arguments and reasoning concerning matters of fact) are founded on experience. [From C1 and C2]

SECOND PART:

P5) The Principle of Uniformity cannot be rationally justified by anything that we learn through the senses about objects "secret powers".

This follows from P3 above.

P6) The Principle of Uniformity is not intuitively certain.

C4) The Principle of Uniformity cannot be rationally justified on the basis of a good argument (I.e., there must be a medium for proving it). [From P5 and P6]

THIRD PART:

P7) There can be no good demonstrative argument for the Principle of Uniformity.

> This follows from the fact that the contrary of the Principle of Uniformity can be distinctly conceived and is, therefore, possible.

P8) All good reasoning is either demonstrative or moral (i.e. probable).

C5) If there is a good argument for the Principle of Uniformity it must be probable only. [From P7 and P8]

P9) Any probable argument for the Principle of Uniformity would be circular.

C6) There is no good argument of any kind for the Principle of Uniformity. [From C5 and P9]

FOURTH PART:

C3) All probable arguments (moral arguments and reasoning concerning matter of fact) are founded on experience.

P10) All arguments founded on experience proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past.

C7) All probable arguments (moral arguments and reasoning concerning matter of fact) proceed upon the supposition that nature is uniform, and in particular, that similar causes will in the future have similar effects to those which they have had in the past (i.e., upon the Principle of Uniformity). [From C3 and P10]

C4) The Principle of Uniformity cannot be rationally justified on the basis of a good argument (I.e., there must be a medium for proving it).

C6) There is no good argument of any kind for the Principle of Uniformity.

C8) The Principle of Uniformity cannot be rationally justified. [From C4 and C6]

C10) No probable argument (moral argument or reasoning concerning matter of fact) is rationally justified, and hence, it is not reason (but custom or habit, a non-rational instinct) which engages us to make probable inferences. [From C7 and C8]

SOME POSSIBLE RESPONSES

A. The Inductive Justification: The *inductive* defense of induction is based on the obvious (if apparently naive) idea that induction can be shown to be a reliable method of inference by appeal to its past success. Of course the instant retort of the Humean will be that such a procedure is viciously circular – induction *just is* the method of making inferences about the future based on the supposition that it will conform to the past, so to assume that it is legitimate to justify the future employment of this same method by appeal to its past success "must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question." [Max Black]

B. The Analytic Justification: The *analytic* justification of induction can be viewed as a natural response to the perceived circularity of the inductive defense. For Black's argument does seem to invoke a supremely rational method of assessing any non-deductive rule of inference, namely on the basis of its past success, and if such a compelling method cannot itself be justified by this sort of argument without circularity, then perhaps this is indicative not that the method is in any way suspect, but on the contrary, that it is irreducibly *constitutive* of rationality. From this perspective, therefore, it is *analytic* that induction is rational: to say that a non-deductive rule or generalization is rationally well-founded *just is* to say, in part, that it is founded (directly or indirectly) on induction. [P.F. Strawson]

C. The Pragmatic Justification: The *pragmatic* approach to the question of justification accepts that the question can indeed properly be asked, but then goes on to stress, in a somewhat Strawsonian spirit, that it cannot directly be answered. To those impressed by Hume's skeptical assault this attitude can seem almost inevitable: "How could we realistically hope to justify our *most fundamental* method of factual inference, when Hume has shown that it cannot be proved reliable by *a priori* reasoning, and we have no other method of reasoning to which we can appeal for the purpose even in principle, since no other method has half as much authority as the one we are attempting to validate?"

"Validation", then, is impossible, but the aim of the pragmatic justification is to provide instead a "vindication", to use a term and a distinction made famous by Herbert Feigl (1950). On this account the *validation* of rules or methods is the process of showing that they are warranted by reference to more fundamental rules or methods – and clearly this cannot be done in the case of those (such as induction) that are the most fundamental of all. Here, however, *vindication* is still a possibility, whereby the fundamental rule or method is shown to be worthy of that status not by reference to others, but through a demonstration that it is appropriately suited to accomplish the purpose that is expected of it.

Given the agreed impossibility of proving induction to be reliable, any attempted vindication must obviously take some other form. And here Hans Reichenbach and his former pupil Wesley Salmon have pursued the aim of showing that although induction admittedly cannot be guaranteed to work, at least it can be proved to be our "best bet", in the sense that *if any method of prediction at all will work, then certainly induction will.* Thus their justification is "pragmatic" in the same sense as Pascal's Wager – it does not purport to show that a particular theoretical claim is rationally well-founded, but recommends that in practice we rely on the truth of that claim on the principle that if it is indeed true, we prosper, and if it is not, then our cause is lost whatever we do. The outcome may be uncertain, but given this "nothing to lose" situation, at least it is obvious where the rational punter must lay his stake.

POSSIBLE EXAM 2 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the views of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume on the limits of human knowledge.
2. Discuss the views of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume on substance.
3. Discuss Locke's and Berkeley's proofs for the existence of God.
4. Discuss Locke and Hume on personal identity.
5. Discuss Hume's views of induction and causality.