

Humes Old and New

Peter Millican

I. Introduction

A bewilderingly wide range of interpretations are on offer (see for example my 2002d), often complex, distant from the apparent spirit of Hume's text, and inspired by finding resonances with fashionable views (e.g. naturalised epistemology, externalism). Also a desire to distance Hume from some simplistic traditional interpretations (e.g. as a radical sceptic or logical positivist).

II. The Good Old Hume

- Hume's primary aim is to undermine the notion of human reason as *perceptual insight* (cf. Locke's view of factual inference as founded on *perception* of probable connexions).
- He distinguishes 'relations of ideas' from 'matters of fact' – roughly analytic/synthetic.
- Likewise 'demonstrative' reasoning from 'probable', 'moral', or 'reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence' ['factual inference' for short] – roughly deductive/inductive.
- Induction presupposes a principle of uniformity (UP), which cannot be founded on any form of rational evidence. Hence induction cannot be founded on perceptual insight; instead, it is founded on 'custom', an instinct to extrapolate from observed to unobserved.
- Since all belief about the unobserved depends on factual inference and hence on UP, 'the wise man' should base his beliefs (e.g. about miracles) on consistency with experience.
- We think of things as causally connected because we find ourselves making customary inferences, and hence acquire the idea of necessity: 'the necessary connexion depends on the inference, instead of the inference's depending on the necessary connexion' (*T* 1.3.6.3).
- All our understanding of necessary connexion derives from this customary inference in response to constant conjunction – beyond that 'we have no notion of connexion' (*E* 8.5).
- Since customary inference is as applicable to the moral as to the physical world, and since we have no other notion of connexion, this same necessity applies equally to both domains.
- Hence claims about causation (or its lack) must be based on experienced correlations alone: '*a priori*, any thing may produce any thing ... all objects, which are found to be constantly conjoined, are upon that account only to be regarded as causes and effects' (*T* 1.4.5.30-2).
- This empirical, causal, deterministic science involves a systematic search for underlying correlations, 'reducing the principles ... to a greater simplicity', for example by explaining phenomena in terms of functional relationships of quantitative *forces* (*E* 4.12-13).

III. Four Fashionable 'Heresies'

(a) Stove: demonstration \neq deduction; (b) Garrett: Hume's argument concerning induction is not sceptical; (c) Loeb: Hume's argument is externalist; (d) Wright: Hume is a (thick) Causal realist.

IV. The Treatise, the Enquiry, and Induction

There is plenty of evidence of Hume's dissatisfaction with the *Treatise*, from as early as four months after it was published in 1739. The *Abstract* of the *Treatise* (composed 1739) seems to mark a rethinking of the material of Book I, in a form that would lead to the *Enquiry* of 1748.

The *Enquiry* is commonly thought to be a mere popular summary of the *Treatise*, but on some of the most important topics (notably induction and free will) it is far more worked out. For example the argument concerning induction in *T* 1.3.6 considers only whether the Uniformity Principle (UP) can be founded on demonstrative or factual inference, whereas in *Enquiry* IV Hume also rules out the possibility of founding UP on intuition or sensation. Now consider:

'It is common for Philosophers to distinguish the Kinds of Evidence into *intuitive*, *demonstrative*, *sensible*, and *moral*' (*Letter from a Gentleman*, 1745)

Hume's argument seems intended to rule out *any kind of evidence* for UP, which is clearly a sceptical result (more than just denying that UP is founded on a sequential *argument*).

V. What Does Hume Mean by 'Demonstrative'?

Hume says that 'no matter of fact is capable of being demonstrated' (T 3.1.1.18). But there is obviously no problem with having a matter of fact as the conclusion of a deductive argument. So does this mean that only *a priori* deductive arguments should count as 'demonstrative'?

No it doesn't! If I demonstrate (or deductively prove) *Q from P*, that is quite different from demonstrating *Q tout court*. Hume denies that any matter of fact can be *demonstrated*. He nowhere denies that one matter of fact can be demonstrated *from another*. Moreover he explicitly alludes to the role of demonstration in applied mathematics (which is not *a priori*).

VI. Hume's Epistemology of Induction

The final step of Hume's argument concerning induction goes like this:

All factual inferences to the unobserved are founded on UP
UP is not founded on reason

∴ No factual inference to the unobserved is founded on reason

Garrett, Noonan, Owen and Beebee want to interpret 'founded on reason' *descriptively*, meaning (roughly) 'caused by stepwise argument', but then the step above seems to be a *non-sequitur*. However it's easy to understand if 'founded on reason' is *normative*, meaning rationally *justified*.

VII. Humean Externalism?

Can this objection be evaded if Hume is seen as taking for granted from the start that induction is rational, so that he here restricts his attention to *justified* stepwise arguments? Loeb combines this idea with viewing Hume's commitment to the rationality of induction as *externalist*.

But this overlooks the obviously *negative* outcome of Hume's argument. He doesn't focus on justified 'kinds of evidence' in order to identify the true rational basis of UP; rather, he does it *to prove that UP has no rational basis*. He entitles the section 'Sceptical Doubts', and refers to it as giving 'the sceptic ample matter of triumph'. Externalism is anyway anachronistic, and can't provide any justification that Hume could have accepted for belief in *future* uniformity.

VIII. The New Hume, Liberty, and Necessity

Hume's argument that the same necessity is applicable to both the moral and physical realms crucially depends on taking our understanding of necessary connexion to be completely exhausted by the two factors of constant conjunction and customary inference:

'the most zealous advocates for free-will must allow this union and inference with regard to human actions. They will only deny, that this makes the whole of necessity. But then they must shew, that we have an idea of something else in the actions of matter; which, according to the foregoing reasoning, is impossible.' (Abstract 34)

So the argument works only if his two 'definitions of cause' are interpreted *semantically* – as constraining what we can *mean* or coherently *refer to* – rather than *epistemologically*.

IX. Conclusion: Hume and Inductive Science

'Heretical' interpretations typically build on the assumption that Hume must be either *completely sceptical* (in which case he shouldn't endorse induction or causal language), or *completely non-sceptical* (in which case his apparently sceptical arguments must be radically reinterpreted). The truth lies in between. His argument concerning induction is *genuinely sceptical*, but Hume gives induction an alternative basis and takes it as the source of all 'wise' belief about the unobserved. Likewise, he is entirely realist about causation, understood as constant conjunction and inference; but firmly anti-realist about Causation, understood as any sort of 'thick connexion' beyond this.