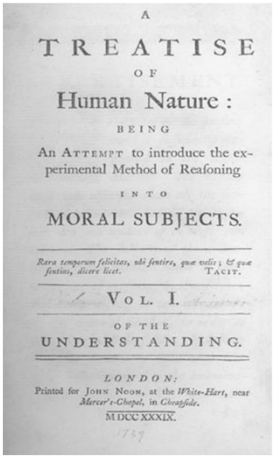
Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

APPENDIX

Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason


A
TREATISE
OF
Human Nature:
BEING
An ATTEMPT to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning
INTO
MORAL SUBJECTS.
Rara temporum felicitate, ubi sentire, quæ velis; & quæ sentias, dicere licet.
TACIT.
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"Hume's Pivotal Argument"

- Hume's argument "Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason", in *Treatise* 1.4.1, is not as commonly studied as his familiar discussions of induction, necessary connexion, the external world, and personal identity. Yet in the context of the *Treatise*, it is hugely important, bringing apparent disaster to the Conclusion of Book 1.
- However, it completely disappears from Hume's later work, and I have recently suggested that his realisation that it fails might well have been pivotal in significantly changing his attitude to scepticism, as manifested in the first *Enquiry*.

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Stage 1 – the *Uncertainty Argument*

- The *Treatise* 1.4.1 argument falls into two main stages. The first stage – which I call the *Uncertainty Argument* – argues that, even if we assume that in "demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible" (*T* 1.4.1.1), some doubt is still appropriate because our faculties are imperfect and we sometimes make mistakes.
- If we take proper account – as we should – of our *experienced frequency* of having made such mistakes in the past, "All knowledge degenerates into probability" (*T* 1.4.1.1) .

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An Arithmetical Example

- Suppose, for example, that I am trying to solve a quadratic equation, and conclude that the only positive solution is x=16. Should I believe this with *total conviction*? Hume argues that if experience suggests I sometimes go wrong, then I should not.
  - To make this question vivid, suppose that getting the answer wrong will cost me £1000, and I am given the opportunity to take out insurance against error: should I be prepared to pay to insure, and if so, how much?
  - If in practice I have got such equations right about 95% of the time, then it indeed seems prudent to pay up to £50 to insure (thus backing up Hume's argument).

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"A history of all the instances"

"We must, therefore, ... enlarge our view to comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv'd us, compar'd with those, wherein its testimony was just and true. Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. By this means all knowledge degenerates into probability; and this probability is greater or less, according to our experience of the veracity or deceitfulness of our understanding, and according to the simplicity or intricacy of the question."

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- When Hume says "Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause", he is alluding back to *Treatise* 1.3.12, "Of the Probability of Causes". There he gave an associationist account of probable reasoning from *inconstant* past experience, typically where *a mix of unknown causes* is involved, so we have to base our expectation on past statistics alone.

  "when an object is attended with contrary effects, we judge of them only by our past experience, … and that effect, which has been the most common, we always esteem the most likely." (*T* 1.3.12.8)

  "when in considering past experiments we find them … contrary … each partakes an equal share of … force and vivacity, … Any of these past events may again happen; and we judge, that when they do happen, they will be mix'd in the same proportion as in the past." (*T* 1.3.12.10)

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An Obligation to Embark on "Reflex Judgment"

- Hence when we consider what confidence to place in a mathematical calculation that we have carried out (for instance), we need to make, and take account of, a reflexive judgment about the reliability of our reason or understanding:

> "we ought always to correct the first judgment, derived from the nature of the object [e.g. the mathematical judgment that *x*=16], by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding [e.g. the experiential judgment that we tend to go wrong 5% of the time]." (*T* 1.4.1.5)

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Stage 2 – the *Regress Argument*

- Hume thinks exactly the same sort of correction is rationally required for probable judgments – which will include our reflexive judgments about our own reliability (*T* 1.4.1.5), leading to a infinite regress.
- Thus since that first reflexive judgment – e.g. that I'm 95% reliable in solving quadratic equations – is itself subject to error, I need to take this into account by making a second correction:

> "we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

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Iterative Weakening to Nothing

- This obligation iterates, repeatedly weakening the evidence left by the previous judgments:

> "this decision, tho' it should be favourable to our preceding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still farther our first evidence, and must itself be weaken'd by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on *in infinitum*; and even the vastest quantity … must in this manner be reduc'd to nothing. … all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

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Hume's Assessment of the Argument

- Hume repeatedly implies that he considers the sceptical argument to be *rationally* compelling:

> "all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence." (*T* 1.4.1.6)

> "I have here prov'd, that the very same principles, which make us form a decision upon any subject, and correct that decision by the consideration of our genius and capacity, … when we examin'd that subject; I say, I have prov'd, that these same principles, when carry'd farther, and apply'd to every new reflex judgment, must, by continually diminishing the original evidence, at last reduce it to nothing, and utterly subvert all belief and opinion." (*T* 1.4.1.8 – see also *T* 1.4.2.57, 1.4.7.7)

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Does Hume Accept the Conclusion?

> "Shou'd it be ask'd me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument … and whether I be really one of those sceptics, who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in *any* thing possest of *any* measures of truth and falshood; I shou'd reply, that this question is entirely superfluous, and that neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion. Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; …" (*T* 1.4.1.7)

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The Irresistibility of Belief

> "… nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sun-shine. Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist …" (*T* 1.4.1.7)

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Hume's Intention Here

"My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.* … I have prov'd, that … If belief … were a simple act of the thought, without any peculiar manner of conception, or the addition of a force and vivacity, it must infallibly destroy itself, and in every case terminate in a total suspence of judgment." (*T* 1.4.1.8)

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Rejecting Alternative Theories of Belief

- Hume thus attacks alternative theories of belief – based on the general notion that our beliefs (do or should) result from *rational* oversight and judgment – as inevitably leading to total absence of belief, an outcome which is clearly empirically false.
  - This attack presupposes that the sceptical argument is *rationally* correct (hence that a rational-oversight theory of belief would indeed be compelled by it).
  - By contrast, Hume's own theory is that belief arises from the causal operation of *custom* – which acts by enhancing the vivacity of ideas – in a way that "mere ideas and reflections" cannot prevent (*T* 1.4.1.8).

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How Does Hume Avoid the Regress?

- How does Hume's own account of belief escape this iterative weakening and eventual reduction to complete suspension?

  "I answer, that after the first and second decision; as the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure; tho' the principles … be the same …; yet their influence on the imagination [weakens] …" (*T* 1.4.1.10)

- As Hume remarks, this difficulty of following and being moved by abstruse arguments is very familiar to us. (*T* 1.4.1.11, cf. 1.3.13.17)

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The Significance of the Argument

- Hume anticipates *T* 1.4.1 in the previous Part:

  "we shall find afterwards, [note to *T* 1.4.1] … one very memorable exception [to iterative psychological weakening], which is of vast consequence in the present subject of the understanding." (*T* 1.3.13.5)

- He also draws on it in the conclusion of Book 1:

  "I have already shown, [note to *T* 1.4.1] that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life." (*T* 1.4.7.7)

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A Trivial Property of the Fancy

- As discussed in Lecture 8 on *Treatise* 1.4.7, this point is extremely significant: we are saved "from … total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy [i.e. the imagination], by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things".
- This ultimately raises serious doubts about the adequacy of Hume's response to scepticism in the *Treatise*: scepticism seems to be avoidable only by relying on what we would normally consider to be *trivial* and *irrational* principles of the imagination.

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Is Hume's Argument Strong?

- The *T* 1.4.1 argument seems very dubious:
  - Suppose I make a mathematical judgment.
  - Suppose experience suggests to me that I go wrong about 5% of the time in such judgments; so I adjust my credence to 95%.
  - Then it occurs to me that my estimate of 5% might be wrong … but why should this make me assume that my estimate is likely to be too *optimistic* rather than *pessimistic*? Maybe my credence should be *greater than* 95%?

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A Spreading "Margin of Error"?

- Some defenders of Hume (e.g. Bennett, Owen) admit that reduction isn't forced, but suggest that iteration implies a "spreading" of the probability estimate, so it becomes completely non-specific.
- But this doesn't fit Hume's account of belief as a vivacious idea – belief involves *a specific level of felt vivacity*, not reflective judgment over a range.
- Moreover like other defences of Hume, it has never been spelled out beyond vague hand-waving, and no such defence has achieved sufficient rigour to yield mathematical plausibility.

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Why Iterate?

- More fundamentally, *the case for repeated iteration is hopeless*. My credence in my mathematical judgment should – on the very principles explained at *T* 1.4.1.1 – depend on my reliability [and hence remembered track record] in judging *mathematics*, not on my reliability in judging my reliability in judging … (etc.).
  - Hume's argument *itself* relies on memory and records, explicitly appealing to the "history of the instances" of my past judgments (*T* 1.4.1.1), and expressing no scepticism about our memory or record-taking ability etc. These remembered/recorded statistics remain what they are, *irrespective of how good or bad I might be at iterative reflexive judgments*.

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Where is the Obligation of Reason?

- Even if there were some good reason *in principle* to iterate up lots of levels, *in practice* doing so:
  - Is psychologically impossible for us (*T* 1.4.1.10);
  - Confuses and pulls us away from the true statistics;
  - If we were able to do it, would obliterate all belief.

  So how can it possibly be *an obligation of reason* to iterate, as *T* 1.4.1.6 insists?
- On Hume's own conception of reason, reflexive checking can only make sense if it is warranted by *experience* (applying reflective rules such as those of *Treatise* 1.3.15). Hence the lack of any *a posteriori* benefit entirely undermines the supposed obligation.

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A Failed Argument

- Many other scholars have attempted to defend Hume's argument of *Treatise* 1.4.1, but I have recently argued that they all fail decisively ("Hume's Pivotal Argument, and His Supposed Obligation of Reason", *Hume Studies* 2018).
  - I argue that it is impossible *even to elucidate the argument* with any plausibility if one focuses on *examples* (rather than relying on the handwaving "and so on" of *T* 1.4.1.6). And I speculate that this makes it extremely likely that Hume himself would have come to appreciate the problem when he came to work on the *Enquiry*, which (in striking contrast to the *Treatise*) illustrates its discussions with a large number of examples.

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Examples in the *Treatise*

- "Of the inference from the impression to the idea"
  - *Treatise* 1.3.6 briefly mentions only one example (flame and heat at T 1.3.6.2).
- "Of the idea of necessary connexion"
  - *Treatise* 1.3.14 barely mentions the examples of billiard balls (T 1.3.14.18), a couple of mathematical relations (T 1.3.14.23), and a blind man's false suppositions that scarlet is like a trumpet sound, and light like solidity (T 1.3.14.27).

By contrast in the Enquiry …

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Examples in the *Enquiry*

- "Sceptical Doubts concerning … the understanding"
  - *Enquiry* 4 contains over twenty examples, some of which are developed extensively (e.g. billiard balls at *E* 4.8-10; momentum at *E* 4.13, 16; the nourishing qualities of bread at *E* 4.16, 21).
- "Of the idea of necessary connexion"
  - *Enquiry* 7 mentions billiard balls repeatedly (*E* 7.6, 21, 28, 30), heat and flame (*E* 7.8), the influence of will on our limbs and other organs (*E* 7.9, 12, 14), a man struck with palsy (*E* 7.13), our power to raise up a new idea (*E* 7.16), the effects of sickness, time of day, and food (*E* 7.19), descent of bodies, growth of plants, generation, and nourishment (*E* 7.21), and vibration of a string causing a sound (*E* 7.29).

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