

The Inherent Uncertainty of Reason

Laura Specker

In Hume's *Treatise*, the argument is made that all knowledge is really probability, and that all probability essentially undermines itself. The conclusion of this argument will be that since our knowledge must always be contingent on probability, it can never be certain. Hume will allow that practically, this is an impossible position to hold. He will concede that there are certain beliefs that, due to their causal nature, are impossible for us to suspend. This argument will leave us with the knowledge that none of our knowledge is certain, as well as with a set of beliefs that we uphold, even though we know them to be based on habit and not reason. In this paper I will interpret important points in the argument, then analyze objections to the argument to determine whether or not it is practical. I will conclude that Hume does present a valid argument, because while he uses reason to degrade reason, his proposal of skepticism is as an inherent contradiction in the system of reason, rather than as an alternative to reason itself.

Hume originally says that human reason is divided into knowledge and probability (Hume 86). Knowledge is defined as the evidence resulting from the comparison of ideas, otherwise known as relations of ideas. Probability is the result of arguments from causes or effects, otherwise known as matters of fact. Despite this early distinction, Hume later argues that all knowledge degenerates into probability (Hume 121). He makes this argument by first proposing that all knowledge is demonstrative. This is evident because what seems to us to be one of the most intuitive decisions, the

addition of two simple numbers such as one and one, really involve calculations. As calculations are demonstrations, then this addition involves demonstrative, and not intuitive, knowledge. This seems to be a valid argument. Even if something appears to us to be intuitive knowledge, there is probably some computational/demonstrational quality to the intuition that we either do not remember, or don't perceive as significant enough to mark.

The form of demonstrative knowledge is a set of rules that are applied to certain circumstances. These rules are relations that we are naturally led to believe in. Every reasoning we make through demonstrative knowledge applies these assumed rules (beliefs) to a situation in order to make a judgment about that situation. For example, I have the belief that two hard objects, upon impact, will make a sound. This allows me to make the judgment that if I hit my book against the table, it will make a noise.

This kind of judgment is made by the application of reason (applying general rules concerning cause and effect to certain circumstances). Reason, therefore, seems to be the cause of which judging is the effect. However, all reasoning from cause and effect was previously defined as probability. Therefore, if it is true that all our knowledge is really demonstrative, and that reasoning from demonstrative knowledge produces judgments, then it seems that all knowledge does in fact become probability¹. In order to assess this claim, however, it is important to explicate Hume's use of probability.

Hume defines probability as reasoning from conjecture, which is basically reasoning from the principle of cause and effect. Due to the fact that cause and effect are

¹ I primarily referred to Fogelin in order to better understand this part of Hume's argument.

ideas derived from experience (from custom), then to investigate a cause the argument must move from experience to the understanding.

Hume defines two different kinds of evidence from probability, that from the probability of chance and that from the probability of cause. He points out that in a situation in which there are no conditions through which to investigate a cause, the probability is concerned with chance, and not cause. In contrast to the idea of cause, the idea of chance is contingent on there being nothing in the understanding to favor one occurrence over another. The evidence from the probability of chance is an array of possible events, each with their possibility of occurring undetermined by exterior conditions. It is the complete indifference to any causes. Therefore, the probability of one chance cannot be superior to that of another, as all probabilities must be equal for there to be no weight for any one particular probability.

The probability of cause is defined as the restriction of this understanding of chance. It is the narrowing of the field of the probability of chance by the association of ideas to a present impression. To put it simply, probability of cause is determined by identifying the possibility of chance, and restricting the array based on the associations derived from present experience. This definition of probability of cause is very similar to the definition of reason (the application of general rules to particular circumstances in order to produce a judgment). Hume believes that his definition of the probability of cause as the narrowing of the evidence from probability of chance by the association of ideas to a present impression also applies to the faculty of reason. Accordingly, Hume says that reason is itself causal. It is an event we experience in conjunction with the production of judgments. However, he does not believe that reason is necessarily

connected to its judgments because he doesn't believe in the necessary connection between a cause and effect.

Instead, Hume says that the association of ideas to a present impression comes from our belief that the future is likely to resemble the past. This belief is based on habit that comes with the observation of the constant conjunction of objects. Every past experience is a kind of chance, because it determines whether it is another piece of evidence conforming to what is learned from habit or not. The more instances of conjunction the greater the force and therefore the stronger the habit and association (and greater the probability of that certain cause). However, this belief is not based on any objective necessary connection between the past and the future.

Hume has argued that all knowledge we derive probabilistically (and he has already stated that the only knowledge we can have is probabilistic) is the result of habit – of observing the constant conjunction of two events and deriving from this observation the idea of cause. Therefore, there is nothing inherent in any object that would lead us to draw conclusions beyond it. Even after observing the frequent conjunction of objects, we have no reason to draw inferences beyond the experience of this conjunction.

Instead, Hume defines the idea of necessity as the result of the repetition of the experience of the two objects together each time producing a new impression of which necessity is the resultant idea. After a frequent repetition, the mind is determined by custom to think of the two objects as connected.

However, the repetition of similar instances can never on its own give rise to the idea of necessity, even though this repetition is the source from which the idea of it

arises. The repetition of the objects together does not discover or produce anything new, it simply multiplies the effect of a single instance.

Therefore, similar instances are the first source of our idea of necessity. They have no influence by their similarity on each other or on the object. However, the observation of the similarity produces a new impression. We observe the resemblance in several instances, and we feel the effect of the resemblance as the tendency when given one object to think of another. Thus, the several similar instances lead us to think of necessity. Their union is only in the mind. Necessity is the impression of this internal union, and is only present as an internal impression of the mind. Necessity exists in the mind, not in objects. A cause may now be defined as an event or object perceived as precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it. This preliminary idea determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form the more lively idea of the other.

Hume takes this conclusion and applies it in his statement that all reasoning is itself a cause. The conclusions he draws from this statement are evident. On the one hand, if reason is itself a cause then it is not necessarily connected to its product, which is a judgment of truth. We can never be certain that the connection between our use of speculative reason is connected to the judgments that we make about the world. All knowledge is contingent, not just on our experience, but by the natural conditions of our mind. Indeed, Hume says, “what we call the mind is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and supposed, though falsely, to be endowed with perfect simplicity and identity” (Hume 137).

Hume's argument has great implications for the possibility of concrete knowledge about the world. He has argued that all knowledge is probability, that the probability of cause determined by the association of ideas that lead us to form judgments is in fact based on nothing but constant conjunction and custom, and therefore reasoning, as a cause itself, can never lead to certainty about the world.

However, what Hume has undergone in the previous argument is itself based on reasoning, because he used reason to draw his conclusion (that our knowledge can never be certain) from his initial judgment (that knowledge is probability)². This seems to be a problem, because if Hume is denying the necessity of any conclusion, then there remains the question of why we should accept his conclusion.

Hume anticipates this argument, and in reply says that the skeptical argument is necessarily done using reason, because that is the only way for the argument to have any authority. As the skeptical argument gains authority, the power that reason is supposed to have diminishes. If the strength of reason (which Hume terms dogmatic reason) is degraded, then so is skeptical reason. Hume believes that what this amounts to is a complete degradation of the system of reason itself, both skeptical and dogmatic, so that in the end reason is given no certainty. Skeptical reason is not really a system proposed in opposition to dogmatic reason, rather, it is a contradiction inherent in our entire system of

² This is a form of H.A. Prichard's objection to Hume, as represented in Fred Wilson's *Hume's defense of causal inference*. Wilson himself points out that Hume rejects objective necessary connections. Therefore, if there is no necessary connection between the premises of an argument and its conclusion, the fallibility of the premise does not necessarily mean the fallibility of the conclusion. If all our faculties are fallible, then we may still believe in Hume's conclusion, despite the fallibility of the reason whereby he arrived at it.

reasoning which brings to light its inadequacy. Therefore, Hume's argument against reason, as a whole, seems valid.

It is important to note that Hume recognizes this is an impossible position to hold in common life. He modifies his skepticism by saying that, once we have arrived at this skeptical view of knowledge, we turn back to common life, and, through our actions, discover that there are certain beliefs that we cannot suspend. He argues that it is impossible to suspend them because a belief is a product of the application of reason. Reason is a natural faculty of the mind, and therefore we cannot rid ourselves of its conclusions willingly. Although we may, through speculative reason, determine that none of our beliefs are certain, this does not mean that we can apply these conclusions to practice.

This definition of reason as a natural faculty, and the mind as a natural organ, is an important one. Essentially, Hume argues that we are determined by nature to think what we think and to feel what we feel. He defines his hypothesis in this manner, "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" (Hume 123).

The conclusion Hume would like us to draw is that we are determined by the natural faculties of the mind to think through our reasoning. However, we need to recognize that there is an inherent contradiction, in the form of the inevitability of the skeptical argument, built into the system of reason. While it is necessary for us to use reason in common life, since it is part of the architecture of our brain, it is an imperfect faculty, whose judgments we should never rely on for certainty. We may make

judgments, and call these judgments knowledge, as long as we keep in mind that all judgments are really just probabilities. In order to advance our knowledge, we must continue to question what we assume to be certain.

Works Cited

Fogelin, Peter. *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Millican, Peter. Skeptical doubts concerning induction. In *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Stanistreet, Paul. *Hume's Scepticism and the Science of Human Nature*. Vermont: Ashgate, 2002.

Wilson, Fred. *Hume's Defense of Causal Inference*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.