

Lecture 1

Hume on Induction

Patrick Maher

Scientific Thought II
Spring 2010



1711: Born in Edinburgh, Scotland.

1748: *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.*

1754: This portrait painted.

1776: Died in Edinburgh.

Hume's question

- We have lots of beliefs about the future. E.g.:
 - The sun will rise tomorrow.
 - This building won't collapse in the next 5 minutes.
 - If a piece of chalk is released, it will fall.
- Hume asked: What is our justification for these beliefs?

Hume's argument

Our beliefs about the future are based on experience

- It is logically possible that the sun won't rise tomorrow, so logic alone can't prove it will.
- We use our experience that it has risen every day for a long time in the past.
- We may use knowledge of scientific laws but why do we believe they will hold tomorrow? Because of our experience that they have held in the past.

and on the assumption that the future will resemble the past

- Our experience is only about the past, so experience alone cannot justify beliefs about the future.
- Example of the assumption: Having experienced the sun rising every day in the past, we assume that the future will resemble the past and thus believe that the sun will rise tomorrow.

The assumption is unjustified

- It can't be justified by logic alone because it's logically possible the future won't resemble the past.
- It can't be justified by experience alone because our experience is only of the past but the assumption concerns the future.
- It can't be justified by assuming the future will resemble the past, because that would be circular.

Therefore, our beliefs about the future are unjustified

because they are based on an assumption that is unjustified.

Quotation

All our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question. (IV.ii)

What Hume isn't saying

- He's not just saying that we can't be sure what will happen in the future.
 - Beliefs that we can't be sure are true may still be justified.
- He's not saying we shouldn't have beliefs about the future.
 - He thinks we'd be crazy not to have these beliefs.

None but a fool or madman will ever pretend to dispute the authority of experience, or to reject that great guide of human life. (IV.ii)

He's saying that these beliefs, though sensible, aren't justified.

Why we form these beliefs

Examples

- Having seen the sun rise every day we just come to expect that it will rise in the future.
- Having seen chalk fall whenever it is released we just come to expect that if this piece is released it will fall.

We form these beliefs due to custom or habit

For wherever the repetition of any act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding, we always say, that this propensity is the effect of Custom. By employing this word, we pretend not to have given the ultimate reason of such a propensity. We only point out a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects. (V.i)

- 1 According to Hume: (a) what are beliefs about the future based on? (b) which part of this basis can't be justified and why can't it be justified? (c) why are all beliefs about the future unjustified?
- 2 Did Hume think we should stop having beliefs about the future? Support your answer with a quotation from Hume.
- 3 According to Hume, what is the principle of human nature that causes us to have beliefs about the future? Give an example of how this cause can produce a belief about the future.

Generalization

- Hume's argument can be generalized to apply to *all* matters of fact that we haven't observed, not only ones in the future but also ones in the past and in the present at other places.
- For this general case, the assumption needs to be, not that the future will resemble the past, but that *the unobserved resembles the observed*.



David Hume.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.

1748.

[Online edition.](#)

Quotations are from this book; numbers in parentheses are section and part numbers.