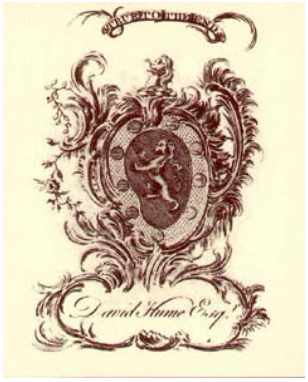

Is Hume a Sceptic About Induction?
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IS HUME A SCEPTIC ABOUT INDUCTION?

On a Would-be Revolution in the Interpretation of Hume's Philosophy

I

The history of philosophy does not abound with great philosophers. But the number of those whose preoccupation is with the interpretation of the great philosophers' works is overwhelming. It is not surprising, therefore, that time and again we come upon arguments to the effect that a great philosopher has never been properly understood. What, after all, could better justify one in adding still another paper or book to the number of works published yearly on any great philosopher, than the claim that one put forward a new interpretation; and what could be a more revolutionary interpretation than that which claims that a certain philosophy has been misunderstood altogether.

This is not to say that real revolutions in the interpretation of major philosophical works are a priori precluded. It could possibly happen that generations of scholars have again and again been mistaken as to a philosopher's basic intentions. But one should certainly check and double-check any such revolutionary interpretation lest one fall a victim to it.

In what follows I shall discuss a recent revolutionary interpretation concerning Hume's attitude toward induction. Hume scholars in the past have been at variance over many a question, but they all agreed that Hume was the first to present the problem of the justification of induction systematically. They also agreed that Hume tried to prove that induction cannot be justified: there is no convincing argument which could (without begging the question) demonstrate that inductively based predictions and theories are reasonable. According to this traditional view Hume's attitude to induction was of course sceptical.

But lately T. Beauchamp and T. Mappes argued that this view was totally mistaken.[1] They claim that Hume never grappled with the problem which came to be called the problem of the justification of induction; actually it does not appear in his writings. The view that Hume was bent on proving the impossibility of such a justification is simply erroneous. According to these philosophers had Hume discussed this problem at all he might well have either argued with Strawson that it was a pseudo-problem or tried with Reichenbach to justify induction pragmatically. If this interpretation is correct, we must conclude that the traditional view of Hume as a sceptical philosopher who denied the rationality of inductive inferences is false to the point of being a mere fabrication.[2]

I shall analyse here some of the arguments advanced by Beauchamp and Mappes in order to expose some of their weak points. I shall try to show that however revolutionary their interpretation, it is only a would-be revolution. If I still find it worthwhile to discuss it at length, it is because their interpretation - as erroneous as it is - raises a very important question about the consistency of Hume's philosophy. My aim is not merely to expose some of the vulnerable points of what I shall call the "revolutionary interpretation" but also to deal with the fundamental question it raises.

II

Beauchamp and Mappes argue that it never occurred to Hume to dispute the rationality of induction. He could doubt whether certain inductive inferences could pass the test of the established institutional standards of inductive reasoning, but the "external problem" of the justifiability of the entire institution of inductive reasoning was never raised by him. This interpretation is based on two kinds of arguments: the one, a general argument, has to do with the principles of Hume's philosophy and the other with textual considerations.

According to the general argument the traditional view that Hume doubted the rationality of the empirical-inductive method is incompatible with well-known facts about Hume, such as his use of this very method, or his assertion that it was the major innovation of the Treatise. "Are we to believe", Beauchamp and Mappes ask, "that the most influential figure in modern empiricism, who wrote a Treatise using the empirical method, binds himself to a procedure whose conclusions cannot be given rational justification of any kind?"[3]

The textual underpinnings of the revolutionary interpretation are of two kinds: on the negative side it is maintained that Hume said nothing which necessitates the conclusion that he thought the entire institution of induction rationally unjustifiable; on the positive side it is argued that whenever Hume seems to question the rationality of induction he actually questions the rationalistic view, according to which at least some causal inferences[4] are demonstrative inferences. Hume's attack on human reason in these places is but an attack on the a priori-rationalistic conception of reason.[5] And although he sometimes employs the term 'reason' in a wider sense, which includes what he calls "experimental reasoning", he never does so whenever he attacks other views concerning induction. What he contends for in these places, according to Beauchamp and Mappes, is that inductive inferences lack the logical necessity which characterizes demonstrative inferences. Consequently, Hume was a sceptic, but of a limited kind: Hume's "sceptical doubts center solely on the scope and powers of the understanding (the faculty of a priori reasoning), not on the justifiability of inductive reasoning".[6]

Since I would like to discuss mainly the general argument advanced by Beauchamp and Mappes, I shall say only a few words concerning the textual evidence they offer. Although it is true that Hume often says causal inferences cannot be based on demonstrative reasoning, it is simply untrue that this is all he said on this issue. Even

Beauchamp and Mappes admit that in two places Hume's words are incompatible with their interpretation. His words in these places make clear that no reason - not even an empirical reason - could explain why predictions based inductively on past experience should be preferred to predictions which are not so based. Beauchamp and Mappes claim that these two places are anomalous in Hume's writings and they emphasize that "they both appear in the early, and self-confessedly brushwork of the Treatise". But this claim is not true. One can find similar remarks in Hume's other, mature, works. He says, for instance, in the conclusion of the Enquiries, *"we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn."*[7] The context makes clear that Hume refers here to the absence of a satisfactory reason of any kind. His obviously sceptical attitude here is not directed at the rationalistic conception of causal inferences but at any attempt to justify these inferences.

Interestingly enough, not even Beauchamp and Mappes deny that Hume several times raises the problem of justifying the assumption that the future will be conformable to the past. They also admit that Hume's attitude towards this assumption is sceptical. But they claim that here "Hume is merely arguing that this assumption is unwarranted, not that the institution of induction is unwarranted".[8] They maintain that his sceptical argument against this assumption is but a part of his attack on rationalism. Rationalists must assume that the future is conformable to the past in order to ground their view that causal inferences can be drawn with the force of logical necessity. Hume contests this view, arguing that the assumption of the uniformity of nature on which it is based cannot be rationally justified.

But this interpretation of Hume's words is extremely strained. What Hume says is rather that the uniformity of nature assumption is implied in any study of causes and effects; it is not specific to the rationalistic

view of causal relation. Hume's scepticism about this thesis is part of his overall sceptical attitude to human reason.

In order to substantiate the claim that here, as elsewhere, Hume's scepticism is not just directed at the rationalists' conception of reason, the citing of one important fact, which seems to have been overlooked by Beauchamp and Mappes, is sufficient. It is evident that Hume was perplexed to the point of despair by the sceptical conclusions he was driven to:

> *The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions; and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.*[9]

It is clear then that at least at some stage in his life, Hume's attitude to his factual beliefs, including, of course, those based inductively on past experience, was sceptical. Otherwise this text makes no sense. Were the revolutionary interpretation correct, that is, did Hume never dispute the validity of the empirical-inductive method, his *"deplorable condition"* would be a riddle. After all, the impotency of the rationalist's a priori reason cannot be very deplorable for a person who believes that past experience is a firm and credible source of information about the world. One should also bear in mind that Hume

did not despair for long:

> *Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, Nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when, after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.*[10]

How did Hume rid himself of the sense of despair to which scepticism drove him? Was it the conviction that the inductive-empirical method is immune to sceptical arguments which worked this change in him? Of course not. He did not conclude (like Descartes) that scepticism was unwarranted; he was just compelled by nature to disregard his sceptical conclusion.

This view of nature's power is formulated elsewhere in a more systematic way:

> *Shou'd it here be ask'd me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument, which I seem to take such pains to inculcate, and whether I be really one of those sceptics, who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgement is not in any thing possest of any measures of truth and falsehood; 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.*[11]

The question whether we should use inductive

inferences has, therefore, no room in Hume's philosophy, but the reason is not that Hume believed in the justifiability of inductive inferences - as Beauchamp and Mappes seem to think. The reason is that the question implies for Hume the absurd assumption that we could stop thinking inductively. In other words, if the problem of induction is understood as the question whether one can prove that through induction we can reach truth or at least approximate it - Hume would say no. But if by the problem of induction we ask whether we should use inductive inferences - Hume would say that such a question is unreasonable since we could not stop using them. We are influenced inductively by our past experience whether or not this influence is rational.

Actually, Hume's polemics with the Pyrrhonians (in the concluding chapter of the first Enquiries) have to do only with the supposition that one could conduct oneself according to Pyrrhonian doubts. He certainly does not contest their conclusion that our picture of the world cannot be rationally justified (and the context makes clear that this picture includes not only beliefs of the rationalistic variety, but empirical beliefs based on inductive inferences as well). And if the revolutionary interpretation is correct, why did Hume not use this opportunity to refute the Pyrrhonians' conclusion altogether, and justify the empirical-inductive method?

The only difference between Hume's scepticism and Pyrrhonian scepticism as it emerges from the final chapter of the first Enquiries, is that for the Pyrrhonians scepticism served as a basis for a way of life,[12] whereas for Hume it was a barren theoretical conclusion which, though unrefutable, could not yield a real influence on our thoughts and life.

> *A Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial... Though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or*

> *others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples... He will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able... to satisfy themselves concerning the foundations of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.*[13]

Now it is quite true that Hume is here talking about the Pyrrhonian, yet bearing in mind the above quoted paragraph from the Treatise, where he described his *"deplorable condition"* and the way he rid himself of despair, it seems to me quite obvious that he is also talking about himself as a sceptic. Hume's words certainly do not fit in with Beauchamp and Mappes' revolutionary interpretation. He explicitly says that one cannot remove the objections against the foundations of our reason, and it would be preposterous in this context to confine "reason" to a priori reason.

III

We may now turn to the discussion of the general argument on which the revolutionary interpretation is based. According to this argument if we subscribe to the traditional view of Hume's philosophy we must assume it to be self-contradictory to a degree which makes this view preposterous: Are we to believe that a great philosopher would announce at the opening of his major work that his most important philosophical innovation is grounding the 'science of man' on the empirical method and yet maintain in the self-same work that the empirical method cannot be justified on rational grounds? The attack on the traditional inter-

pretation is based then on a reductio ad absurdum: if this interpretation leads us to the absurd conclusion that Hume was a schizophrenic philosopher - a sceptic and a non-sceptic at the same time - then it could not be correct.

We should keep in mind, first, that Hume's contemporaries have already contended that his scepticism is incompatible with his constructive philosophy.[14] But this claim was directed at Hume, whereas Beauchamp and Mappes use the same claim to undermine the traditional interpretation of Hume's philosophy. They impute inconsistency to Hume scholars, rather than to Hume. Secondly, not only did Hume know of this claim, he actually responded to it indirectly in several places. This is an important point for us, since obviously Hume's response might serve as the crucial test for the revolutionary interpretation. If this interpretation is correct and the only way to rebuff this claim of inconsistency is by suggesting that Hume never doubted the rationality of induction, Hume should have retorted: "You, my critics, failed to understand me. I have never doubted the rationality of induction; all I meant was to question the demonstrative-rationalistic view of inductive inferences". But this, as I shall show, was not Hume's answer to his critics.

That Hume was well aware of the charge of inconsistency is seen already in the Dialogues:

> *To whatever length anyone may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason, than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing. If he ever carries his speculations farther than this necessity constrains him, and philosophises, either on natural or moral subjects, he is allured by a certain pleasure and satisfaction, which he finds in employing himself after that manner. He considers besides, that every one, even in common life, is constrained to*

> *have more or less of this philosophy; that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning ... that what we call philosophy is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life.*[15]

These words express Cleanthes' views and it may be argued that Hume, who did not appear in the Dialogues, was not of the same mind. But the Enquiries repeat the same view in different words. *Nothing, but the strong power of natural instinct,* he says, *can free us from the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt. Those who have propensity to philosophy, will still continue their researches; because they reflect, that, besides the immediate pleasure, attending such an occupation, philosphical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.*[16]

Again, although Hume does not mention himself specifically in these passages, the context makes clear that the question discussed here applies not only to the Pyrrhonian but to him as well. This question, directed at Hume, could be framed as follows: "Even if you, Mr. Hume, could not stop using inductive inferences in your everyday life (since nature determined you to judge, as well as to breathe and feel), you could at least stop your philosophical investigations into the science of man since they depend on the empirical-inductive method the rationality of which you yourself question. One could not demand that you stop doing what you could not stop doing, that is, using inductive inferences, but one could certainly demand in the name of consistency that you stop doing that which you could, namely, complex philosophical researches based on doubtful inductive inferences". (One should keep in mind that for Hume "philosophy" embraced both natural and moral subjects, the latter including every branch of the 'science of man'

including today's psychology, sociology, etc.).

If this indeed is the question Hume grapples with in the above quoted passages, it is much the same question raised both by Hume's traditional critics and by their critics in turn: namely, the question whether Hume the sceptic can be reconciled with Hume the constructive philosopher.

Hume's answer does not fit in with the revolutionary interpretation. Because philosophical investigations cannot be rationally grounded, there is no reason, according to Hume, to give them up. He says, first, that he goes on philosophizing although he could stop philosophizing in spite of the fact that it is based on a method which cannot be given rational justification because philosophizing gives him pleasure. This is an interesting answer, but it holds only for David Hume or for those whose mental make-up is similar. Secondly, and this is our main issue, philosophy as Hume sees it has no method of its own (as Plato or Spinoza, for example, believed); philosophy is different from common sense only in that it is developed more carefully and systematically. But the basic principles and standards of philosophy are implicit in the commonplace considerations of everyday life. Hume would say that his philosophical theories are to be judged by the same standards by which people allow or disallow any claim in their everyday life. It is a brute fact that we cannot give up these standards and if we wish to be consistent, we cannot criticize those who apply these standards in their philosophical work.

It is not within the scope of the present paper to analyse or evaluate this view of philosophy; still, it can account for a rather strange fact, remarked also by Beauchamp and Mappes. A few chapters after Hume presented his sceptical position concerning causal inferences, he lists the methodological rules *by which to judge of causes and effects.* [17] Hume says that by these rules we may judge which causal inferences are warranted and which are unwarranted and distinguish sound scientific theories from mere superstitution. On the face of it this fact is

incompatible with the traditional view that Hume was sceptical about causal inferences. We may circumvent this conclusion by a more careful reading of Hume's words.

Hume nowhere tells us how and on what grounds he reached those methodological rules by which we should *regulate our judgements concerning causes and effects.* He only tells us: *these rules are formed on the nature of our understanding, and on our experience of its operations in the judgements we form concerning objects.* [18] The last phrase is very vague. What could he mean by saying that these rules are formed on the nature and operations of our understanding? We should bear in mind that Hume often uses "understanding" in a peculiar sense of his own. When he speaks, for instance, about the need to "adhere to the understanding," he immediately adds that by "understanding" he means *the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination.* [19] If he uses "understanding" in the same sense in the above quoted passage we could read it as follows: the judgements people form by their understanding are the judgements that the general and established properties of the imagination make them form;[20] and the rules by which we should judge causes and effects are formed on the basis of these judgements. In other words: these rules are formed on the basis of those beliefs and inferences which we are predisposed to make when this predisposition is "general" and "established." These instinctive beliefs and inferences function as standards according to which Hume's methodological rules are formed. The validity of the rules depend on whether they conform to our instinctive beliefs and inferences. Now it is true that Hume the sceptic attempted to demonstrate that our causal inferences cannot be given rational justification. But since he thought that these inferences are unavoidable, he relinquished the sceptical point of view and took the validity of these inferences for granted.

This shift in Hume's point of view, of which he was well aware, also manifested itself in his attitudes on

the existence of the external world. As is known, Hume thought that one cannot prove that there is an external world beyond the subjective world of impressions and ideas. Yet Hume appears neither in his everyday life nor in his 'science of man' as someone who disbelieves the existence of the external world. His Treatise is a treatise of human nature, and not a treatise of the subjective, solipsist nature of David Hume. Now Hume was well aware of this as is clear from his claim that the sceptic

> *must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice ... We may well ask, What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body? but 'tis in vain to ask, Whether there be body or not? That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.*[21]

Although Hume himself tried to prove that the belief in an external world cannot be rationally justified, he took the truth of this belief for granted in all his reasoning. Isn't his attitude to induction quite similar? The fact that Hume relied upon inductive inferences in his 'science of man' and obviously took them for granted does not prove then that he never doubted their rationality; it only proves that Hume was unwilling to disregard the fact that he, like everyone else, made such inferences instinctively every moment of his life and that he could not stop doing so. What Hume thought he should do as a philosopher was to try to uncover and systematize the standards implicit in these inferences and then apply them in the various branches of the 'science of man.'

A further analysis of Hume's position is outside the scope of this paper. I did not intend to cover all its aspects. Neither did I intend to defend it from criticism. The aim of this paper was to refute the thesis that it is impossible that Hume was both a sceptic and a constructive

philosopher. Hume has a more complex philosophy than Beauchamp and Mappes realize. As I showed, not only was Hume aware of the duality in his philosophy, he also tried to explain and justify it. Hume would also probably say that every philosopher should be prompted by this kind of dualism: he should question the rationality of inductive inferences and then relinquish this doubt, taking certain beliefs and inferences for granted. One can dissent from Hume's view on this point but no philosopher studying Hume can disregard it.

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1. T. Beauchamp and T. Mappes, "Is Hume Really a Sceptic About Induction?" American Philosophical Quarterly, 12 (April, 1975), 119-129.

2. It is interesting to note that D. Stove in Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) also departs from traditional interpretation, though not to the extent Beauchamp and Mappes do. In contrast to Popper, Von Wright and others, Stove argues that it did not occur to Hume that induction may be given a probabilistic justification. According to Stove, Hume wrongly supposed that if inductive inferences are invalid (i.e., their conclusions do not follow necessarily from the premises) then they are not rational. I cannot here enter into a detailed discussion of Stove's interpretation, but it is noteworthy that Stove, too, did not dream of doubting that Hume questioned the rationality of inductive inferences. Yet this revolutionary interpretation is gaining ground. See, for instance, Alex Michalos' review of Stove's book in Philosophia, 4 (1974) p. 378, where Michalos supports Beauchamp and Mappes' interpretation.

3. Op. cit., p. 125.

4. Hume actually never used the term "inductive inference;" he used "causal inference" instead. Hume thought that only by means of the relation of cause and effect can we *go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses* (Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding,

ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), par. 22). This is, of course, an error, since an inductive inference is not necessarily a causal inference, but here I will follow Beauchamp and Mappes in using "inductive inference" and "causal inference" interchangeably.

5. Op. cit., p. 122.

6. Ibid., P. 123.

7. Enquiries, par. 130.

8. Op. cit., p. 123.

9. Treatise on Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), Bk. I, Pt. IV, sec. 7. Evidence of similar psychological reaction to scepticism is found in Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Kemp-Smith (London: Nelson, 1947), p. 133. For a comparison of Hume's psychological reaction to scepticism with that of other sceptic philosophers, see my Trends in the History of Scepticism (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1974), pp. 28-32, 64-66 (in Hebrew); see also my "Nietzsche on the Sceptic's Life," Review of Metaphysics, XXIX (1976), 532-537.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., Bk.I, Pt. IV, sec. 1.

12. Hume's description of the Pyrrhonian position may be misleading. The Pyrrhonian did, indeed, consider the impact of scepticism on life to be great - only through scepticism could one reach tranquility of mind (Ataraxia). But he certainly did not demand that we give up in everyday life all our empirical-inductive beliefs. The Pyrrhonian would have shared Hume's belief in the unreasonableness of such a demand, since he thought that some empirical-inductive beliefs are instinctive and inevitable. On Hume's inaccurate interpretation of the Pyrrhonian position and the differences between Humean scepticism and Pyrrhonism see my Trends in the History of scepticism, pp. 59-66.

13. Enquiries, par. 128. When Hume says that sceptical arguments "produce no conviction", he does not mean to say that one could prove them unsound. Else how could we construe the immediately preceding characterization of sceptical arguments as arguments which "admit no answer"? These arguments are not convincing for Hume only because psychologically one could not believe in their conclusions: *Their only effect is to cause...*

momentary amazement and irresolution... (Enquiries, par. 122, note 1.).

14. See, for instance, Thomas Reid, An Inquiry into the Human Mind (Edinburgh: 1764), p. 25.

15. Dialogues, (Kemp Smith ed.) Part I.

16. Enquiries, par. 130.

17. Treatise, Bk. I, Pt. III, sec. 15.

18. Ibid., Bk. I, Pt. III, sec. 13 and passim.

19. Ibid., Bk. I, Pt. IV, sec. 7. I am following here Passmore's interpretation in his Hume's Intentions (Cambridge: The University Press, 1952) p. 45. However there is much Passmore says about Hume's scepticism that I do not subscribe to. To mention one point - I don't think that "Hume is certainly exaggerating the extent of his scepticism" (p.145).

20. On the distinction between *the solid, permanent, and consistent principles of the imagination,* characterizing sound empirical beliefs, and those principles which *however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable,* characterizing ancient metaphysics and superstition, see Treatise, Bk. I, Pt. IV, sec. 4.

21. Ibid., Bk. I, Pt. IV, sec. 2.