INFERENCE AND EXPERIENCE IN HUME'S ENQUIRY

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Abstract

The ordinary justification for my not doubting that the next bread I eat will nourish me as in the past is that we humans do not bother ourselves with doubts except where life actually prompts a doubt. Hume, however, represents this not-doubting as an inference we repeatedly draw, and not a very strong one since it concludes to a future-tense judgement from past-tense premisses. Thus Hume creates the impression that the commonest ways of leaning on past experience as a guide involve a woefully weak type of inference, and this paper challenges that impression.
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...The bread, which I formerly eat, nourished me; that is, a body of such sensible qualities was, at that time, endued with such secret powers; but does it follow, that other bread must also nourish me at another time, and that like sensible qualities must always be attended with like secret powers? The consequence seems nowise necessary. At least, it must be acknowledged that there is here a consequence drawn by the mind; that there is a certain step taken; a process of thought and an inference, which wants to be explained .... (Enquiry, Section IV, Part II).

Hume in this and neighbouring passages speaks at large about something we all do all the time; we depend upon past experience as a guide in our affairs. He finds a stubborn residue of mystery in the 'inference' or 'process of thought' that goes with our depending on experience. This is the matter I would like to look into, with a view to understanding how the mystery comes to confront Hume.

I

A hungry man goes to his cupboard, butters a slice of bread, and eats it. Is there in his 'a consequence drawn by the mind... a process of thought and an inference'? We must go slowly here in order not to cut the nerve of Hume's reasoning by too quick an appeal to introspection. Hume is not referring us to introspection, but to what the concept of depending on experience will yield if we look at it closely. He will certainly allow, to begin with, that a man can eat bread abstractedly or without the express thought that it will nourish him. But now stop the man at the cupboard and ask, "Do you look for that piece of bread to nourish you?" The answer, if the man abides our question, might be, "Why, yes, of course I do, is anything the matter?" If his reply runs along those lines, his interlocutor can then go on to ask what his grounds are for expecting that, and the man's answer to this follow-up question will refer

us sooner or later to past experience.

Apparently, then, Hume's point about there being 'a consequence drawn by the mind' takes its cogency from the fact that we can (although we do not very often) set ourselves questions such as "Do you look for that bread to nourish you?" and so to speak catch ourselves depending, counting on, taking for granted, and the like. In this sense it seems fair to say that Hume's point rests not on introspection, i.e., an inward search for the 'process of thought' he is concerned about, but on the fact that by putting certain questions to ourselves we can easily remind ourselves of the ways in which past experience shapes our anticipation.

In expecting bread to nourish us, then, we are depending on experience. Again we ask, though, in depending on experience is there, generally speaking, what we should want to call 'a process of thought and an inference'? To bring out the negative this time, let us consider another example in which I think everyone will agree there is an inference made. A man goes to the breadbox, pauses, and says to his wife, "This was a new loaf. I wonder what made that hole in the wrapping?" He studies the tear and its surroundings for a moment and then adds, "It looks as though we've got a mouse." This is quite different from Hume's example. In merely eating a piece of bread there is no transition or assent to a new proposition. By and large we eat our bread not doubting that it will do for us what other bread has done. Our depending on past experience in this kind of case, as far as I can see, amounts merely to our taking that matter for granted, while in the mouse example a new belief comes into the picture. The man assents, provisionally anyway, to the likely truth of "We have a mouse" because it would suffice to explain a perplexing hole in the wrapper. If we go on to ask what makes the mouse-hypothesis plausible to him, his answers, as in the earlier example, will refer us sooner or later to past experience.

Notice, however, that the contrast between these examples allows room for a distinction Hume does not take the time to draw. That is, in depending on past experience as a guide, we only sometimes make an inference in the narrower and stricter sense of transiting to a new proposition. More often, we simply do not doubt, and even when we are consciously bent on nourishing ourselves, our taking for granted that bread will help involves no 'step taken' at all resembling the mouse inference. Hume's discussion does not acknowledge a distinction between taking something for granted and inferring it. Failure to take that distinction
into account, I want to argue, can throw us very much off the track when we take up the problem of how to justify our depending on past experience.

II

As a starter on the issue of justification, it is plain enough that one may eat today's bread taking for granted or not doubting it will nourish him the same as yesterday's. Also plain is the fact that with very little effort one can catch himself not doubting this. Now what is the justification, or the ground if we prefer, or the rationale of his taking this for granted? If the question demanded our grounds for inferring that the next loaf will nourish us, as Hume's question does, this would take us into any of a number of populous dead-end streets. But we have already seen, I believe, that to represent our depending on past experience as an inference is somewhat forgetful and misleading. I am asking instead, then, about the reasonableness of taking for granted that the next loaf will nourish.

For most people the justification for taking such matters for granted begins and ends with this: Our kind does not go in for unoccasioned doubts. This is on all fours with the unexciting fact that we bother to scratch only when we itch, and both of these facts belong to the natural history of the species. If someone should call for a deeper rationale, aware that the facts just cited are not very deep, what would he be after? In the tradition of polite philosophy, where the otiose does not count against a man, one could remind him that our kind has too much else to do, too many importunate needs to meet, to go in for itchless scratching or unoccasioned doubts. Putting it differently, there are already doubts enough to go around, including a few about enriched white bread. Normally, though, he will have known these things beforehand.

At this point I hear someone saying, "But this is surely not a logical justification." Quite right. Up to now I have been sketching the reasonableness not of an assertion, such as "This next slice will nourish me," but of the bit of human natural history summed up in these words: We do not go in for unoccasioned doubts.

Next comes the question of how Hume contrives to find mystery in this fact of nature. The first thing he does is to express a mere taking-for-granted in the form of a flat future-tense assertion of belief: "This new loaf will nourish me like earlier ones," or something similar. But
where does this assertion come from? Well, if we stop and quiz that man at the cupboard, chances are very good that we can get him to utter an assertion of that sort: "Yes, of course I expect it to nourish me." Something is fishy about this, but let it pass for the moment. At any rate, once Hume has turned an instance of taking-for-granted into a future-tense assertion, he holds in his hands something about which one can ask for grounds or premisses or justification. And where are we to look for those if not to past experience?

Very well, our past experience of eating bread to keep body and soul together is to be in some way the ground or premiss of the assertion "This next loaf will nourish me"--for we are asked, remember, to think of that assertion as 'a consequence drawn by the mind.' And now Hume puts premiss and consequence one after the other to inspect the link between them:

These two propositions are far from being the same, I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect, and I foresee, that other objects, which are, in appearance, similar, will be attended with similar effects.

Now we have an argument-form before us. By easy degrees the original taking-for-granted has become first an assertion with presumed backing, then an assertion with some backing filled in, and finally a full-fledged inference whose paradigm is supplied by Hume. Concerning the last he writes:

I shall allow, if you please, that the one proposition may be justly inferred from the other; I know, in fact, that it always is inferred.

A glance at the paradigm, however, is enough to call forth his confident challenge:

But if you insist that the inference is made by a chain of reasoning, I desire you to produce that reasoning....

No question about it, the inference does look a little odd.

Earlier I tried to suggest, by a few references to a behavioural fact characteristic of our kind, that taking this or that for granted in daily life, not doubting unless life prompts a doubt, wears its rationale on its sleeve.
However, when Hume takes note of that norm of behaviour, and represents it by stages as an inference people are forever making, all at once the norm can begin to seem riddled with unreason. Yet to show its reasonableness, I submit, we need only go back and express that norm in a non-inferential way. Where Hume on the other hand turns taking-for-granted into a type of inferring, the task of supplying a logical justification for the inference, a premiss or set of premisses plus a sinewy argument-form, can seem acute and demanding, though the need for it is unreal.

III

Something gives Hume's sequence of moves a seemly appearance; something makes it look proper to him to represent that human behavioural norm—not doubting unless life spurs a doubt—as an inference. There seems on the face of it no compelling reason for representing the norm in that way, and no advantage to it either, since it creates the illusion that the rationale of our most ordinary behaviour is quite beyond us.

What makes these moves seem right to Hume—and here I am guessing—is tied up with the first step in the sequence. There the human business of taking for granted the common course of events gets expressed in terms of a positive assertion about the future. Once that assertion is admitted into court, the later steps develop with a certain inevitability—an assertion ought to rest on evidence; the transition from evidence to assertion is an inference; inferences can be good or bad, and so forth. Hume is a very keen noticer, but it seems to escape his notice that if all our ordinary takings-for-granted were to be set forth as positive assertions, many useless sentences would begin to clutter the atmosphere, for example, "Why, I believe you people have bones in your arms and legs, though I've never seen them!"—a development which most of us would regard as downhill.

What makes it seem acceptable, to Hume and others, to express an ordinary instance of taking-for-granted in terms of a future-tense assertion? The only factor I can think of has already been mentioned: the fact that by interrogating someone at the bread-cupboard, interrogating in a very particular way, we can very often wrinkle such an affirmation out of him. Precisely because it deals with what goes without saying the world over, his affirmative sentence in all likelihood will have no linguistic function
except in the rarest of circumstances. In any event, once the interrogator succeeds in getting said what normally goes unsaid, and then passing off as a universal human belief something that is never, or almost never, a useful sentence for anyone anywhere, the reader's alertness to strange combinations has been pretty well dulled for what comes later.

The innocent face of a question such as "Do you expect today's bread to nourish you like yesterday's?" is capable of winning a Yes out of all but the most hard-bitten souls. The framing of that question, it seems to me, is the disarming move at the start of Hume's analysis, the move that makes all his later ones appear to be based on something unchallengeable. What, though, are that question's credentials? How does it arise and where do people run with it? Are not some special circumstances required to give it a function, and what would those be like? These are, I believe, real puzzles and well worth the solving.

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