

## **Philosophy Paper 101: History of Philosophy from Descartes to Kant**

### 6. *Hume on Induction*

What is Hume aiming to prove with his famous argument concerning induction, and how does it proceed? Is he a sceptic about inductive inference?

#### **READING**

David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (any reasonable edition will do), I iii 6.

David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sections IV and V Part i. Any reasonable edition will do, but you might find the Introduction (esp. pp. xxxv-xli) and notes (pp. 189-92) of my Oxford World's Classics edition (OUP, 2007) help you to understand what's going on.

#### **Hume's Purposes**

*You might find it helpful to start with an overall perspective on what Hume is up to, and the general thrust of his anti-rationalist project. For a quick summary, see pp. 165-8 and 194-6 of:*

(\*) Peter Millican, "Humes Old and New: Four Fashionable Falsehoods, and One Unfashionable Truth", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 81 (2007), pp. 163-99

*or for an overview of how Hume fits into the history of philosophy more generally, see:*

Peter Millican, Introduction to Oxford World's Classics edition of Hume's *Enquiry*, pp. i-xxx

#### **The Argument Concerning Induction**

*Hume's argument concerning induction first appears (1739) in *Treatise* I iii 6, but there it is placed in the middle of his lengthy investigation into the idea of necessary connexion, so it's better approached by looking at his later, far more polished presentation, in Section IV of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Read through this section of the *Enquiry*, and then read it again while consulting relevant parts of:*

Peter Millican, "Hume's Sceptical Doubts Concerning Induction", in Millican (2002), chapter 4, §§2, 3, 3.1, 3.2, 4, 4.2, 5, 6, 7, 7.1, 8, 9, 9.3 and appendix

*These sections of the paper give a step by step commentary of how Hume's argument proceeds in the *Enquiry*. Of course feel free to read the rest of the paper if you wish, but it is long and in parts complex, so perhaps better left for another occasion. Note also that the material of §7.1 is more or less repeated (in a more engaging manner, I think) on pp. 176-80 of the 2007 paper (\*) above.*

*An excellent philosophical treatment of Hume's famous argument is provided by:*

Barry Stroud, *Hume* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), chapter 3

*But be warned: although he purports to be discussing the argument from *Treatise* I iii 6, in fact Stroud presents an amalgam of the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* versions, so don't let this throw you (see pp. 173-4 of the 2007 paper (\*) above if you want details).*

*When Stroud wrote, the most influential interpretation of Hume's argument was that of David Stove (1965 and 1973), who claimed that Hume is a "deductivist" – i.e. someone who assumes that the only good arguments are those that are deductively valid (in the informal sense, i.e. arguments whose*

*conclusions follow with absolute certainty from their premises). Stroud was concerned to argue that Hume's argument need not depend on such a dogmatic premise, and therefore should be taken as a serious sceptical challenge, as indeed it had been by most philosophers for the last couple of centuries. More recently, however, other interpretations have come to the fore, which are outlined at the beginning of §10.3 of my 2002 paper above (pp. 154-6). Stove's "deductivist" interpretation is now considered refuted by Hume scholars, for reasons sketched there (p. 156) and in §10.2 and pp.162-3 (if you wish to follow them up). But since 1997 a new interpretation has become quite popular, initially presented in a book from which the relevant extract appears in a slightly more developed form as:*

Don Garrett, "Appendix: The Meaning of Hume's Conclusion concerning 'Inductive' Inferences", in Millican (2002), pp. 332-4

*Garrett's "no argument" interpretation is in striking contrast to the traditional reading of Hume, in seeing his famous argument as completely non-sceptical. It is presented most fully in a book which focuses on the Treatise argument:*

Harold W. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (Routledge, 1999), chapter 3

*If you want to see in detail why I think Garrett and Noonan are wrong, read §§10-10.3 of my 2002 paper, but don't spend too long on this, and reading pp. 174-5 and 181-6 of the 2007 paper (\*) above is a shorter and less demanding way to the main point. Note also that those who have defended a "no argument" interpretation of Hume have all focused on the Treatise, and have not taken issue with my interpretation of the Enquiry argument (which has been around since 1995). So it's possible to argue that Hume's view may have changed between the two works, though perhaps implausible. Naturally, I read the Enquiry as significantly improved, making explicit what in the Treatise was a rather convoluted and poorly expressed argument, rather than as a change of mind (again the main points are most easily taken from the 2007 (\*) paper, pp. 171-6). To help compare the two versions, I've prepared (and will send on request) a structure diagram of the Treatise argument to contrast with the Enquiry diagram on page 171 of my 2002 paper.*

*A discussion which focuses on the Treatise, and discusses a variety of interpretations including my debate with Garrett, is:*

Abraham Sesshu Roth, "Causation", in Saul Traiger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise* (Blackwell, 2006), pp. 95-114.