Hume: Sections IV and V of the Inquiry: Hume on Unobserved Matters of Fact

1. Two Kinds of truths: Relations of Ideas vs. Matters of Fact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modal Status</th>
<th>Relations of Ideas</th>
<th>Matters of Fact</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Known</td>
<td>(Can be) known <em>a priori</em>: “discoverable by the mere operation of thought” (15.6)</td>
<td>Cannot be known <em>a priori</em>; only from experience [<em>a posteriori</em>]</td>
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<td>How Securely Known</td>
<td>(Can be) “Intuitively or demonstratively certain” (15.4)</td>
<td>Not intuitively or demonstrably certain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Studied by</td>
<td>Geometry, algebra, arithmetic (15.4)</td>
<td>Natural sciences. Also comprise much of our everyday knowledge.</td>
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<td>Examples</td>
<td>“That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the two sides”; “That three times five is equal to half of thirty” (15.5)</td>
<td>“The sun will rise tomorrow” (see 15.8); When the first billiard ball strikes the second, the second ball will move (see 18.8)</td>
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-This is not just innocent observation & classification. That only necessary truths can be known *a priori* is a substantive claim.

2. This substantive claim drives **Hume’s great skeptical argument of section IV** (see other side of sheet).

3. **Hume’s own negative conclusion**: “Our conclusions…are not founded on reasoning or any process of the understanding” (21.1; see also, e.g., 27.4)

4. **Hume’s “Skeptical Solution”** (title of section V): The belief is the (unavoidable) result of “custom or habit” (28.2)

5. **Hume cozying up to the inference/belief (& sounding non-skeptical):**
   --“some other process of equal weight and authority” (27.6)
   --“none but a fool or a madman” (23.3)
   --Hume “quite satisfied…as an agent” (24.8)
   --“Nature will always maintain her rights and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning” (27.3)
   --“pre-established harmony” (36.4)
   --Two propositions, one “justly inferred” from the other -- at least “allowed” (22.2)
   --“We need only ask such a sceptic [the “excessive” sceptic] *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer.” (110.6)

6. **Hume casting skeptical shadows on the inference/belief:**
   --Title of section IV: “Skeptical Doubts...”
   --but where’s the “required” “medium”? (22.3)
   --Challenge: “produce that reasoning” (22.2)
   --“if there be any suspicion”; experience becomes “useless” (24.6)
   --“whimsical condition of mankind” (111.1) – at least hints of some kind of skeptical stance

-Mainly, we take the argument to be skeptical in order to make it an interesting & important philosophical argument. Not very interesting or good as a piece of cognitive psychology, telling us which faculty these beliefs come from. Also, at key points, Hume seems to rule against the claim that reason is operating on evaluative grounds: our thinking seems to him unreasonable or not rationally justified.
Hume's Sceptical Argument of Inquiry, Sect. IV

Scope: All matters of fact that go "beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory" (p. 16.1) -- we will call these "S-propositions"

Force: ??? But we’ll start with knowledge.

P: When I officially release this eraser, it will fall.

U: Uniformity of Nature: "The future will resemble the past" (p. 24.5): The laws and regularities of Nature, for the most part, will continue to hold in the future. Better for Hume’s purposes would be: Phenomena I haven’t observed follow (or followed or will follow) the same laws and regularities that have governed what I have observed. Or, if Hume does want to keep this principle limited to the future, then he should likewise limit the scope of his skepticism.

A Version of the Argument:

1. If a proposition is a matter of fact, then one can know it only if one has come to know it through experience.

2. P is an S-proposition.

∴ 3. I can know that P only if I have come to know it through experience. (from 1,2)

4. One can come to know an S-proposition through experience only if one already knows that U.

∴ 5. I can come to know that P through experience only if I already know that U. (from 4,2)

6. U is an S-proposition.

∴ 7. One can know that U only if one has come to know it through experience. (from 1,6)

∴ 8. One can come to know that U through experience only if one already knows that U. (from 4,6)

9. If one can come to know that U through experience only if one already knows that U, then one cannot come to know that U through experience.

∴ 10 One cannot come to know that U through experience. (from 8,9)

∴ 11 One cannot know that U. (from 7,10)

∴ 12 I cannot come to know that P through experience. (from 5,11)

∴ 13 I cannot know that P. (from 3,12)