Hume’s Eclectic Method on Logic

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Introduction
In ‘Abstract of the Treatise’, under the pretense of being a book reviewer of his own work, A Treatise of Human Nature, the 18th century Scottish Philosopher David Hume stated, ‘The author has finished what regards logic’. Because it went against the prevailing logic at that time, his logic had a large implication on specific characters. That is, as a matter of form, it inductively purifies the principles of logic into the phenomenological world composed of ideas, rather than deductively in an axiomatic system that holds reasoning as valid from necessary premises. The objects to be treated in his reasoning are only our ideas, and therefore, he studies the mental or moral operations of humans, who are unintentionally engaged in reasoning concerned, as faculties or functions dependent on human nature. It is generally interpreted that he divided reasoning into demonstrative and probable reasoning in the same manner as he divided his objects. He presents, however, the notion in the last section of Book I of Treatise, ‘Conclusion of this book’, that he could not sincerely devote himself, in his path of life, to only one aspect within the two species of reasoning. On the other hand, he also makes an unanticipated statement in first Enquiry that ‘it is, at bottom, erroneous, at least, superficial’. In this presentation, I show his substantial relationship between them.

1. The Role of Hume’s Logic

(1) Zabeeh’s Insights into Hume’s Logic The Sole End of Hume’s Logic

Hume stated that ‘the sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas’ (THN intro. xvi). Indeed it might be come down to this one or two points in order to contribute ‘the science of man’, but he used the term ‘logic’ in a few manners in his works. F. Zabeeh divided Hume’s logic into three parts, which seemingly proper and consistent with each other (Zabeeh 106-107).

1. His logic is in part an inquiry into the causal operation of ‘our reasoning faculty’ (Philosophical Psychology).
2. His logic in part consists of rules which an experimental philosophy ought to observe in his search for causal connection (Canons of Induction).
3. His logic in part consists of principles which a philosopher ought to accept if he wants to talk sense and not nonsense (Principle of Meaning).

From these standpoints, he articulated that ‘inquiry into the formal relation of terms and propositions (syntactic) is regarded by Hume as trivial and pretended reasoning’. But I think 3. is integrated into 1., whereas 1. and 2. are rightly classified. So, I will replace 3. with my own view finally.

(2) The Sole End of Hume’s Logic

Now, what does logic mean specifically for Hume? I think that to answer the fair-seeming question, we should firstly pay attention to his criticism on existing and prevailing logic that was still taught at schools in those days.

This error consists in the vulgar division of the acts of the understanding, into conception, judgment, and reasoning, and in the definitions we give of them. [...] But these distinctions and definitions are faulty in very considerable articles. (THN 1.3.7.n2)

What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects. [...] the act of the mind exceeds not a simple conception. (ibid.)

This kind of division of them we can easily find in the famous texts of logic in early-modern times (Alnaud & Nicole, Watts, &c.). As opposed to them, he claims that we can naturally conceive the proposition composed of only one idea. This claim call a view like that Hume’s claim for demonstrative certainty entails needs for ‘mere forms or essences’ (Anderson §9 63). But I think that demonstrative certainty consists only in setting proportions in arithmetic, not in all the systems of mathematics or algebra.

2. Counterarguments to Hume’s Requiring Certainty

(1) Weintraub’s Tentative Theory for Justification of Inference

R. Weintraub presented three possible responses in cases of the justification of a form of inference (Weintraub 464). Her points consist in whether a mode of inference itself can be justified or not, and the reasons of those judgments in each cases.

(A) A mode of inference can be basic – justified, but not by reference to another.
(B) Its justification might be mediate.
(C) It may be unjustified.

According to her, Hume chose (c) with respect to ‘induction’. The reason for ruling out (A) is that induction is not basic (intuitive). And the reason eliminating (B) is that induction can not be justified inferentially; because ‘it has no deductive justification’, though if inductive justifications had some mediate (e.g. the uniformity of nature), only to circular.

On the other hand, she construed Hume as practically picking out (A) in case of deduction. The reason for excluding (B) depends on what Hume said, ‘the same principle cannot be both the cause and effect of another’ (THN 1.3.6.7). And the reason ruling out (C) derives from his stance not accepting skeptical attitudes towards deduction.

But I disagree with her conclusion in case of deduction. Hume never countenance deduction or ‘arguments a priori’ as being possible to be justified as well as induction. Because they are appreciated in terms of our assurance of reasoning.

(2) Impermanency of Total Skepticism

Hume presented skeptical arguments with our reason in Treatise as follows.

‘In all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and fallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error.’ (THN 1.4.1.1)

‘Since therefore all knowledge resolves itself into probability...’ (THN 1.4.1 4)

It is true that when he observe ‘all knowledge resolve itself into probability’, he does not necessarily assent to that kind of skeptical arguments. Rather he instead implies the influences for us to correct the first or prior judgments from the skeptical perspective of our reason, whereas the claims of total skepticisms with regard to our reason or senses remain self-destructive; and also our unreliable faculties may still often make mistakes in demonstrative sciences.

For Hume if this kind of skepticisms, if ever not so strong as to break up demonstrative sciences, has the role to support us, who are engaged in that sciences or other, then the first or prior judgments, relatively speaking, would practically take the character of probability, which has no certainty therefore requires many corrections up to gaining generalities.

3. Skeptical Arguments against his Dichotomy

Thus, Hume’s dichotomy on the issue of our reasoning, or division between argumentation from reason and experience could be open to doubt, especially in that for him each reasoning is always treated as independently in academic or social fields. He observes in first Enquiry as follows.

‘Though it be allowed, that reason may form very plausible conjectures with regard to the consequences of such a particular conduct in such circumstances; it is still supposed imperfect, without the assistance of experience, which is alone able to give stability and certainty to the maxims, derived from study and reflection.’ (THN 1.5.1.2)

‘But notwithstanding that this distinction be thus universally received both in the active and speculative scene of life, I shall not scruple to pronounce, that it is, at bottom, erroneous, at least superficial.’ (ibid.)

But I think these are not problematic views but natural results of his standpoint. Because for Hume reasoning, either inductive or deductive, is irrelevant to their justification. As far as I know, Hume nowhere refers reasoning to be justified in his works.

4. Eclectic Method according as our Ends

To reconcile these seemingly paradoxical circumstances, I should comprehend what he implies in adopting reasoning from reason in our investigations; for example in physics. Of course, we do not always adopt reasoning only from reason, because we assume that what reasoning, in the phenomenological world can be inquired from the standpoints of causes and effects as ideas. Mathematics, indeed, are useful in all mechanical operations, and arithmetic in almost every art and profession: But (sic) ‘is not of themselves they have any influence. Mechanics are the art of regulating the motions of body to some design’d end or purpose; and the reason why we employ arithmetic in fixing the proportions of numbers, is only that we may discover the proportions of their influence and operation’ (THN 2.3.3.2).

We are conscious, that we ourselves, in adopting means to ends, are guided by reason (sic) and design, and that ‘it is not ignorantly nor casually we perform those actions, which tend to self-preservation, to the obtaining pleasure, and avoiding pain.’ (THN 1.3.16.2)

Hume regards judgment from demonstration as useful and helpful as a means to ‘matters of fact’ which, like natural philosophy, inquires causally. And the ends lie in knowing the nature of what we quest for. This is the point peculiar to Hume’s logic that Zabeeh overlooked. And this argument above consistent with his view of ‘two kinds of truth’ that one is the discovery of the proportions of ideas, the other is ‘the conformity of our ideas of objects to their real existence’, which, in effects, desired as an exemplary stage.

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