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HUME AND THE ROLE OF TESTIMONY IN KNOWLEDGE

ABSTRACT

It has been argued that Hume's account of testimony is seriously inadequate: an autonomous knower of the sort Hume defends cannot, through simple inductive methods, justify accepting another's testimony as true. This conclusion is no doubt correct. But Hume does not defend the idea of an autonomous knower, nor does he defend relying upon simple inductive methods. An examination of Hume's critique of Descartes' method of doubt shows him as a defender of what might be called the responsible knower, and reveals the sophistication of the inductive methods he wishes to defend. It is shown that Hume can and does use these methods to justify accepting the testimony of others.

Descartes, while still a young man, discovered that many things that he had learned or had been taught were not true and certainly not certain, that, in other words, much that he thought he knew was clearly not knowledge after all. It was not knowledge in the sense of *scientia*, knowledge of the essences of things that are the reasons why those things are as they are, knowledge of these entities that lie behind but are supposed to explain things in the world of sense experience, knowledge that is infallible and incorrigible. Those who educated him had given him many ideas and beliefs, but, as he had discovered, some of those beliefs were in fact false. So, since some of what he had been taught by his teachers was not knowledge, those teachers could not be reliable authorities: their say-so could be no criterion of truth. Nothing that they said could, simply because they said it, be taken to be true. He found that the testimony of others, e.g., classical authors, was equally unreliable. So neither could the classics be considered a source of truth. Nothing that he found about beliefs coming from elsewhere or elsewhom could provide a criterion that could pick out those beliefs that were infallibly true.

Descartes concluded that the only resources that he might be able to trust could be his own, and in fact there is among things his own only one among those possible sources of knowledge that could be trusted, namely, his reason. No other person and no other thing was a source of knowledge, and he had in the end only reason, that is, his own reason, as a source for knowledge about the reasons for things. As he put it in his *Discourse on Method*, "I thought it virtually impossible that our judgements should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had

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full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had been guided by it alone." (1637/1985, 117) He therefore resolved to, as it were, start over, and rebuild the edifice of knowledge from the foundations up. These foundations needed to be safe, in the sense that they could not be doubted.

To start this rebuilding, he decided to reject everything that was dubitable and to accept nothing as true unless the evidence for it rendered it indubitable. His first rule of method was "never to accept anything as true if I did not have conclusive knowledge for its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it." (120) In order to rebuild, he had to demolish the old edifice that had shown itself to be unsafe. As he put it in his *Meditations*, he realized that "if I was to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last," then "it was necessary . . . to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations . . ." (1641/1985, 17) The first rule of method dictated the "method of doubt" with which he searched for the faculty by which classes of beliefs were formed, e.g., sense experience, and rejected all beliefs in this class if that faculty could itself be shown to be fallible, by finding at least one case where the faculty led to a belief that was false or even dubitable.

He thought that he could bring himself out of the depths of doubt. He thought that he could discover clear and distinct ideas about the essences of things. These essences provided the reasons for things and how they change, reasons that are the causes of the apparent behaviour of things. These clear and distinct and infallibly true principles that he thought he could discover were those of mathematics – geometry and arithmetic – and those traditionally ascribed to metaphysics. These truths of mathematics and metaphysics provided premises from which he could start and also principles of inference he could use to go beyond these premises to further truths that were thus seen also to be clear and distinct and therefore infallibly known. The edifice of knowledge gradually began to emerge anew, and on a stable foundation.[1]

In this scheme mathematics and metaphysics and therefore physics, or parts of it anyway, were in the reconstructed edifice. But history and testimony and most of what the senses tried to tell us did not get rescued. All this latter sort of stuff was not part of what is known. We did need to rely on some of that unrescued material in our everyday life, but everything there is second-rate, and nothing there is a part of the new edifice of knowledge.

That was Descartes' idea. But it soon became clear that the only thing of which he could be certain was "I think, therefore I am" – *cogito, ergo sum*. Descartes, of course, thought he could really go beyond this to the principles of mathematics and physics and the causal structure of the world.[2] However, almost everyone else has thought he could not get beyond this one principle, the *cogito*. Be that as it may, Descartes felt the next step beyond the *cogito* was to come to know the essence of this thing that thinks. The "I" that got this far, Descartes went on to argue, was

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simply a reasoning thing – *sum res cogitans*, "I am a thinking thing." This knower is not, contrary to what Aristotle argued, a rational animal, he was something that was pure thought, nothing more than a reasoning thing.

As this reasoning thing, Descartes is, in rebuilding the edifice of knowledge, to be guided by his reason alone. In the search after knowledge, this reason is to rely on no faculty, e.g., the senses, other than itself. Moreover, the reason on which he is to rely is his own reason. This reasoning thing is no "political animal," again contrary to what Aristotle said; the method of doubt has shown that, taken as a faculty, the senses cannot provide anything to fit into the edifice of knowledge that this thinking thing was erecting, and perforce, then, testimony is not a reliable source of knowledge: with regard to the history of things, we know nothing. The thinking thing, so far as he (or it) *knows*, has no place in which he lives nor any history out of which he has grown.

Clearly, the "I" that is the knower is totally alone. He is, as it were, an atom unrelated to any other thing (if there be any) nor related to any other thinking thing (if there be such). He has no civic duties – it, the reasoner, knows no *polis* or *res publica*. The only duties he has, and can have, are cognitive: reconstructing the edifice of knowledge is his only concern. Moreover, he is totally responsible for raising anew the edifice of knowledge, totally responsible for finding the relevant parts and putting them together in the correct order. This is what has been called the idea of human being as "autonomous knower."

David Hume strongly disagreed with this view of human being. He argued in his *Enquiry concerning the Human Understanding* (1748/1975) that such a "knower" can in fact know nothing: the Cartesian position amounts to a radical scepticism. "There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgement." This sort of antecedent scepticism "recommends a universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles but also of our very faculties…" (149) But there are no principles that we can recognize incorrigibly as incorrigible, and even if there were, it would not be possible to advance beyond these principles, since all the faculties that we might use to effect such an advance have themselves been called into question. "The Cartesian doubt," Hume concludes, "… were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable, and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject." (150) The method of doubt simply cannot be carried out by any human being – any *real* human being – and the idea of the human being as an autonomous knower is basically unreasonable.

It is impossible that one doubt that one is a human creature, a living human creature, flesh and blood and bones, someone who eats and drinks and plays backgammon, eats and drinks at a table off plates, often with others, sometimes at home, sometimes at an inn, sometimes in Edinburgh, sometimes in London or Paris. Who could doubt that sort of thing? And causes too: any reasonable person has to accept that the one billiard ball striking the second causes the latter to move

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off, just as any reasonable person (after Newton) has to accept that the force that causes the apple to fall causes the planets to move in elliptical orbits about the sun. We cannot simply shed these beliefs about our selves and about the causes of things. When we come to do philosophy, we are what we are, rational animals, and we find our own selves, each with a certain shape and size, a certain physiognomy, a sort of character, with various tastes and passions, and of course various beliefs; and we find ourselves thrown (as it were) into a world not of our making but about which we have many beliefs, many of which indeed enable us to get about in the world and engage in activities in it, by ourselves and with others.

All this is given to us, we are given, each of us, our self and the world that self is in. Not even Descartes could escape these facts, nor could he escape the beliefs that are given to him. He, of course, as he meditated, professed to doubt them all, but then when he got tired meditating he went out like any other normal human being to go to dinner and then perhaps to bed, perhaps with his mistress. All these things presupposed that he had various beliefs – beliefs that he had just come from trying to doubt. These beliefs were all, he held, second best, but even as a thinking thing he found he needed them, however much he disdained them; they couldn't be avoided.

That Descartes was being impossibly cautious does not, Hume went on to argue, preclude a reasonable degree of caution. This is a sort of scepticism, another species of antecedent scepticism if you wish, but "more moderate" than that of Descartes. Scepticism understood in this reasonable sense, he tells us, is in fact a "necessary preparation to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgements, and weaning our mind from prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion." (*Enquiry*, 150) Such mitigated scepticism does not require one to give up all current beliefs nor even most of them, nor to despise our faculties or rules of method for the pursuit of truth. One could be a Newtonian and use the inductive experimental method while rejecting any demand for an *a priori* method. From the Cartesian standpoint that means one is settling for scepticism about knowledge: for the Cartesian, mitigated scepticism just is scepticism.[3] But at least it works, gets things done, second-best though it may be.[4] At least it doesn't require the person to shrink to a rational atom that seeks to find the meaning of the world we ordinarily inhabit by turning towards a world of essences outside the ordinary world, essences not of this world but constituting the reasons for it.

It had become clear by Hume's day that our acceptance, as living human beings, of various causes of natural things and events in the ordinary world would not be the acceptance of an *a priori* body of knowledge of the sort that Descartes thought it ought to be. A mitigated scepticism took this for granted, for we have no awareness of the alleged essences that, were these illusory entities to exist, alone could guarantee incorrigible knowledge in an *a priori* science. Science came to be something that Descartes had taken to be second-best: it still aimed to know the causes of things, but such knowledge was nothing more than the acceptance – the fallible acceptance – of what seemed to one and to one's friends and colleagues to

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be patterns of things and events in our ordinary world. When one said one knew the cause of something, e.g., why the billiard ball moved off when struck, what one knew was a pattern of events in the ordinary world, a regularity. Or, to use Locke's example,

> Tell a country gentlewoman that the wind is south-west, and the weather lowering, and like to rain, and she will easily understand it is not safe for her to go abroad thin clad, in such a day, after a fever: She clearly sees the probable connexion of all these, viz. south-west wind, and clouds, rain, wetting, taking cold, relapse, and danger of death, without tying them together in those artificial and cumbersome fetters of several syllogisms, that clog and hinder the mind, which proceeds from one part to another quicker and clearer without them; and the probability which she easily perceives in things thus in their native state would be quite lost, if this argument were managed learnedly, and proposed in mode and figure. For it very often confounds the connexion… (1690/1979, bk. 4, ch. 17, sec. 4, p. 671)

Regularity is what counts, regularity tested by successful prediction: the country gentlewoman knows the causes of things, but what this means is that she knows patterns, regularities in nature – regularities and nothing more; attempts to fit such a regularity into a framework of essences and ontological necessity "confounds the connexion." Of course, if causation is regularity, then whether the supposed regularity really was universal, as it perhaps seemed to be, we could not ever know – we are not omniscient and there was no awareness of essences that could guarantee its necessity and therefore its universality – one accepted what one accepted, and fallible though that might be, one made do with it.

Most of the time the fallibility does not matter: what we accept, what we believe, does not fail. Our friends invite us to a game of backgammon. Walking to the games room, setting up the board, joining in the jollity – all these things and many many more presuppose our having certain beliefs about the regular patterns of things in our world. We take them as given. It would be quite out of place to interrupt the game by asking whether these beliefs were justified, asking, for example, whether the board in front of the players really was there for them to lean their elbows upon, to toss the dice upon, and so on. One's companions would think one joking, or, if you seemed serious, would think one somewhat crazy. But as a good companion, one does not ask that these beliefs be given some sort of justification, some sort of evidence that these beliefs really are, as we supposed them to be, true. These beliefs are given, but no justification is given nor would any person in that context call for one to justify their beliefs, to provide evidence that they, one and all, are true. Nor would one ask the country gentlewoman what was the evidence that her beliefs about the weather and the way it is are true. The proper response is: Surely you jest. Or are you mad? Of course they are true. So what if they are fallible, here they are not failing.

We are what we are, accepting what we accept, but it is still the case that such acceptance is fallible and often enough we find we are in error – what we thought we knew we do not know. We all have our prejudices, our rash opinions, bits

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of things that we accept because our educators have put them there in us. We sometimes find out where we are wrong or where what we accept is contrary to what someone else accepts – our friend recommends homeopathic cures and I have my doubts about their efficacy; one of us must be wrong but it is not clear who it is. Now, we are, as persons in this world, passionate creatures, moved by concerns other than cognitive – which was the only end that moved the thinking thing that Descartes had convinced himself that he essentially was. We are motivated by our passion for backgammon, for example, or, like the country gentlewoman, our desire to get the laundry out to dry and to evade the causes of one's getting a cold. Our motives and passions are many. But among our passions there really is a love of truth, the passion of curiosity (*Treatise* 1739–40/1978, II, iii, 10). This concern for the truth takes its place among others in determining how we end up directing our lives. And so, sometimes when we come to doubt one of the things we were taking for granted, we become curious about that matter, and that passion moves us, sometimes urgently, sometimes more idly, to undertake some sort of inquiry into the way things are in order to discover what is the truth in the matter that has come to concern us.

Hume describes how philosophy is reasonably done only if is prompted by some motive, guided by some "propensity," as he puts it:

> Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (*Treatise*, 270)

The relevant motive or propensity is curiosity. This motive guides reason as to where it ought to be concerning its activity, that is, the process of inquiry. That proper end is finding out what is the case, finding evidence, in other words, to justify our acceptance of some belief or other in the area where some doubt has arisen. Where there is doubt and where curiosity in fact moves us, *there* a justification must be found. Elsewhere nothing is in doubt, and so there no inquiry is called for, nor, therefore, is there any need to produce that which is the upshot of inquiry, something that will justify one or some or all our beliefs.

The motive of curiosity that sometimes moves us to action, the action of an inquiry, must be seen in its place in fuller aspects of one's personality. Hume sees this clearly – he puts his points in a single long paragraph, each part of which deserves attention and comment:

> At the time, therefore, that I am tir'd with amusement and company, and have indulged a *reverie* in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a river-side, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally *inclin'd* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation. (270; his italics)

His curiosity is aroused, especially about the causes of things, his own behaviour in particular. He does know some things about himself, some regularities. But these are gappy. His curiosity moved him to try to fill in the gaps.

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How should one proceed in such an inquiry? Hume has elsewhere told us what one should do. Earlier in the *Treatise* he gives an example that shows us, when we happen to discover our knowledge is gappy, and we are moved to fill in the gaps, how we should proceed.

The example (132) is that of a watch that works regularly when it is wound; this regularity amounts to the judgment that being wound causes the watch to run. Then one day it is wound but it doesn't run. What was taken to be generally true turns out, after all, not to be a genuine regularity. It is a case of "often does, sometimes doesn't"; there is a "contrariety" in our experience, as Hume puts it (131). Curiosity moves us to replace what we formerly accepted, but which turned out to be not really acceptable, with something that is acceptable, something that we can reasonably take to be genuinely a regularity. There is a gap in our knowledge. Most of us – the philosophers, anyway, though perhaps not the vulgar – have found that the principle of "same cause, same effect, and conversely" seems to hold pretty solidly; when in the past we have followed its guidance, we have discovered causes, and we have never found any counter-examples. Guided by this principle, we infer that *there is a cause* why the wound watch does not work. We can further infer roughly the sort of thing that that cause is: it is something that interferes with the mechanism inside the watch. Knowing that there is a cause (the effect is determined) and knowing roughly where or what it is (there is a limited variety of possibilities), a skilled watchmaker can investigate and eliminate various possibilities until it is found that the cause of the wound watch not working is a grain of dust. Duly found, and duly removed: the watch runs properly once again.

As Hume puts these points, "From the observation of several parallel instances, philosophers form a maxim, that the connexion betwixt all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes." (132) This principle of inference is sufficiently strong for one to deem it "necessary" and in that sense "self evident" and reasonable to follow in any inquiry the curious person may undertake – though of course not "self evident" in the sense of being true *a priori*: any investigation that it guides is limited in the Cartesian sense to the second best. However, being second best does not bother the "artizan" in his search for the cause of why the wound watch doesn't work, and guided by this regularity about regularities, our "artizan" uses in effect what has come to be known as the "Method of Difference" to discover that the regularity

> For any watch, if it is wound then it runs.

is only conditionally sound, that what holds unconditionally is that

> For any watch, just in case there is no grain of dust in its mechanism, then if it is wound then it runs.

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To put it another way, where we had a counterexample to a regularity, we have discovered that after all we do have a regularity.

This is the method of natural science.[5]

So, Hume is undertaking his inquiries, moved, it seems, by the passion of curiosity that has been aroused in him. There is another point, however, that has to be noted. It is not just curiosity that is moving him, but since he is not sure about himself and therefore unsure about exactly what it is that is moving him, there is a worry about whether he is really doing the right thing. There is even – shades of Descartes – a worry whether the way he draws his inferences in his inquires is justified. *But it is of course the doubt of a mitigated scepticism – they are simple human worries about aspects of his cognitive undertakings*, just a sense that he might in certain ways be able to do better, and not the impossible worries of the Cartesians that could be assuaged only by some guarantee of infallibility.

> I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. (270)

And there is yet another point. He is moved by curiosity, but this fits into a broader sense that he has about what is worth doing. There are things here that make him concerned for others, and behind those concerns there are some self-regarding motives.

> I am concern'd for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. (270–1)

These further motives and propensities he feels arising within himself are perfectly human motives. He simply wonders how he might contribute through the inquiries aroused by his curiosity to the well-being of others, but also to his own sense of well-being and his sense of being able to achieve some reasonable and helpful goals.

> These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy. (271)

But we should recall what Hume has also earlier told us, that inquiry is hard work (175) – the *bricolage* of the house of knowledge does not come easy. So, let us suppose that what has come to bother one is really something rather trivial; perhaps the issue that is before one is, e.g., which of two bits of trivial gossip is true. In fact the issue is so trivial that the pleasure of coming to know requires a constancy of effort and trouble the pain of which far outweighs the pleasure one would have in coming to know; coming to know isn't worth the effort, and one could better spend one's time at other things – in such a case, in trying to come to know, one

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"shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure." Undertaking inquiry and coming to know things are activities, projects that are part of one's life and must be fit into that life, balanced against other opportunities or possible projects.

From the perspective of Hume, the Cartesian method of doubt prevents one from setting about any real inquiry into matters of fact; the Cartesian method of doubt is mere dithering. And dithering is not one of the cognitive virtues. It is simply an irresponsible way to do these things. For Hume, in contrast, one undertakes inquiry in a *responsible* way: (I) a justification for the acceptance of a belief consists in providing evidence that that belief is true; (II) one does not because one cannot provide a justification for all one's beliefs, rather one undertakes to provide a justification when one's cognitive interest in the truth is aroused; (III) an inquiry is a process or activity undertaken to provide (if one can) evidence for a belief; (IV) one undertakes an inquiry only when moved by one's curiosity; and (V) one undertakes an inquiry only if one takes the upshot to be something that is not too trivial to take up, and only if the upshot is worth the effort required to complete the inquiry. This is the *responsible knower*, someone who undertakes an inquiry aimed at justifying some belief that has been called into question, beginning where one must, with what is given to one by way of beliefs and methods of inference, and, if one deems it worth the effort, proceeding from this given in conformity with the tested and accepted rules of causal inference. *Descartes gives us the impossible cognitive ideal of the AUTONOMOUS THINKER; for Hume the cognitive ideal is that of the RESPONSIBLE KNOWER.*[6]

To continue: Hume suggests that the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" are relatively simple and reasonably well-known. The relevant rules can in fact be organized more formally as a set of "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" (*Treatise* I, iii, 15), but, as the watch example shows, these rules are part of common sense and have proved their validity again and again. Certainly, they have shown themselves to be as successful as one could perhaps hope for, and are certainly better than various rules of "unphilosophical probability" (I, iii, 13), such as the rule of induction by simple enumeration or the rule that one should accept as true what one wishes were true, which experience soon shows are incapable of leading the curious person to acceptances that are solid and can withstand the tests of further experience.

The causal principle Hume re-formulates this way when he comes to state the "rules" (it is the 4th of his rules):

> The same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause. (173)

As we would put it, events have causes and effects, and for any cause, that cause is necessary and sufficient for its effect. As we have already noted in connection with this principle, there are as instances of it specific cause and effect relations – for example, one billiard ball causing another to move off when it strikes it, or water boiling when heated. These are regularities at the specific level. The causal

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principle is a generalization about these specific level regularities, a regularity about regularities; it asserts that there are such regularities and that these have a certain generic form.

Having stated this causal principle as rule 4, Hume goes on to make two comments. *First*, as we have seen, Hume notes that

> This [the causal] principle we derive from experience …

Since this principle is a regularity about regularities, what this means is that we have in fact discovered regularities of this form. These already known specific level regularities all have the form required by this principle. Evidence confirming the specific level regularities therefore also confirms the causal principle. It is in this way "derived from experience." And as he indicated earlier, this "maxim" is formed "from the observation of several parallel instances" (104); that is, the evidence consists in regularities that seem to hold in general and that share a logical form that permits one to generalize to the causal principle as a law about laws.

We discover specific regularities. These permit prediction. The sort of prediction obtained with specific level laws gives us grounds for using it in our further, more general inferences about the world, that is, the world of ordinary experience. The central point is this: The causal maxim as an empirical law about laws in this way guides us in our exploration of the causal structure of the world in which we live our ordinary everyday lives.

This is Hume's *second* comment on his statement of the causal principle:

> … and it [that is, the causal principle] is the source of most of our philosophical reasonings.

We can use it to infer about hitherto unexamined cases that there are causal regularities for these cases also, and proceeding on the basis of the causal principle, draw conclusions from our experiments about causes, as, for example, the "artizan" used the Method of Difference to locate the cause why the wound watch was not running.

We must now note here a *third* point. There is an extremely relevant qualification that Hume makes about these inferences. We can bring this out by noting how Hume expresses his first comment: "This principle *we* derive from experience …" (italics added). The experience that supports the acceptance of this principle is not simply that of the investigator, the "artizan," say, or the philosopher: it is indeed my experience that is relevant, but my experience is backed up by that of others – what is relevant is *our* experience, the experience of *us* taken collectively.

But if it is *our* experience, then this knowledge relies on the *testimony* of others. Here, as elsewhere, *testimony is crucial*.

> … there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. (*Enquiry*, 111)

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When we come to our projects, and in particular our projects of inquiry, we come with a given, an unchallenged set of beliefs, including a set of beliefs largely derived from the testimony of others; these latter beliefs are among those that are given to us as we start our inquiry into this or that, whatever it may be. *Hume recognizes the role of testimony in justifying our acceptances of beliefs.*

Hume himself had, of course, experienced causes and effects that confirmed the truth of the causal principle. Hume has his own experience justifying acceptance of the causal principle. Hume can also add as evidence the experience of others to his own. He knows some of these events through his own experience. The rest – overwhelmingly the most – he knows through the experience of others, which he knows by virtue of the fact that they all *testify* to these events. *We* know the *causal structure* of the world through our acceptance of what has been *testified to* by others. And more than that, there is, of course, history: what *we* know of *history* we know through the *testimony* of others. The point is general: *Testimony is the basis of most of what we know about the world of everyday experience.*

So, how does Hume handle testimony? Here as elsewhere we take as given our acceptance of certain regularities. In particular, our reliance on testimony takes for granted a regularity about persons, that in general they are truth-tellers. This is the regularity to the effect that when a person asserts that something, say p, is the case, then p is indeed the case:

> For any person, and for any proposition p, when he or she asserts p, then p is true.

For Hume, this is a matter-of-fact regularity about people as ordinary beings in the ordinary world that we know by sense experience. It is, let us note, a generic level principle, one that has as its instances similar and parallel empirical regularities about individuals:

- For Beverly, and for any proposition p, when he or she asserts p, then p is true.
- For Jones, and for any proposition p, when he or she asserts p, then p is true.
- and so on

He remarks in a letter to Hugh Blair that "No man can have any other experience than his own. The experience of others becomes his only by the credit of testimony; which proceeds from his own experience of human nature." (Norton 1965, 403) These regularities about the reliability of particular persons are at the specific level. These are supported at the generic level by the causal principle: testimony as a "species of reasoning" is "founded on the relation of cause and effect." (*Enquiry*, 111) Thus, the veracity of witnesses is an empirical regularity among empirical regularities. And, as is the case with other regularities in the world of ordinary experience, there is no guarantee *a priori* that the regularity is true. The only evidence for the reliability of testimony is the fact that in the past it has as a matter of fact turned out to be reliable (113).

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It was Hume's argument that testimony and therefore history rested on the same sort of basis – an empirical basis – as does, for example, physics, or the practical knowledge of how watches work.

> … our assurance in any argument of this kind [an argument based on testimony] is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. (111)

The pattern for testimony is the pattern that obtains for all other empirical sciences:

> It being a general maxim, that no objects have any discoverable connexion together, and all inferences, which we can draw from one to another, are founded merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony, whose connexion with any event seems, in itself, as little necessary as any other. (111)

Hume's position here has been criticized by C. A. J. Coady in his study on *Testimony* (1992).[7] He argues that "we are told by Hume that we can only trust in testimony because experience has shown it to be reliable, yet where experience means individual observation and the expectations which it gives rise to, this seems plainly false and, on the other hand, where it means common experience (i.e. the reliance on the observations of others) it is surely question-begging." (81) But this doesn't fit with Hume's picture of inquiry at all.

Coady is correct that Hume states that our acceptance of the reliability of testimony is based not only on one's own experience but also on that of others – even as one's acceptance of the causal principle is based not only on one's own experience but also on that of others. But – here is where Coady goes wrong – it does not do so in a question-begging way.

When we commence an inquiry, we take much for granted, as we have seen: to repeat the point made earlier, since our errors about causes are errors about patterns, we need principles that replace incorrect or gappy knowledge about patterns – patterns of inference that have been tested in ordinary experience and have been found to do a fairly good job of replacing erroneous judgments about patterns with better judgments about patterns. The rules we use to judge of causes and effects are rules for a real person, one coming to the inquiry with a set beliefs given at that point to him or her, beliefs that are *not* the subject of the inquiry, but are taken for granted in or during that inquiry; and the rules of reason are rules for changing our beliefs but not for changing all at once all our beliefs given to us when inquiry begins; they are, rather, rules for guiding us in correcting among all our beliefs those that contain errors that have come to our attention and where we think that those errors are worth the time and effort it will take to correct them.

Consider a person, X let us say. It is generally true that

> For any p, when X testifies that p, then p.

But let us suppose that X testifies to S but S is false. S, to which X testifies but which is false, provides a counterexample. We do have a regularity in our

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experience – people, including X, generally tell the truth – but we also have a counterexample. There is, as Hume would put it, a *contrariety* in our experience. It is like the situation in which the wound watch normally runs satisfactorily but sometimes does not. In the latter case, the philosopher, guided by the causal principle that

> Like causes have like effects, and conversely,

concludes that in the case of the wound watch that does not work, there is some factor, as yet unobserved, the presence of which accounts for the watch not working in this case. The watchmaker discovers by elimination that, among the possible causes, the relevant one is the presence of a grain of dust in the mechanism:

> For any watch, just in case there is no grain of dust in its mechanism, then if it is wound, then it runs.

Similarly for testimony. Here too the method of science shows how a counterexample to the regularity that testimony is reliable turns out to be the effect of a hitherto unnoticed factor, a "hidden cause" like the grain of dust. With this new knowledge we can, as it were, "explain away" the counterexample as not a real challenge to the reliability of testimony, as we explain away why the wound watch does not work by pointing to the hitherto hidden grain of dust. Actually, what we discover is that it is indeed, as the counterexample shows, not a regularity that testimony is reliable, that is, not a regularity that testimony is unconditionally reliable. But we do find that it is a regularity that conditionally, testimony is reliable. We discover, in other words, that we have to be more cautious than we were previously, and accept testimony as reliable only under certain conditions. But, provided we have pursued the method of science carefully, we have found out what those conditions are. The general causal principle permits us to infer that there are present, under a generic description, factors that enable us to explain why this testimony, though false, does not really challenge the principle that testimony is reliable; it permits us to infer that the regularity that testimony is reliable does not hold unconditionally but only under certain conditions. Further inquiry (using the eliminative methods to judge of causes and effects) then shows us what *specifically* are the conditions under which testimony is reliable. We have discovered that the counterexample of testimony that is false does not mean that we can no longer rely on testimony; we have, rather, discovered that in relying on testimony we must be cautious, and not only that we must be cautious but also, more specifically, where we must be cautious.

Consider an example from Gibbon. "It may seem somewhat remarkable that Bernard of Clairvaux, who records so many miracles of his friend St. Malachi, never takes any notice of his own, which, in their turn, however, are carefully related by his companions and disciples." (1776–88/n.d., ch. XV, n. 52, vol. I, 409) Gibbon adds the question, which one can presume is rhetorical: "In the long series

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of ecclesiastical history, does there exist a single instance of a saint asserting that he himself possessed the gift of miracles?" Gibbon had not encountered anything like American evangelical preachers of the mega-churches. Be the latter as it may, Gibbon is clearly arguing that the miracles of St. Bernard recorded in the testimony of his disciples did not in fact occur: the disciples testified that S and we know that not-S. We have in the case of Bernard's miracles a counterexample to the usual pattern

> For any p, when X testifies that p, then p,

that is, in this case,

> For any p, when one of Bernard's disciples testifies that p, then p.

The counterexample constitutes a contrariety in experience. As in the case of the watch, on the basis of the causal principle that "like causes have like effects, and conversely," we infer that *there is something that makes the difference*, that is, some relevant factor that causes this contrariety. Now, there are at least two possibilities as to what makes the difference. One is the possibility that Bernard's companions and disciples were knaves unusually prone to the deception of others. This can reasonably be eliminated by the historian. Another possibility is this: suppose that p states a miracle; as a miracle, it gives evidence of the holiness of Bernard and all that that implies; in that case the disciples had a very strong special interest in p being true, and, it being an age more credulous than ours or Gibbon's, were very likely swayed by the principle of asserting to be true what they strongly wished to be true. This attitude with little doubt is what made the difference in this case.

In general we take it that "For any p, when one of Bernard's disciples testifies that p, then p." But the counterexample of the tales of the miraculous show that this is not true unconditionally, that, in other words, it is a conditioned regularity and only gappy knowledge. Having located the factor that conditions it, we make it explicit. The unconditioned regularity is parallel to that for Hume's watch example; it goes something like this:

> For any p, just in case that one of Bernard's disciples has no strong interest in p being true, then if that disciple of Bernard testifies that p, then p.

This is true, but let p *state a miracle*. There are no miracles, no violations of the regularities of nature, or at least, Gibbon makes clear, in the case of Bernard there are no miracles. So p is false. However, in the case of a purported miracle, *the disciple has an interest in* p *being true*. Therefore, contrary to what ordinarily happens, that disciple asserts p, though p is false. The disciples are undoubtedly not knaves, deliberately asserting with intent to deceive what they know to be false; but they delude themselves, especially when they want very much what they are deluded about to be true – Hume quotes the Cardinal de Retz, to the effect that "there are many things, in which the world wishes to be deceiv'd . . . ." (*Treatise*, 253); miracles in a credulous age are among those things.

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The presence of factors like this explains the propensity of otherwise decent and honest persons to tell tales, undoubtedly false, about things supposedly miraculous. Hume had dealt with these things in some detail in his essay "Of Miracles" in the *Enquiry* (sec. X, 148–9). There is, to begin, evidence about the record of the testifier:

- Does the testifier have a record of truth-telling? What is his or her reputation in this regard, as an honest person or as a knave? (cf. *Enquiry*, 112)
- Is the testimony credible in itself, or is it something fantastic, contrary to the normal course of nature (as, for example, a miracle)? (cf. 84)
- If the testimony is contrary to what might normally be expected, then has it been given in a credulous age or society? (cf. 119) At the same time, however, if a document purporting to be from a rude and credulous age does not contain references to miracles and prodigies, then it is undoubtedly a forgery – that is one of the reasons for thinking the Ossian poems are forgeries.[8]
- Is the testimony presented in a manner that indicates its reliability; for example, has it been given in a straight-forward way, or is it perhaps presented as poetry or humour, or, again, is it presented in an indirect way or with some hesitation? (cf. 112–3)
- Is the testimony supported by independent witnesses? The greater the number of independent witnesses, the more likely that testimony is true. (cf. 112)
- Is the testimony first-hand or hearsay? Hearsay is more liable to error than first-hand testimony. The longer is the chain of testifiers, the less probable is the testimony. As Hume puts it in the *Treatise*, with reference to "the connexion betwixt each link of the chain in human testimony": since each link introduces a degree of probability less than certainty, "Every new probability diminishes the original conviction; and however great that conviction may be suppos'd, 'tis impossible it can subsist under such re-iterated diminutions." (145, in the section "Of Unphilosophical Probability")

Here are some of the factors Hume mentions as among those the presence of which can cause someone who is normally a truth-teller to testify to something that is not the case:

- Enthusiasm or a passionate commitment can cause one to misreport something. (cf. *Enquiry*, 345, in a note "additional" to "Of Miracles")[9]
- Does the one testifying have an interest in his or her testimony being true? As in our example from Gibbon, Hume cautions that the social interests of the testifier may corrupt his or her testimony. (cf. 125)

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– Does the testifier have a pecuniary interest in his or her testimony being true? (cf. 124)

And so on.

Three points are to be noted.

(1) It is a regularity about a testifier that he or she is a truth-teller and acceptance of this regularity is justified by gathering empirical evidence that inductively supports that acceptance.

(2) We have used ordinary causal inferences to explain why people sometimes testify to what is not the case in spite of its being the norm that when someone testifies to something, then what is testified to is true. The regularities concerning testimony are simply regularities among regularities, and the same causal principles apply to these regularities as apply in the case of wound watches working and not working.

(3) As in the case of the watch, so in the case of testimony, when we reason about exceptions to the rule, we take for granted the general causal principle.

We have seen how specific instances of the causal principle support that principle, and are in turn supported by that principle. There is no circularity here. Regularities about testimony are among the specific instances of the causal principle. Specific regularities about the reliability of testimony therefore support the causal principle. In turn the causal principle supports the specific regularities about testimony. Again there is no circularity. We can take as facts those that are testified to by reliable testifiers, that is, testifiers for whom the regularity holds that when they testify to p, then p. Among these facts obtained through testimony are facts that support specific causal regularities. These specific causal regularities support the general causal principle. This generic principle in turn supports the specific regularities. Among the specific regularities are those concerning the reliability of testimony. Again, there is nothing circular in this.

What it does depend upon is the logical connections among the laws that form the specific-generic hierarchy, with the causal principle playing the central role in tying the system together. It is this same hierarchy that is central to the use of the rules for eliminative induction, that is, Hume's "rules by which to judge of causes and effects."

We can now see where Coady goes wrong. Basically, he takes Hume's account of knowledge to be empiricist, subjectivist, and individualistic. This is precisely what we have been arguing against. Hume, the responsible knower, is likely an empiricist, in some broad sense of that term; at least he holds that there is no realm of essences transcending this world that we know through our senses. But he is not a subjectivist; after all, he allows the testimony of others to provide data justifying his acceptance of various beliefs, including the causal principle. Nor, perforce, was his account of knowledge individualistic: the Humean knower was the member of a community of knowers and accepted (usually) the testimony of

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these others. Certainly, it is misleading to suggest, as Coady does, that Hume is seeking in subjective experience a foundation for knowledge, with the remainder of the edifice erected through inferences based on the rule of induction by simple enumeration.

The difficulty here is that Hume does not allow that induction by simple enumeration is among the "rules by which [one may reasonably] judge of causes"; the rules by which "we *ought to regulate* our judgment concerning causes and effects" (*Treatise*, 149; emphasis added) are the rules he develops in the section (I, iii, 15) devoted to the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects." These rules are, as we know, the rules of induction by elimination guided by the general causal principle of "like causes have like effects, and conversely." Simple enumeration yields principles with many exceptions, and provides no way to eliminate such contrarieties. His "rules," in contrast, confront such contrarieties head on and lead, as we have seen, to the discovery of regularities that do not have exceptions, or at least not the old exceptions. Hume does allow that the vulgar use simple enumeration but argues that philosophers, wiser in the ways of the world, use the more reliable method to be found in his "rules." (See *Treatise*, 148–9.)

Hume's knower is a real person, not the autonomous knower, not the reasoning atom that Descartes defended. One has to take these beliefs from and about the testimony of others, as one has to take so many other beliefs, as given; and as a *responsible knower* one begins to doubt some one or another of these beliefs only when confronted by a contrariety in experience or a gappiness in our knowledge; only then do we use the rules of reason, that is, Hume's "rules," to change those beliefs for ones that are better.

One can question something that one has learned by testimony by looking directly at the facts in question. We take for granted what we have been told, for example, that the Earth is round, but we can learn what the evidence is for this proposition and check it out for ourselves (e.g., from the round shape of the shadow of the Earth on the Moon during a lunar eclipse). But other beliefs that we take for granted we cannot in this way check out for ourselves, e.g., that there was a Julius Caesar, that he crossed the Rubicon, that he was the father of Cleopatra's son Caesarion, and so on. Here we must take for granted the reliability of testifiers and chains of testifiers. If one for some reason begins to doubt, all one can do is check whether the testimony is an exception to the rule that testimony is usually truthful. Thus, there is little reason to doubt the testimony that there really was a Bernard of Clairvaux and that he wrote about his friend Malachi. But the testimony attributing miracles to Bernard is something else. Here there are grounds to doubt that the testimony is true, as Gibbon makes clear. This is contrary to the principle that we accept that generally, testimony is reliable. Here is where the rule of reason has its place; Hume's "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" enable us to eliminate the contrariety, the contrariety that calls into question our general acceptance of the reliability of testimony. Hume's "rules" guide us as to how to eliminate the contrariety, and this elimination of the contrariety further confirms those "rules"

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as principles worthy of acceptance. And, of course, it further justifies our general acceptance of the reliability of testimony.

But there are exceptions. Hume will handle these as the "artizan" handled the case of the wound watch. Hume recognized the need for the historian to look out for factors the presence of which could make a difference and interfere with the simple, but by itself simplistic and gappy, regularity that when one testifies to p, then p is true.

Hume was clear on all this. As an historian, with regard to the texts on which he relied to provide testimony about the events in the narrative he was constructing, he regularly raised the relevant questions.

It is no doubt the case that the causal inferences with regard to testimony are often complicated, as in cases, for example, before a court of law, or as in the reconstruction of the events in history. But the basic structure is clear enough: details aside, its structure is that of Hume's "rules by which to judge of causes and effects." In applying these rules we must perforce take an awful lot of testimony for granted: we can set ourselves straight on some testimony only by taking for granted ever so much that we know by testimony. Indeed, we can defend the generic principle that

Testimony is reliable

only by taking for granted specific cases like

Gibbon is reliable in that to which he testifies,

which together form a set of "parallel instances" from which philosophers form the "maxim" that

Testimony is reliable

that is, that testimony is in general reliable but that there are cases where it is not to be trusted – adding that our "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" permit us to explain, explain away if you wish, the exceptions.

What else could we expect of the mitigated sceptic?

We may conclude that, Coady notwithstanding, Hume on testimony is essentially correct.

Now recall that the Cartesians relegated history to some place outside the edifice of knowledge. The propositions of history, all of them, lacked the clarity and distinctness characteristic of *real* knowledge, the infallible and *a priori* knowledge of, for example, mathematics or (as they thought) physics. They were therefore excluded from any claim to the intellectual respectability of *scientia*; history is second rate.

A history is a narrative, describing events and connecting them into a series. The connections are such that the earlier events explain the later events; the connections are, in other words, causal. It is these connections that make a

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history different from a chronicle. The latter, too, relates a sequence of events, but provides no explanation of why the sequence goes this way rather than that way; the historical narrative supplies connections, causal connections that make the sequence intelligible. A narrative could be given of a sequence of moves in a billiard game, balls being struck in order and moving off in various directions. The connections between the events are causal. The causal patterns are the laws of mechanics. These regularities are inductive generalizations, the acceptance of which is justified by the experimental method. This justification turns on the principle of causation. Histories of billiard balls are not terribly interesting, however. Histories of people and of nations are rather more interesting. But, though more interesting, they are of a piece with the supposed history of billiard balls in a game of billiards. A narrative in history relates a sequence of events and details a causal ordering of the sequence that renders intelligible the whole, enabling us to understand why the sequence develops this way rather than that. The causal connections that link the events are patterns, mainly of human behaviour (*Enquiry*, 83). Not exactly the same, of course, but more or less so, and the exceptions are themselves tests or experiments that yield a deeper understanding. As for the differences, "from observing the variety of conduct in different men, we are enabled to form a greater variety of maxims, which still suppose a degree of uniformity and regularity." (85) The methods of the human sciences are the same in logical structure as the methods of the natural scientist.

> [The] records of wars, intrigues, factions and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals and other external objects, by the experiments which he makes concerning them. (84)

With the rejection of the Cartesian proposal, it turns out that explanations in the natural sciences, e.g., why billiard balls move as they do when struck or why Mars goes about the Sun, rest on the very same basis that explanations in history rest on: causal inferences justified by the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects."

None of this is available to the autonomous knower of the Cartesians. Sometimes it is thought that none of these things available to the Humean – since he is often described in Cartesian terms. But such a description would be false of Hume. His knower is, to the contrary, the responsible knower who is a member of a society all of whose members, or almost all, are responsible knowers. So these necessary things that one needs to justify one's description of the causal network of the world are all available to Hume as a responsible knower who is part of a community of responsible knowers. And also of a few knaves, and a few who delude themselves, and a few, Hume's "the vulgar," who remain determinedly knowers who are, if not irresponsible, then at least less than fully responsible – but nonetheless a community mostly of mostly responsible knowers, a community

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wherein there are practices, that is, cognitive practices, based on sound causal reasoning, that enable the good guys to find out the bad.

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NOTES

1 For a discussion of Descartes on method in science, see Wilson (1999, Study One). See also Wilson (2008b).

2 For a discussion of Descartes' metaphysics, see Wilson (1999, Study Seven).

3 David Norton has nicely remarked that "For Hume, the method and nature of science were represented by Newton, and Newton's scientific work was widely seen, perhaps even by Newton himself, to be within the skeptical tradition and to be a form of skepticism." (1965, xxxvi). For a discussion of the relation of skepticism and the science of the Royal Society, including the work of Newton, see Van Leeuwen (1963).

4 For a discussion of Newton's rules as part of an inductive – Baconian, if you wish – philosophy of science, see Wilson (1999, Study Five).

5 For discussion of Hume on the structure of scientific inference, see Wilson (1997, ch. 2).

6 For greater detail on this point, see Wilson (2008a, ch. 5).

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7 For discussion of other aspects of Coady on testimony and on Hume on testimony, see Wilson (2008a, ch. 5).
8 See Hume's essay on the Ossian poems in Norton (1965, 393f.).
9 This part of a long footnote moved from its proper place as a note to the essay "On Miracles," p. 125.

Fred Wilson received his PhD from the University of Iowa in 1965, when he joined the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He was retired in 2003 and became Professor Emeritus. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1994, and received the 2003 Canadian Philosophical Association/Broadview Press Book Prize for his study *The Logic and Methodology of Science in Early Modern Thought*. He has published extensively in ontology, in the philosophy of science, and in the history of philosophy, especially on Hume and on John Stuart Mill. His most recent book is *The External World and Our Knowledge of It: Hume's Critical Realism, an Exposition and a Defense*.

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