

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

	Relations of Ideas	Matters of Fact
Modal Status	Necessary	Contingent: “The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible” (15.8)
How Known	(Can be) known <i>a priori</i> : “discoverable by the mere operation of thought” (15.6)	Cannot be known <i>a priori</i> ; only from experience [<i>a posteriori</i>]
How Securely Known	(Can be) “Intuitively or demonstratively certain” (15.4)	Not intuitively or demonstrably certain
Studied by	Geometry, algebra, arithmetic (15.4)	Natural sciences. Also comprise much of our everyday knowledge.
Examples	“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)	“The sun will rise tomorrow” (see 15.8); When the first billiard ball strikes the second, the second ball will move (see 18.8)

-This is not just innocent observation & classification. That only necessary truths can be known *a priori* is a substantive claim.

-Why one might hold it

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)