

中西哲學論衡

余治平 周明俊 主編

Philosophische Begegnungen
zwischen Ost und West

Comparative Philosophy:
East and West

- On Hume's Alleged Skepticism about Practical Reason 徐向東
- 利瑪竇、萊布尼茲與「禮儀之爭」 俞懿嫻
- 「孟軻敦素」：南朝孟學史的點睛之筆 楊海文
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- 「所知障」：在梵文構詞異讀、概念邏輯關係及釋義學的反證之間 劉宇光

中

第四輯

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On Hume's Alleged Skepticism about Practical Reason

Xu Xiangdong

It is already a conventional reading of David Hume that he does not have the conception of a practical reason. While many commentators believe that Hume is nevertheless committed to an instrumentalist conception of reason, there are a few Kantian critics who have argued that Hume does not even have an instrumental conception of practical reason. I share with these critics the view that instrumental reason cannot stand alone in the sense that its exercise and application inevitably involve developing a conception of the good, or involve using normative standards of evaluation. However, it is in this point that it is worthy of reexamining the claim that Hume does not have any conception of practical reason. In accordance with my interpretative principle, whether Hume has or does not have a conception of practical reason is not so much dependent upon whether he does literally employ that conception in his analysis of relevant issues. Rather it relies on whether we can sort out something in Hume's texts that is functionally correspondent to what we ordinarily call practical reason, especially in the Kantian sense of this term. Once we begin to understand Hume in this way, it will turn out that he does have a conception of practical reason.

I

We will have to begin with a brief analysis of Hume's attitude towards skepticism since his putative skepticism about practical reason is allegedly derived from his skepticism about reason in general. In what sense and to what extent

Hume is really a skeptic, however, is a complicated problem and does not admit any simple answer, since it depends on what we intend to mean in describing a philosopher as a skeptic and on whether Hume's actual positions allow us to attribute him that name. In this paper I shall only concentrate on investigating two questions. First, whether Hume's account of the nature of beliefs leads him to skepticism about reason in general. Second, whether his understanding of the relations between reason and the passion leads to skepticism about practical reason.

It is well-known that Hume's alleged skepticism is drawn from his analysis of the nature of beliefs. A central part of Hume's project in the *Treatise* is to give a naturalistic account of how we come to believe certain things about the world surrounding us.^① For the sake of argument, let us consider the belief that the external world exists independently of us and will continue to exist even when we are not aware of it. According to Hume, the common belief is not based on any sort of reasoning to begin with and cannot be supported by sound reasoning after the fact. For not only is the great bulk of mankind wholly unacquainted with any arguments on these matters but also they believe, but do so in a total absence of justifying arguments (T 193). On the other hand, once we are prepared to prove the existence of an enduring external world by appeal to reason, it is easily be shown that all those arguments are simply no good.

To illustrate this point, let us briefly examine Hume's skepticism with regard to reason. Reason is, as Hume sees it, the faculty that performs demonstrative reasoning and causal reasoning. Hume typically uses two arguments to establish skepticism with regard to reason, which can be conveniently called "the regression

① In the paper the editions of Hume's works I am using are as follows: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, text revised with notes by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning Principles of Morals* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, text revised with notes by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). In the text, reference to the first literature is abbreviated as T, with numbers as quoted pages, and reference to the second one is abbreviated as E, with numbers as quoted pages.

argument” and “the diminution argument”.^① The regression argument is essentially based on the idea that in our judgment we must not only attend to the object under consideration, but we must also step back and ask the prior question whether — or to what extent — those procedures we use in dealing with the object is reliable. That is to say, as rationally reflective epistemic agents, we will or should not be content to rest with our initial confidence. But rather we should “in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief” (T 180). For Hume, all faculties are subject to this restraint. In particular, “our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect” (T 180). However, a new judgment need be guaranteed by another new judgment: we must specify to what extent the first new judgment is reliable. Since the process to seek the warrant of a judgment or belief must be performed infinitely, it follows that “all knowledge degenerates into probability” (T 180). The need to establish a judgment of assessment for our every belief or judgment, and to establish another judgment of assessment for the first judgment of assessment, and so on, will inevitably lead to a vicious infinite regress of assessments of assessment. We have no justification for stopping the procedure at any particular stage. Yet if we continue it, we will end with “a total extinction of belief and evidence” (T 183). Accordingly, rational mechanisms cannot sustain beliefs — to the contrary, they simply lead to the extinction of beliefs.

Indeed, it is disputable whether Hume's arguments for skepticism with regard to reason can be plausibly accepted. For example, it may be unnecessary to be committed to a Cartesian foundationalist program of justification for rational beliefs. However, for our principled purpose, there is no need to get involved in the dispute. The arguments, together with Hume's inductive skepticism and his arguments for skepticism with regard to the senses, do powerfully undermine, though probably not ultimately destroy, a prevalent rationalist or intellectualist

^① Here I am following Robert Fogelin in naming these arguments in this way. See Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).