

Understanding Hume's skepticism through Watkins' criticism of it

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Abstract

The paper intends to discuss the naturalist strategy used by Hume in his skepticism in the first half of the paper, while in the second half of the paper, it comprises of criticisms to Humean skepticism and Watkins's critical analysis of criticism taken from different philosophers who are critical of Hume's approach towards skepticism. The paper also in general makes an attempt to bring out the issue of the development of knowledge in the domain of philosophy of science from the notion of philosophical skepticism, which in this paper focuses on Humean skepticism only. In short, the paper will reply to two questions i.e. (a) What is Hume's naturalist strategy to deal with skepticism? and (b) How does Watkins criticize it?

Introduction

The notion of philosophical skepticism was started first in modern Western Philosophy in Descartes' *Meditations on first philosophy* and the unsolved problem of Descartes was tried to solve by Hume and in the process of doing so, Hume became a naturalist and skeptic of knowledge from external world. It was indeed Popper who first introduced the usage of 'Conjecture' and his contribution in philosophy of science through his method of falsifiability, which was also used by Watkins to criticize Hume's naturalism to deal with skepticism.

The debate of philosophical skepticism has been since Pyrrho (360 B.C.) and Hellenistic period of philosophy but in this paper, the intention of bringing the notion of skepticism is rather to be taken in a restricted sense and the sense is nothing but to consider that the discussion of skepticism here refers to only Humean skepticism.

Humean skepticism is a skepticism as a result of Hume's naturalist strategy to deal with skepticism. It is neither Pyrrhonian skepticism nor Cartesian skepticism. It clearly follows the conjunction of three propositions and they are as,

- (i) There are no synthetic a priori truths about the external world.
- (ii) Any genuine knowledge we have of the external world must ultimately be derived from perceptual knowledge.
- (iii) Only deductive derivations are valid.

Hume's naturalism to deal with skepticism

As discussed above that skepticism which is Humean skepticism here, is a conjunction of the three propositions viz. i, ii and iii. The three propositions are named as,

- (i) Anti-apriorist thesis
- (ii) Experimentalist thesis
- (iii) Deductivist thesis

Hume's philosophical position is to be treated neither materialism nor mind-body problem but despite various readings on Hume's work, there is at least a commonality in which his philosophy evolves and that is, the problem of induction. Whether Hume is to be considered as a radical skeptic or naturalized epistemologist, is an area of significant discussion, and hence, both its aspects need to be understood in order to understand his naturalist strategy on dealing with skepticism.

For Hume, reason is a slave of passion, and habits and custom override logical powder which may be a powder with extreme rationality. Humean skepticism believes in two things viz.

- (i) a natural way of forming beliefs through inductivism, as one fundamental belief, and
- (ii) a general belief forming which coincides and hence, forming Hume's monist theory of human cognition.

A careful understanding of Hume's *Treatise in An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, is required to posit what and where could Hume's skepticism be in a philosophical discourse. Hume's natural way of forming belief through inductivism, could lead to a problem of whether there could be a reliable non-circular proof of induction or not, and hence, owing to such potential problem, his natural way of forming belief, is heavily criticized.

Humean skepticism does not deny that there is an egocentric knowledge of mental existence, hence, his notion of sensationalism plays a significant role, in understanding the epistemology of external world, as in his world, since, senses or perceptual experience is helpful in yielding knowledge of external world but, such knowledge can never be deduced from *a priori* truth with the help of logical powder, and hence, his sensationalism comes more important than logic or reason. The very notion of such skepticism comes when there is a gap between an external world and perceptual experiences, while making an

attempt to know the external world through perceptual experiences , and to address that gap, leads to epistemology and Hume's explanation of it is in the form of his skepticism using naturalism strategy.

Hume who called skepticism as an academic amusement , academic product, because, in front of nature, skepticism can not know what nature is, as nature is too vigorous to be found skeptical.

Hume while talking about skepticism discusses whether skepticism could be *intentional* or *genuine* , in which he says that genuine skepticism is impossible. Hume's attempt to distinguish between general ordinary life without skepticism that the sun will rise again and his naturalist skepticism for his intellectualist mood in asking whether the sun will rise again or not, is beautiful , because he acknowledged that there is a difference between the layman's notion and philosopher's way of looking at the same problem, but having said this, he says in his famous slogan of 'philosophical decisions' as 'corrected and methodized common life reflections' , and this is also indeed a clear signal of his strong notion of customs over reasons.

The naturalistic interpretation of Hume's skepticism is not to consider his argument as *a reductio of reason per se* but of *the rationalistic (or intellectualist) conception of reason* . Hence, his skepticism is hypothetical in an intellectualistic model. Hume's love for naturalism goes to the extent of saying that there can not be any knowledge possible without having beliefs and beliefs are based on customs and not on reasons. He explains how come mathematical truths be exemplified as not a priori truths ,but indeed fallible as there could be mistakes in mathematical belief, hence, he attributes the reason of its fallibility to nothing but customs , hence, customs make up beliefs and not reasons make up beliefs. Such analysis of his comes from probability of evidences ,in which he uses the word 'evidentness' (he uses it in synonymous with belief , assurance, vivacity , as a property of idea) and not 'evidence', due to which , he claims that "*all knowledge resolves itself into probability, and becomes at last of the same nature with that evidence, which we employ in common life*" . These customs are based on sensationalism , and thus, the maxim of Hume's *first principle's* 'There is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses.', has become profoundly significant in the view of understanding his naturalistic strategy to deal with skepticism.

Watkins' criticism of Humean naturalistic strategy to deal with skepticism

Watkins' criticism of Humean naturalism while discussing skepticism is majorly done by using the critical analysis from different philosophers who are critical of Humean approach towards skepticism, such as namely , Wittgenstein, Kant ,Strawson , Freud ,Polanyi and Feyerabend , Popper , etc. besides using anti-skeptical strategies.

Watkins' own individual criticism to Humean naturalistic approach to skepticism, though is difficult to be filtered from his collections of criticism from other philosophers, but ,it could be found in the form of his allegiance to Popper as he attended Popper's *Logic and scientific method* , that his fundamental way of attacking Humean skepticism is precisely, by attacking Hume's monist theory of human cognition which says about the possibility of the universal convergence of rationality by humans, but as humans have different customs and language usage, such universal convergence is ought to be impossible.

Watkins could also criticize by raising the fundamental point of Hume with regards to Hume's natural way of forming belief through inductivism ,and in that , Watkins could ask , how can a reliable non-circular proof of inductivism be possible? , when there is no deductive certainty of inductivism.

Watkins could also criticize Humean skepticism using anti-skeptical strategies and they are as follows,

- (a) Apriorist strategy
- (b) Transcendental argument strategy
- (c) Conjecturalist strategy
- (d) Nondeductivist strategy
- (e) Probabilistic strategy
- (f) Phenomenalist strategy
- (g) Vindicationist strategy
- (h) Pragmatist strategy
- (i) Naturalist strategy

Apriorist strategy would be Kant's reply to Humean skepticism, Transcendental argument strategy would be to bring the argument of the form and for the possibility of scientific knowledge, Conjecturalist strategy would be Popper's reply to Hume, Nondeductivist strategy would be for valid non-deductive inference, Probabilistic strategy is for the solution to the problem of induction, Phenomenalist strategy would be to close the gap between the external world and perceptual experiences, Vindicationist strategy would be for vindicating the inductive method, Pragmatist strategy is for utilitarian approach, Naturalist strategy would be that there is no epistemic reply to skepticism because skepticism is for a mere academic activity, and human cognitive faculty is made so rigorous by nature that skepticism could hardly affect it.

Wittgenstein, if science is assumed to be based on 'principle of induction', could say that science is nothing but a language game, and language game is nothing but language used which differs from context, time and place, and such differences will go against the universal convergence of human cognition , which is the monist theory of human cognition of Hume in his naturalistic approach of

skepticism. There could be an example of consulting an oracle instead of a physicist while understanding a reason.

Kant, though would regard Hume for waking him up from his dogmatic slumbers , but he would be strongly critical of Humean skepticism which does have no place for *a priori* truths including mathematical truths, which , Hume calls them fallible due to probable mistakes in mathematical beliefs. Kant would go for synthetic *a priori* truths which ultimately makes physics possible, and hence, if Humean skepticism is to be scientific, Kant's understanding of how physics is possible , needs to be taken seriously, otherwise, Humean skepticism would be unscientific and could be pseudo-scientific, or perhaps, could be reduced to merely an academic activity, but then, academic activity of whom ?

Strawson criticizes Hume's monist thesis of universal convergence of human cognition, saying that, it is a question of cognitive psychology and Hume's basic canons of induction is not to be treated as same as basic rules of Bacon's inductive method, as human's cognitive faculties differ and ,hence , there can not be a convergence of human cognition for Hume's monist thesis to be possible.

Freud in his *Pleasurable* principle, argues that, when a man has strong feelings which is controlled by what he calls as reality principle and, suddenly, if the man is made to realize that that reality principle is nothing but the irrationally adopted hypothesis due to the universal convergence of human cognition as per Humean skepticism, then, Freud says that the man would not believe and indeed would believe only that such an irrational hypothesis would lead not only to irrationalism but also completely irrational.

Polanyi would consider science and magic on the same par, if objectively and philosophically considered, though, he in his personal life, believes in science and not in magic. He would argue that science has become so catholic to an extent of calling the discipline as a kind of scientific fideism, which would sharply criticize Hume's naturalism as well as empiricism too. Thus, Hume's skepticism is nothing but due to catholicism of scientific customs, which is nothing to do with knowledge but indeed would give a sense of irrationalism and irrationalism.

Feyerabend goes even to an extent of calling testability, verifiability method of objectively knowing scientific theorizing as a fairytale, and draws a parallel between science and primitive thinking. This would amount to the building of irrationalism or lack of realism in response to Hume's skepticism. He says that quantum physics is a human construct.

Popper had a beautiful examples to criticize Hume's skepticism through his naturalistic strategy, by giving an example from the observable facts from physics such as in Faraday-Maxwell idea of electro-magnetic field, that the idea of Faraday-Maxwell could be hardly sensed by human perceptual experiences, but from the observations which are the effects of such idea, the Faraday-Maxwell idea of electro-magnetic field is possible in science, and this possibility is against the perceptual experiences wanted by Hume in his naturalism for upholding skepticism .

Thus , by bringing the criticisms of Humean skepticism by many philosophers, Watkins shows that there is a lot of inconsistency in Hume's naturalistic strategy to deal with skepticism, and thereby, his criticism against Humean skepticism stands valid.

Conclusion

The understanding of science to have scientific truth to posit for Theory of Knowledge, so that , the search of knowledge becomes possible and meaningful, has created much of philosophical skepticism in its trail which has begun since time immemorial from the birth of philosophy as a natural philosophy, in particular. The rise of Hume and his naturalism while dealing with skepticism has awakened many philosophers to further question his own approach , and thereby , leading to the criticism of his naturalistic strategy, and this has led many philosophers to criticize Humean skepticism ,and such criticism has been discussed thoroughly by Watkins in his search for science and skepticism.

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