Experience & Understanding
In the middle of the eighteenth century, David Hume produced a disquisition on human understanding that has disconcerted philosophers and laymen alike ever since. And no wonder, for it cut at the root of the belief on which all our knowledge rests; namely, that in the light of past experience, it is possible to infer from present events what will happen in the future.

On the face of it Hume’s contention seems opposed to all common sense. And Hume was no more devoid of common sense than he was of intelligence. He confessed that he framed his own life on the assumption that the past is a guide to the future. Furthermore, he recognized that the whole of human knowledge rests on the belief that there is a causal relationship between events. All this he conceded with his customary urbanity. Yet, he was unable to fault his own logic, and as Bertrand Russell pointed out, subsequent philosophers have been no more successful.
We are thus left in a curious position. On the one hand, we see human achievements in the scientific sphere increasingly justifying our belief that, on the basis of previous experience, we can reason from cause to effect and vice versa. On the other, we have as yet failed to refute Hume’s contention that such a belief is logically untenable.

Is it not possible, however, that in seeking to refute Hume’s arguments we have been misdirecting our efforts? Might it not be that what was at fault was not his logic but the proposition from which he started?

II

The argument underlying Hume’s contention runs as follows: “For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past and similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities. If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change and the past be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any argument from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future, since all arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance.”

Given the proviso in the second sentence of the foregoing statement, the conclusion in the third is logically irreproachable. But, if we can suppose that the course of nature might change, we can equally
well suppose that it might not. In that case we should have to rewrite the second and omit the third sentences of Hume’s paragraph so that it reads as follows: “If there be no suspicion that the course of nature may change and the past may not continue to be the rule for the future, therefore, inferences and conclusions can properly be drawn from past experience as to the course of future events.”

Thus, according to whether we start from the proposition that the course of nature might change, or the proposition that it might not, logic will lead us inexorably to diametrically opposite conclusions. If we opt for the first of these propositions, we shall be driven, like Hume, to conclude that it is impossible to argue from past experience and that our belief in cause and effect is misplaced. If, on the other hand, we opt for the second, we shall be driven, equally firmly, to conclude that it is possible to reason in this way and that our belief in cause and effect is fully justified. Given the proposition from which the argument starts, both these conclusions are equally logical. It is impossible, therefore, to decide between them on this basis.

But does this rule out the possibility of deciding between them on other grounds? After all, if the course of nature were to change, that would be a fact. The question whether it has or has not done so is, consequently, one that falls to be decided on factual grounds. In order to take the measure of the proposition that it might change, therefore, should we not consider what would happen if it did?

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Clearly, the course of nature could not change unless the forces that had hitherto determined its course were themselves to do so. Consider, therefore, what would happen if one such force, gravity, were to stop.

If I toss a stone into the air, then, on the basis of previous experience, I expect it sooner or later to fall to the ground. If, however, the force of gravity were to fail, it would not. It would continue on into outer space. It would, in Hume's words, have lost its "sensible quality" of heaviness and, hence, its "power" of returning to earth.

This, however, gives a wholly inadequate picture of what would happen if gravity were to stop. The effects of its doing so would not be confined to any particular kind of object. Everything that has weight would be affected. For instance, this planet would no longer be able to retain its atmosphere. As a result, all living organisms that depend on having air to breathe would die, and there would be none left to experience anything. The fact that there are such creatures alive today means, therefore, that as long as they have existed, gravity has been operating. Furthermore, that as long as they continue to exist, it will not cease to do so.

But the force of gravity is not a thing apart. The same considerations apply to all other forces that govern the course of nature. If those that determine the course of chemical reactions, for instance, or the

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transformation of one form of energy into another, were to fail, all life on Earth would come to a halt. In short, the form and functioning of all living creatures have been dictated by the natural forces that exist and, should any of these cease to operate, all such creatures would, inevitably, die. Although, therefore, we cannot be sure that these forces will never fail, we can be certain that, if they do, nobody will be alive to witness the event. In consequence, the proposition that the course of nature might change, although logically irrefutable, is irrelevant to any inquiry into the development of human understanding.

The conclusion that follows from these considerations is clear. As long as human beings exist, they can count on the future resembling the past and, hence, can justifiably infer the course of future events from past experience.

Would it be wrong to say, therefore, that Hume set out to determine the limitations of human knowledge but what he actually succeeded in doing was to demonstrate the limitations of abstract thought, however logical, as an instrument for advancing this? In other words, the fault in his argument lay, not in his logic, but in his failure to take into account the full implications of the proposition to which he applied it.