SIX

Imagination &
Credibility
hat men can imagine things of which they have no experience is beyond doubt. But is the human mind completely free in this respect? Is the imagination entirely undisciplined, apart from the requirement that its fabrications shall not be self-contradictory? If so, is it not a delusion to believe that we can distinguish a concept that is merely a figment of the imagination from one that has a basis in reality? Even David Hume agreed that there is a difference between "the ravings of a madman" and "the sober efforts of genius and learning." But how did he know? Given the premises from which "madmen" start, their contentions are often entirely logical. Yet, if we cannot make this distinction on logical grounds, on what grounds can we do so?

To the early philosophers of science, like Francis Bacon, this question presented no difficulty. Believ-
ing, as they did, in the feasibility of inductive thinking, they took it for granted that, provided the observer had accumulated the requisite facts regarding his problem, his imagination would “automatically” be led to form a realistic hypothesis about it. That it was impossible to produce a logical justification for this belief did not worry them. They were content to rest their case on their observation that the hypotheses at which they thus arrived tended to work. To many modern philosophers, however, this failure to provide a logical basis for inductive argument constitutes an insuperable objection to accepting the traditional view. In consequence, they have been driven, faute de mieux, to regard hypotheses as the products of intuition, or inspiration, rather than of rational thought.

And yet, even the proponents of the modern view find themselves forced to concede that man is not entirely free to accept whatever conjecture his imagination throws up; that before submitting a hypothesis to the test of refutation by further observation, he has, in practice, some inkling of whether it is likely or not. As Medawar put it: “If it is a formal objection to classical inductivism that it sets no upper limit to the amount of factual information we should assemble, so also it is a defect of the hypothetico-deductive (i.e. the ‘conjecture-refutation’) scheme that it sets no upper limit to the number of hypotheses we might propound to account for our observations. . . . In real life, of course, just as the crudest inductive observations will always be lim-

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ited by some unspoken criterion of relevance, so also the hypotheses that enter our minds will be plausible and not, as in theory they could be, idiotic. But this implies the existence of some internal censorship which restricts hypotheses to those that are not absurd and the internal circuitry of this process is quite unknown.”

But is that so? That something exists which imposes restrictions on flights of imagination was tacitly conceded both by Hume and Popper. It is instructive, therefore, to see how they tried to deal with this problem.

II

“We can,” says Hume, “in our conception join the head of a man with the body of a horse, but it is not in our power to believe that such an animal has ever really existed. It follows, therefore, that the difference between fiction and belief lies in some sentiment or feeling which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be demanded at pleasure. . . . Whenever any object is presented to the memory or the senses, it immediately, by force of custom, carries the imagination to conceive that object which is usually conjoined to it; and this conception is attended by a feeling or sentiment different from the loose reveries of the fancy. In this consists the whole nature of belief. For as there is no matter of fact which we

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believe so firmly that we cannot conceive the contrary, there would be no difference between the conception assented to, and that which is rejected, were it not for some sentiment which distinguishes the one from the other."

So, despite his contention that "nothing is more free than the imagination of man," Hume conceded that it is only free within certain limits. These, he thought, were determined by the "force of custom," or "habit," as he also calls it. It was this, in his view, that led the imagination, whenever any object is presented to the memory or the senses, immediately to conceive of the object with which it is usually conjoined. "It is that principle alone," he writes, "which renders our experience useful to us and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past." Yet, how could we have got into the habit of expecting one particular object to be conjoined with another equally particular one, unless previous observation had revealed to us that it usually is? In that case, does it not follow that our inability to believe in the existence of an animal in which the head of a man is joined to the body of a horse is because such a beast is outside our experience?

Of course, Hume recognized that, in real life, past experience did impose restraint upon his imagination. Committed as he was to the belief that man could not count on the future resembling the past, however, he was theoretically unable to accept that

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compatibility with previous experience provides any test of the validity or otherwise of our imaginings.

A comparable difficulty faced Karl Popper.

Because of his belief that hypothesis always precedes observation he was driven to postulate the existence of an inborn sense that impels men to see regularities in natural phenomena. But, as we have seen, there is a far simpler explanation; namely, that such regularities actually exist and are revealed to them by observation. In that case, does it not follow that this tendency to order observational data in certain ways, and not in others, is not inborn but is acquired as the result of experience, their own and that of others?

There does seem, therefore, to be a general, albeit tacit, agreement that the imagination is not entirely undisciplined; that, over and above it, there is something that restricts its freedom of action. For Hume this is the force of custom or habit which, by channeling the imagination to envisage only objects that are usually conjoined with what is present to the memory or the senses, limits the number of credible concepts it can produce. For Popper it is an inborn propensity that inclines men to see regularities in natural phenomena and, hence, to expect any concept they form to reflect these. For Medawar, it is something akin to an internal censor that suppresses implausible conjectures.

Despite their differences, all these suggestions carry the same implication; namely that, somehow,
man has come to possess criteria which enable him to judge the likelihood, or otherwise, of any concept his imagination throws up. If this be so, it would go a long way toward explaining, not only the process of hypothesis formation but also that of induction. The question is, therefore, whether such criteria actually exist and, if so, what is their nature and origin?

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