HUME'S FORK RELATED TO SOME LOGICO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISTINCTIONS IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY

It has been rightly remarked [1] that the distinction between the necessary and the contingent truth is most basic to all recent philosophy. Equally prominent and important distinctions are those between the analytic/synthetic and *a priori* and empirical truths. Historically, of the three, the first is associated to Leibniz and the remaining two to Kant. There are some philosphers however, in the modern classical period, along with Leibniz and Kant, viz. Locke, Hume and Mill, whose logico–epistemological ideas were almost similar to the ideas mentioned above: for example, Locke's distinction between the ' trifling ' and the ' informative ' propositions. Hume's *fork*, i.e. the distinction between the relations of ideas and matters of fact and Mill's ' real ' and ' verbal ' propositions. While a study of these ideas reflects upon the logical insights of these philosophers, the same is rarely acknowledged. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse and to relate Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and the matters of fact to some of the familiar distinctions mentioned above made by Leibniz and Kant.

I

Section IV of Hume's *Inquiry* begins with a distinction between what he calls ' relations of ideas ' and ' matters of fact. ' Hume presents the distinction as follows : " All objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas' and 'Matters of Fact.' Of the first kind are

the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic, and, in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain, *That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides* is a proposition which expresses the relation between these figures *That three times five is equal to half of thirty* expresses the relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on anywhere existent in the universe. Though there can never be a circle, or a triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would forever retain their certainty and evidence

" Matters of Fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner, nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of a fact is still possible, because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness as if ever so conformable to reality–That the Sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstrably false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind." [2]

These passages indicate that Hume works with a dichotomy and that the division between propositions is logico-epistemological in character. A study of the above passages shows the following main features of the two kinds of the propositions in question. (1) Statements about relations of ideas are known either through intuition or through demonstration ; whereas those about matters of fact are only probable and may be said to be known through sense experience. In the *Inquiry* Hume does not make clear what he means by intuition or demonstration,

presuming that the words are familiar to the reader. It is not necessary to deal with this question here.

(2) Statements expressing relations of ideas are known by thought alone and are independent of any matter of fact or existence. A statement about a matter of fact is known only through experience. Probably what Hume means is that both the knowledge and the truth of statements about relations of ideas are independent of fact and existence. Hume gives here examples from Geometry and Arithmetic and says that they would be true even if there were nothing in the world corresponding to the words in the statements. Statements of matters of fact, however, are dependent on experience for their being known and also for their truth.

(3) An important characteristic of statements about relations of ideas is that they cannot be denied without self contradiction. The denial of a statement about a matter of fact is not contradictory and is, in that sense, possible.

(4) Finally the contrary (i.e., the denial) of the former kind of statements is not conceivable. Hume says rhat if these statements were demonstrably false, they would involve a contradiction and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind. The denial of the latter kind of statement is possible, and is also, therefore conceivable. Some critics of Hume have observed, in view of the conceivability and inconceivability of the negations of the two kinds of the propositions in question, that Hume is using a psychological criterion of necessary truth.

The distinction between the relations of ideas and the matters of fact drawn in the *Inquiry* is not entirely new. In the *Treatise* we find substantially the same distinction drawn, though in different terms, when Hume deals, with knowledge and probability. In part III, sec. 1, of the *Treatise, of Knowledge and Probabi-*

lity Hume gives a list of what he calls seven philosophical relations viz. resemblance, identity, relations of time and place, proportion in quantity and number, degrees in any quality, contrariety, and causation. These relations are divided by him into 'constant' and 'inconstant' (i. e., invariable and variable relations). The first kind of relations is such that it 'depends entirely on ideas which we compare' and the second kind of relations is such that it 'may be changed without any change in the ideas.' Of these seven relations, 'only four, which depending solely upon ideas, can be the objects of knowledge and certainty. These four relations are resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number. The relations of *contiguity* and distance between things, however, can be changed by alteration of their place, without making any change in the objects themselves or their ideas.

In a later book of the *Treatise* the dichotomy of the *Inquiry* appears in almost the same words. In Book III, Hume says, 'Reason is the discovery of truth and falsehood. Truth and falsehood consists in agreement or disagreement either to the *real,* relations of ideas or to *real* existence and matters of fact.' In another passage in the same book he says, '...the operations of human understanding divide themselves into two kinds, the comparing of ideas, and of inferring of matters of fact,...'

As a matter of fact, this dichotomy is the simplification of a trichotomy mentioned first by Hume in his *Treatise,* though it is also found substantially in the same from in the *Inquiry.* In the *Treatise* Hume says that some people divide all objects of human reason into knowledge and probability, and in the class probability are included all the arguments from experience which depend upon the relation of cause and effect. There are many arguments, however, which though depend upon the causal relation, yet seem to be certain. It is ridiculous, for example, to think that

the statement, 'The Sun will rise tomorrow' is only probable. In order to make room for such propositions, Hume says that propositions have several degress of evidence. And accordingly he proposes a division of propositions into three : those which constitute knowledge, those which constitute proofs, and those which constitute probabilities only. By knowledge, Hume means 'the assurance arising from the comparison of ideas.' By 'Proofs' he means 'those arguments which are derived from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty.' And finally by probability, he means that the 'evidence which is still attended with uncertainty.'[7] But when the trichotomy is reduced to dichotomy, knowledge is placed on the one side, proofs and probabilities on the other.

II.

How is Hume's dichotomy related to some other famous distinctions in logic and epistemology ?

I. Let us begin with the distinction between 'truths of reason' and 'truths of fact' drawn by Leibniz. Leibniz called the former necessary and the latter contingent truths. Though Hume nowhere mentions Leibniz' distinction, and though he never uses word contingent in this connection, we can say that Hume's dichotomy coincides exactly with Leibniz' distinction; for the characteristics of both the kinds of propositions appear to be one and the same. According to Hume, statements about the relations of ideas are absolutely independent of what exists in the world. And Leibniz seems to say the same when he says that the trughts of reason are absolutely independent of anything existing in the world and that these thoughts are true in all possible worlds. He says, ' As for the eternal truths it is to be observed that at bottom they are all hypothetical, and say in fact : such a thing being posited, such another thing is '. Both Hume and Leibniz agree that some of the statements can be

known immediately and that others can be proved by demonstra-
tion. In regard to those statements that are not 'express
identities,' Leibniz uses a device called 'analysis' in which the
definiens is substituted for the *definiendum* in order to reduce a
given statement to an overt identity so that the necessary chara-
cter of a proposition is revealed instantly. There is one more and
crucial similarity, and it is that both Hume's statements about
matters of fact and Leibniz' truths of fact can be denied without
contradiction. In this connection Hume says, 'Whatever is, *May*
not be,' No negation of a fact can involve a contradiction'
'...The non-existence of any being without exception, is as clear
and distinct as its existence ' These passages clearly indicate that
Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of
fact coincides with Leibniz' distinction between truths of reason
and truths of fact.

II.   What about the relation of Hume's dichotomy with the
Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements ?
Though the Kantian distinction was similar to Locke (as the
one between trifling and 'informative' propositions), it had not
attained the status of a major philosophical distinction till Kant
drew it in his *Critique of Pure Reason* This distinction has attai-
ned even a higher status in recent times since the logical positi-
vists adopted the view that all necessity is analytic. There have
been several attempts since then, to see in Hume's division an
anticipation of the positivist doctrine. A proposition which is
either intuitively or demonstratively certain or a proposition
whose denial is contradictory may assume several forms; e g.,
subject-predicate form, conditional form etc.. Hume's criterion of
statements of relations of ideas does not specify any particular
form of propositions. Attempts have been made, however, to
show that Hume's division between propositions would corres.
pond to Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic judge-

ments. Thus Zabeeh [9] says that if we name the invariable and the variable relations, distinguished by Hume as (A) and (B) relations, then a statement of complex ideas could be called analytic if the terms which express these ideas are joined by an invariable relation; and further if the ideas remain unchanged, i.e. if the ideas are connected by (A) relations. Similarly a statement would be synthetic if the terms expressed by the ideas are connected by means of a variable i.e , separable relation, i.e., a (B) relation. According to Bennett if ideas are meanings, then Hume could be distinguishing between analytic and synthetic judgements as follows : (1) The statement that every brother is a male expresses the relation between the ideas of brotherhood and maleness, and this must hold as long as the ideas remain the same. (2) The statement that every brother is intelligent could be true now but later false, though neither the word 'brother' nor the word 'intelligent' have changed their meanings. Thus the truth of (3) does not depend entirely upon the nature of these two ideas. It would, appear, therefore, that Hume's dichotomy coincides with Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements. However, though Hume's view that the denial of a statement about relations of ideas is self–contradictory agrees with the characteristic of an analytic proposition, and similarly that a statement about a matter of fact can be denied without self-contradiction agrees with the characteristic of a synthetic propasition, it cannot be said that Hume's division coincides with the analytic/synthetic division between propositions. Passages can be cited which go counter [10] to the suggestion. Hume held that the statements of mathematics are all statements about relations of ideas, and hence that their denial is contra-dictory. But then it seems improbable that Hume would have disagreed with Kant's view that all mathematical statements are synthetic. Consider, for example, the following passage; Hume

says, ... " Mathematicians pretend that they give an exact defini-
tion of a straight line which they say, *It is the shortest distance
between two points*. But .. this is more properly the discovery
of one of the properties of a right line than a just definition of
it. For I ask any one upon a mention of a right line he thinks
not immediately on such a particular appearance and if it is not
by an accident only that he considers this property ? A right
line can be comprehended alone; but this definition is unintelli-
gible without a comparison with other lines, which we conceive
to be more extended. In common life it is established as a
maxim that the straightest way is always the shortest; which
would be as absurd to say the shortest way is the shortest, if our
idea of a right line was not different, from that of the shortest
distance between the two points ".[11] Compare this passage with
the following passage of Kant; ' That the *straight* line between
two points is the *shortest* is the synthetic proposition. For my
concept of straight contains nothing of quality, but only of
quantity. The concept of *the shortest* is wholly an addition, and
cannot be derived through any process of analysis from the
concept of the *straight line !*[12] There is thus a close similarity
between Kant's views on the issue of the syntheticity of mathe-
matical propositions. The only difference is that Hume does not
use the word 'synthetic'. If he were to know Kant's distinction,
he would have classified the statement of straight lines as synthetic
rather than analytic. But then it is difficult to say how he would
have reconciled this view with his former view that the state-
ments of mathematics are about relations of ideas, and their
denial results in a contradiction.

III. Finally let us compare Hume's dichotomy with ttha
between a *priori* and empirical statements. Speaking about the
statements about relations of ideas, Hume says that their truth
is independent of any fact or existence in the world, and that it

is known by the mere operation of thought. This may suggest that these statements can be called a *priori*. The expression a *priori* does occur in Hume's writings, but it had not acquired then the status of the name of a particular kind of propositions. Invariably whenever the phrase is used by Hume, it is found used as a non–technical term (as an adverb) which means 'without appeal to', or 'independently of experience'. His use of the expression, 'a *priori*' can be easily seen from the following examples, (i) 'If we reason *a priori*, anything may appear to produce anything.

(ii) ... 'every effect is a distinct event from its cause. It could not, however, be discovered in the cause, and the first invention or coception of it, *a priori*, must be entirely arbitrary '.

Nevertheless, Hume's characterization of relations of ideas that they can be known 'by the mere operation of thought' would suggest that this distinction coincides with that between *a priori* and empirical propositions. But it cannot be said that it would coincide with Kant's distinction. In Kant's system a proposition may be a *priori* and yet admit of a denial without any contradiction. This is what is meant by Kant's remark that some propositions are synthetic and yet a *priori*. One cannot, therefore, say that Hume's distinction would coincide with the Kantian distinction between *a priori* and empirical propositions*

Department of Philosophy   **B. Y. DESHPANDE**
Institute of Arts and Social Sciences,
NAGPUR.

NOTES

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1. Pap A., *SEMANTICS AND NECESSARY TRUTH* : Preface, Yale (1958).

2. *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Ed. Selby-Bigge) BK. I Sec-I, Part I. pp. 25-26.

3. *Treatise*, p. 69.

4. *Ibid*, p. 70.

5. *Ibid*, Bk. III Part I. p, 458.

6. *Ibid*, p. 463, 413.

7. *Ibid*, p. 124, *Inquiry* p. 56, *Foot notes*.

8. G. V. p. 428, *New Essays* : p. 515.

9. *Hume : Precursor of Modern Empiricism*, Martinus Nijhoff, II Edn., (1973), pp. 73-74.

10. *Locke, Berkeley, Hume : Central Themes*, Oxford, (1971) p. 231.

11. *Treatise* : Bk. I, Sec. ii, pp. 49-60.

12. *Critique of Pure Reason : B. Introduction*, pp. 53-54.

Department of Philosophy
Institute of Arts and Social Sciences
NAGPUR