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Epistemic Leaks and Epistemic Meltdowns: A Response to William Morris on Scepticism with Regard to Reason¹

Mikael M. Karlsson

I.

In an excellent paper which appeared in the April, 1989 issue of this journal,² William Morris attempts to demonstrate that the arguments which make up Hume's notorious chapter, "Of scepticism with regard to reason,"³ are, in the first place, *coherent*—both internally and with the overall strategy of the *Treatise*—and, in the second place, *successful*.⁴

Morris' paper is an exercise in the noble art of what I style *constructive exegesis*, an enterprise to which many readers of *Hume Studies*, and myself as much as any, are committed. It is a guiding principle of this art that we do not *understand* a philosophical text until we can interpret it in such a way as to render it both *coherent* and *correct*.⁵ From this point of view, coherence and correctness are not as independent of one another as they may seem to be to others who are differently committed.

Some texts, such as Hume's chapter, "Of scepticism with regard to reason," are notoriously resistant to constructive exegesis, despite the formidable bag of tricks which scholars and interpreters have developed; so resistant, that in gloomier moments we may be brought to wonder about our interpretative enterprise itself. Constructive exegesis is indeed a strange, and peculiarly optimistic, enterprise. Someday, I imagine, in a leisurely moment, I will think more reflectively about the principles of our art. But not now.⁶

As a fellow practitioner of constructive exegesis, I am in full sympathy with what Morris tries to do in his paper; and I think that he does contribute substantially to our understanding of what Hume is up to in the chapter, "Of scepticism with regard to reason." The third section of Morris' paper⁷ is, in my judgement, particularly successful in showing how Hume's chapter fits into the larger framework of the *Treatise*: Hume is, we see, attacking *both* what Morris labels "intellectualist rationalism" and its counterpart, which we may call 'unmitigated scepticism', although the chapter's two main arguments go primarily to the *former*. I also think that Morris gives very helpful,

and to my mind accurate, accounts of these two arguments, which I dub, respectively, the *epistemic leak argument*,⁸ and the *epistemic meltdown argument*.⁹ However, I have personally never found either of these arguments remotely convincing; and I still do not, despite Morris' clarification and defense. In what follows, I shall indicate some of the reasons for my dissatisfaction.

II.

The epistemic leak argument purports to "prove" (in Hume's sense) that *reason* or *demonstration* cannot support knowledge.

Morris rightly reminds us that what Hume means by *knowledge* is *perfect assurance* or *conviction*: Knowledge is, in short, subjective certainty. This has caused confusion, for this is not what we usually mean nowadays by knowledge; nor was it what people, philosophers included, generally meant prior to Descartes. In Hume it is the product of the attempt to resolve all epistemic states into mental events or what he calls "perceptions." In any case, we must—as Morris rightly explains—be clear that the epistemic leak argument is aimed at showing that demonstration cannot support *perfect conviction*.

In outline, the argument is simple: It works, as Morris makes clear, by shifting attention away from the *subject-matter* or "objects" of demonstration, that is, relations of ideas, to the *exercise* of demonstrative reason by human agents. The necessity of relations of ideas may suggest to us that we can be certain about them. Against this, one may point out that people do err in the conclusions arrived at by demonstration; this presumably shows that our (rational) understanding is fallible. And once we recognize this, our confidence in any conclusion produced by exercising this faculty is lessened—thus do we move from *knowledge*, or subjective certainty, to *probability*: belief, or imperfect conviction.

Arguments of this general type (we can call them, using Descartes' famous figure, 'rotten-apple arguments'¹⁰) were around long before Hume, although they were more commonly directed against the senses than against reason. We find them in antiquity—in Plato and Sextus Empiricus, for instance¹¹—and in Descartes, in parallel passages in the *Discourse on Method*, the *First Meditation* and the *Principles of Philosophy*, wherein one can discern a version directed precisely against reason and demonstration.¹² To find out what, if anything, Hume has to add, we must turn to the detailed argument in Hume's chapter.

As Morris explains, Hume's detailed argument is built around examples which are supposed to be paradigms of demonstration or reason—to wit, *arithmetic calculations*, and more specifically, *doing sums*. Morris accepts this device without demur. But I protest,

parenthetically, that the notion that doing sums provides us with a good example of demonstrative reasoning is a piece of 17th-century claptrap, with roots in ancient Greece. I don't think it's an example of demonstrative reasoning at all, even of the kind supposedly engaged in by mathematicians.¹³ Worse yet, I don't think that it's even representative of the category of things which Hume himself classifies as demonstrations. What we have here is, in my view, a misunderstanding which Hume takes up without criticism, and which philosophers have regularly parroted without reflection, right up to this very day. If I am correct in this—and I do not argue for it here—then even if the epistemic leak argument were valid as such, it would not show much about demonstration.

But no matter. Let us proceed on Hume's terms. "[A]s none will maintain," Hume says:

that our assurance in a long numeration exceeds probability, I may safely affirm, that there scarce is any proposition concerning numbers, of which we can have a fuller security. (T 181)

This is really the ground of the detailed argument, and it is not particularly objectionable. Let us grant that our confidence in the result of a lengthy addition problem is rarely, if ever, full. From this, Hume argues that:

[T]is easily possible, by gradually diminishing the numbers, to reduce the longest series of addition to the most simple question, which can be form'd, to an addition of two single numbers; ... [but] if any single addition were certain, every one wou'd be so, and consequently the whole or total sum; unless the whole can be different from all its parts. (T 181)

This text is not quoted in full by Morris; but he paraphrases, explains, and clearly approves of the argument which it contains.¹⁴ In a moment, I shall present my reasons for thinking that this argument is actually a *non sequitur*. But before I do, let me note that we here discover an important wrinkle in Hume's version of the rotten-apple argument. For what Hume is doing is arguing against the kind of limitation which most philosophers have placed upon such arguments.

The typical lesson drawn from rotten-apple arguments by philosophers prior to Hume was not that we can never be fully confident of any judgement arrived at by our somewhat-fallible faculties, but rather that our faculties are fully dependable *if* exercised within certain limits—the trick was to circumscribe the domain within which our

cognitive faculties yield knowledge and trust them less outside of that domain.¹⁵ According to this view, the ‘product-advice’ directed to what Morris calls *rationally reflective epistemic agents* might be: “cognitive faculties—safe when used as directed.”

In the case of demonstration, one widely-regarded idea among “intellectualist rationalists” from Aristotle (and Euclid) onward was that demonstration could be divided into *simple* or *immediate* rational intuitions, on the one hand, and *demonstrations* involving inferential steps, on the other. Arguably, the exercise of reason never fails in the former case, though it may go wrong in the latter.

Now, Hume is *answering* this—it is precisely in order to do so that the argument just quoted appears; for if the rationalist is permitted to divide and conquer in the manner indicated, the general sceptical conclusion for which Hume is arguing will, of course, not go through.

This gives the lie to Fogelin’s claim, quoted by Morris, that Hume:

ignores the possibility that our grasp of a simple proposition concerning numbers may not involve calculations at all ... [so] the fallibility that infects our calculations need not touch our intuitive understanding.¹⁶

Hume doesn’t *ignore* this possibility: on the contrary, he *argues against it!* On the other hand, to gladden Fogelin, we can point out that Hume’s argument is no good. For it isn’t true that *doing* a long sum—a long summing-up—amounts merely to doing the various “additions of two simple numbers” which constitute steps in the addition. One must also keep track of where one is in the addition. One might foul up this book-keeping task, which depends upon memory, even if all the simple additions were impeccable. Thus, long summings-up might frequently be in error, even if simple additions never were. Consequently, Hume’s unrestricted rotten-apple argument fails. Of course, it’s still an open question whether simple additions do fail or not. I suggest that some (like adding 8 and 7, or 9 and 4) may do, but that others (like adding 1 and 1, or 2 and 2) don’t. Hume himself invites us to:

comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv’d us, compar’d with those, wherein its testimony was just and true. (T 180)

As a matter of fact and experience, I suggest, it *may* well be possible to describe a range of cases where adding numbers, at least, never fails.

Before leaving the epistemic leak argument, I must take up a claim made by Morris, in support of Hume, which Hume does not make himself. Morris says:

Even if there are some isolated circumstances in which I can be sure that I can infallibly intuit a 'simple addition', this won't help me in explaining my confidence in the results of 'the demonstrative sciences'. I can't generalize from those special circumstances to all the mathematical and scientific demonstrations I now accept. Isolated intuitions will not provide an interesting or important category of things I know.¹⁷

The word "isolated," as Morris employs it in this passage, is tendentious. A *circumscribed, limited* class of intuitions may well provide an interesting and important category of things I know: the axioms of Euclidian geometry, for instance, or the principle of non-contradiction. (Here we see, perhaps, the baneful influence upon Morris of thinking of sums as paradigms of demonstration or rational intuition.) But part of Morris' point is right. Many of the things we *suppose* we know are things which we don't actually know, at least upon one understanding of knowledge; and indeed Hume's argument—like rotten-apple arguments generally—helps us to see this. Hume is perhaps to be thanked for eroding our confidence in *certain* things. However, that was not the intent of his argument: It was supposed to show that "*all* knowledge [read *perfect conviction*] degenerates into probability [read *less-than-perfect conviction*]" (T 180, italics added)—and in this, as far I can see, it fails.

III.

Let us now turn to the epistemic meltdown argument, which is supposed to show, as Morris explains, that for the so-called "rationally-reflective epistemic agent," all probabilities—judgements made upon that mode of reasoning which yields less-than-perfect confidence, even in the first instance—reduce to nothing.

Even "the man of the best sense and the longest experience, ..." says Hume:

must be conscious of many errors in the past, and must still dread the like for the future. ...

Having thus found in every probability, beside the original uncertainty inherent in the subject, a new uncertainty deriv'd from the weakness of that faculty, which judges, ... we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties. ... When I reflect on the natural fallibility of my judgment, I have less confidence in my opinions, than when I only consider the objects concerning

which I reason; and when I proceed still farther, to turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation I make of my faculties, all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence. (T 182-183)

In short, the epistemic meltdown argument works by iterating subjective uncertainty. Employing his faculty of probable, or causal, reasoning, the agent arrives at a judgement, call it X, in which he places a given—perhaps even a very high—degree of confidence. But, as in the epistemic leak argument, he is invited to reflect, in “historical” terms, upon the judgements he has previously formed through probable reasoning. Was the degree of (less-than-perfect) confidence placed in those judgements always warranted? Or hasn’t it sometimes, perhaps often, happened that the given degree of confidence was misplaced?

If we grant that this *has* happened—and let us do so—then, Hume claims, the agent’s confidence in X is eroded. But now, says Hume, the reflexive judgement about the past reliability of probabilities is itself a child of probable reasoning; so the rational agent must re-apply the argument to *it*, thereby reducing his confidence in it and reducing, consequently, still further his confidence in X. This sets up, says Morris, “a vicious infinite regress of assessments of assessments.”¹⁸ Morris clearly approves of Hume’s argument and defends it in his paper against criticisms by Fogelin.¹⁹

I, however, agree with Fogelin that the argument is a morass. Of the many things that might be said about it, I will here content myself with only one, and not the deepest one by any means. It seems to me that *even if we buy into Hume’s trick of iteration*—a move that might well be resisted—we do not get the epistemic meltdown claimed by Hume and Morris. For there is no reason to think that this iteration must always result in the *erosion*, rather than the *strengthening*, of confidence.

It is a characteristic of probable or causal reasoning that it can be *trained*. This is a point emphasized by Hume himself in the text:

’Tis certain a man of solid sense and long experience ought to have, and usually has, a greater assurance in his opinions, than one that is foolish and ignorant, and that our sentiments have different degrees of authority, even with ourselves, in proportion to the degrees of our reason and experience. (T 182)

Suppose, then, that I, as a man of solid sense and long experience, arrive by probable reasoning at a judgement in which I place a certain degree of confidence. Now you ask me whether I don’t sometimes place the wrong degree of confidence in probabilities, and I confess that I do.

This granted, you ask me whether that doesn't reduce my confidence in the present judgement. My response is, *no*: "My dear sir," say I, "I rarely err, and when I do, it's as often in placing too little confidence in my judgement as in placing too much. This being so, your observation does not lead me in any wise to reduce the confidence I place in my judgement, even if it increases my doubt that I have placed just the right amount of confidence in it."

If this response be just, as I think it is, then it is Hume's iteration argument that comes to nothing, rather than our beliefs. The argument can only work if we assume that the errors which we make in placing a given degree of confidence in our probable judgements are more often than not on the side of over-confidence—but this assumption, for one with a well-trained faculty of probable reasoning, is entirely unwarranted.

IV.

My conclusion is that I still see no way, despite Morris' admirable and helpful paper, to understand Hume's arguments in the chapter, "Of scepticism with regard to reason," as successful. As I share with Morris a commitment to constructive exegesis, I am saddened by this, for to me it means that I am about as far as ever from understanding Hume on these points. Could Hume really have argued so badly? Could he have overlooked such obvious errors and contradicted himself so glaringly? I doubt it. And since Morris has shown us how intimately the chapter on scepticism with regard to reason is related to fundamental lines of thought in the *Treatise*,²⁰ the matter is all the more pressing. I therefore hope that in future work Morris, or some other fellow adherent of constructive exegesis, can set me on the right path.

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1. I would like to thank Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson of the University of Iceland and Daniel M. Farrell of the Ohio State University for carefully reading my text and making helpful suggestions, John Biro of the University of Florida for some brief but useful comments, Mary Connor of the University of Pittsburgh for typing my manuscript, the organizers of the 15th Hume Society Congress for inviting me to comment on Morris' paper (see n. 2), and the waitress in the beer garden at Damühle in Marburg for her moral support.
2. William Edward Morris, "Hume's Scepticism About Reason," *Hume Studies* 15.1 (April 1989): 39-60, hereafter styled 'Morris'.

Morris' paper was presented as the keynote plenary address at the 15th Hume Society Congress, held in Marburg, West Germany, on August 15-18, 1988, and subsequently published, virtually without changes, in *Hume Studies*. I was given the honor of commenting on Morris' paper at the Marburg congress, and the present piece is the text of my commentary, with some light editorial changes and relevant notes. In a footnote to the published version of his paper, Morris very kindly records his regrets that "this paper, in its present form, cannot incorporate the interesting and helpful remarks of my commentator, Mikael Karlsson." For that omission, readers of *Hume Studies* should know, I have only myself to blame, for Morris never received my comments in writing; thus, it is especially generous of him to mention me in his footnote.

3. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 180-87. This edition of the *Treatise* is used throughout for purposes of reference and quotation. Further references ("T") are given in parentheses within the text and notes, following the general practice of this journal.
4. See Morris, 39.
5. For this purpose, of course, the 'correctness' of a text is, in general, not to be measured against the standard of the knowledge available to us but against that of the knowledge available to the author.
6. When I wrote this, I had not read the introduction to Michael Frede's *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis, 1987), ix-xxvii, which provides some valuable insights into that which I here call "constructive exegesis." I am grateful to Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson for calling my attention to Frede's piece, which I commend to the interested reader.
7. Section 3 of Morris' paper is entitled, "Is this Hume's Scepticism?"; Morris, 53-58. I am very much in agreement with Morris' conclusions about the nature of Hume's own scepticism, and my remarks should not be read as assuming or implying that Hume's chapter is meant to establish a strong form of scepticism. However, as Morris obviously realizes (although perhaps some others do not), unless the pivotal arguments of the chapter—those that I call herein the "leak" and "meltdown" arguments—work, Hume has not established his case against what Morris styles "intellectualist rationalism."
8. This argument (T 180-81) is discussed in section 1 of Morris' paper, "From Knowledge to Probability"; Morris, 40-46.
9. This argument (T 181-83) is discussed in section 2 of Morris' paper, "From Probability to Nothing"; Morris, 46-53.

10. See the *Seventh Set of Objections to Descartes' Meditations*, in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres de Descartes* (hereafter "AT"), 12 vols. (Paris, 1897-1913), 7:481, 512. For English translations of these passages, see: John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, eds. and trans., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (hereafter "CSM"), 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1984-85), 2:324, 349. One account of Descartes' rotten-apple strategy is given in my article "Doubt, Reason and Cartesian Therapy," which appeared in Michael Hooker, ed., *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays* (Baltimore and London, 1978), 89-113; see esp. 107-12.
11. Plato's *Theaetetus* is a rich source; at 157e-158d Plato presents versions based upon madness and dreaming, which are obvious forerunners of Descartes' well-known examples from the *First Meditation*. Rotten-apple arguments appear widely in the works of Sextus Empiricus; see esp. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I.
12. See and compare *Discourse*, AT 6:32/CSM 1:127; *First Meditation*, AT 7:18-21/CSM 2:12-14; and *Principles*, 1.4-5, AT 8:5-6/CSM 1:193-94. See also 107-10 of my article, "Doubt, Reason and Cartesian Therapy" (above, n. 10).
13. What I think it does exemplify—without pursuing the matter very far here—is the application of an algorithmic procedure, learned by rote. Rationalists have often tended to think of addition as rational intuition applied analytically to 'number concepts'; thus Descartes:

[I]ntuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason. ... [E]veryone can mentally intuit that he exists, that he is thinking, that a triangle is bounded by just three lines, and a sphere by a single surface, and the like. ... The self-evidence and certainty of intuition is required not only for apprehending single propositions, but also for any train of reasoning whatever. Take for example, the inference that 2 plus 2 equals 3 plus 1: not only must we intuitively perceive that 2 plus 2 make 4, and that 3 plus 1 make 4, but also that the original proposition follows necessarily from the other two. (*Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, AT 10:368-69/CSM 1:14-15. See also *First Meditation*, AT 7:20-21/CSM 2:14.)

It may be that people do sometimes engage in this sort of arithmetic intuition, but that is not what is going on in daily life when we do sums, even the simplest ones. And it is clearly the

mundane examples that form the basis of Hume's argument, for he speaks of merchants doing their "accompts" (T 181), just as Morris speaks of balancing one's checkbook (Morris, 44-45).

14. Morris, 43-45.
15. See any number of recent works on Descartes, including my "Doubt, Reason and Cartesian Therapy" (above, n. 10).
16. Morris, 43. The reference is to Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1985), 15.
17. Morris, 45.
18. Morris, 48.
19. See Morris, 49-53.
20. See Morris, 53-58.