

**THE RELATIONS OF
INFERENCE TO FACT IN
MILL'S LOGIC, PP. 7-49**

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CHAPTER I

SUBJECTIVE FACTS AS DATA

The problems of logic are coming to form the center of interest in philosophical discussion. Most present controversies in the field of philosophy turn upon some difference which is fundamentally logical. There is need, therefore, to re-examine and clarify the underlying conceptions of logic. Any one of the great historical systems of logic offers a species of laboratory example of the shaping of logical concepts under some specific point of view, and the difficulties which it leaves unresolved offer valuable experimental material for further logical construction. It is with such a purpose that this paper undertakes an analysis of the relation of inference to fact in Mill's logical system.

In constructing a theory of inference Mill's problem was to reconcile the associationism of the English empirical school with the procedure of modern physical science. He occupies alternately the subjective point of view of the one position and the objective point of view of the other. This oscillation of position comes out strikingly in the varied status which he gives to facts, which are at one time the ultimate constituents of consciousness and at another time the things and events of an independent world. When stating the relation of inference to its data and thus assigning it a locus, he takes the subjective point of view. When analyzing the nature of inference and basing its validity, he takes the objective point of view. It will be well, then, at the outset, to examine his conception of both subjective and objective facts, and the transition which he seeks to effect from the one to the other. Over against both of these, facts in the mind and facts in nature, Mill naively utilizes a system of meanings which he never thinks of as sundered from the facts, yet which are assumed as logically independent in his inferential process. An examination of the system of meanings we shall postpone till after we have examined his assumption of facts, and will consider the latter apart from their meaning so far as that can be done without distortion.

The locus of inference in relation to fact, as assigned by Mill, rests on the distinction between immediate and mediate knowledge. The first is self-evident, the second reasoned. We obtain the first by intuition, the second by inference. "Truths are known to us in two ways: some are known directly, and of themselves; some through the medium

of other truths. The former are the subject of Intuition; . . . the latter, of Inference."¹ They are "truths known to us by immediate consciousness" and "conclusions which can be drawn from these."² Of these two classes of truths, the first does not require proof; such a truth carries its own evidence—"that is, is without evidence in the proper sense of the word."³ It must therefore be "known beyond possibility of question."⁴ One cannot but be certain of it. But only a small part of our knowledge has intuitive character.⁵ By far the larger portion hangs suspended from these immediate truths by a series of proofs.

This apportionment of knowledge appears on the face of it very clear and definite. At any rate it seems to offer a hopeful program: to begin with perfectly certain data and to let each step from those data be one of strict proof. Upon examination, however, the simplicity of the matter disappears. Like the gratuitous advice to "be sure you are right, then go ahead," this program does not tell us how to know when we *are* right. This conception of primitive and unquestionable data, indeed, is thoroughly ambiguous. While he does not uncover its source, Mill has to acknowledge this ambiguity in two respects:

First, Mill admits that there is difference of opinion as to the kind of data from which we start. He sets in sharp contrast two theories on this point: the "ontological" theory of the Scotch school, and the empirical theory of his own English predecessors, which he defends.⁶ The former holds that, in addition to the data admitted by the latter school, the mind is so constituted as to know intuitively the existence and laws of operation of certain objects external to the mind, while the latter recognizes "no ultimate premises but the facts of our subjective consciousness; our sensations, emotions, intellectual states of mind, and volitions." Mill considers all thinkers to be agreed that there are *some* such primitive data, but to disagree as to whether or not such data are exclusively subjective. But surely the very possibility of dispute as to the character of what are to be considered primitive data is a very serious obstacle to the theory that there are any data at all to be taken as unambiguously primitive.

There is a second ambiguity of more serious character, not so explicitly recognized, though virtually acknowledged by Mill. While it

¹ Mill, *Logic*, 8th ed., Harper, 190. References to the *Logic* are hereafter by page numbers, without repeating the title. To make references to the *Logic* more definite, letters are added to designate in order each paragraph or part of paragraph on a page.

² 190-200; Mill, *Examination of Hamilton*, 137.

³ 218.

⁴ 200.

⁵ 216.

⁶ 520b.