

# “A SMALL TINCTURE OF PYRRHONISM”: SKEPTICISM AND NATURALISM IN HUME’S SCIENCE OF MAN

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If any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness or obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride, by showing them, that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature. (David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* 12.24<sup>1</sup>)

The relation between “Hume’s naturalism” and “Hume’s skepticism” constitutes one of the most fundamental and controversial issues in the interpretation of his entire philosophy. Some hold that Hume is ultimately a naturalist at the expense of his skepticism, while others hold that he is ultimately a skeptic at the expense of his naturalism. Many hold that he is inconsistently both a naturalist and a skeptic, while still others maintain that skepticism and naturalism are somehow compatible elements in a coherent Humean philosophy.

Commentators on Hume’s philosophy do not always specify what they mean by “naturalism,” and Hume does not use the term himself;<sup>2</sup> but we may fairly define it for our limited purposes as *the program of providing causal explanations for mental and other phenomena*. As such, it provides the programmatic underpinning for his proposed “science of man.” Hume *does* use the term ‘scepticism’, and he applies it to his own philosophy as well as to

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<sup>1</sup>Hume 2000b, henceforth abbreviated in references by ‘EHU’ indicate the section number and the paragraph number. References in the text to “the *Enquiry*” are always to *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* rather than to *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*.

<sup>2</sup> Nor, despite the impression one could easily get from the secondary literature, does he ever use the term ‘natural belief’. Indeed, Hume says of the term ‘natural’ that “there is none more ambiguous and equivocal” (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 3.1.2.7, Hume 2000a; this work will henceforth be abbreviated in references by ‘THN’, followed by the book number, part number, section number, and paragraph number). It was Norman Kemp Smith (1905, 1941) who popularized the application of the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘natural belief’ to Hume’s philosophy.

the philosophies of others.<sup>3</sup> Yet surprisingly few commentators have tried to state with precision what Hume means by this term or in what his own skepticism consists. This unsettled state of affairs is especially ironic because Hume begins his own discussion of skepticism in Section 12 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* by posing the very questions that concern us: “What is meant by a sceptic? And how far is it possible to push these philosophical principles of doubt and uncertainty?”

Among the happy exceptions to the general obscurity that I have described, none is more bracing or more salutary than that provided by the writings of Robert Fogelin, who has discussed no fewer than six different cross-classifying distinctions between or among kinds of skepticism,<sup>4</sup> indicating how he thinks Hume stands with respect to each of them. I propose to employ the tools provided by Fogelin’s rich set of distinctions to develop and defend my own account of Hume’s skepticism and of its relation to his program of naturalism. First, I will survey Fogelin’s distinctions and explain his characterization of Hume’s skepticism in relation to these distinctions. Second, I will pose four puzzles that arise from these characterizations of Hume’s skepticism. Third, I will examine Hume’s own conceptions of skepticism and reason, and I will introduce two further distinctions that will prove useful in light of these conceptions. Fourth, I will use these distinctions to examine more closely the content and character of Hume’s

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<sup>3</sup> His first explicit self-identification as a skeptic—clearly foreshadowed, of course, but delayed for rhetorical effect—constitutes much of the dramatic point of the very last sentence of Book 1 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which he declares that his earlier verbal expressions of certainty imply no “dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become nobody, and a sceptic still less than any other.” In the Appendix to the *Treatise*, he “pleads the privilege of a sceptic” in response to newfound problems for his account of personal identity; and in his *Abstract* of the *Treatise*, he remarks, “the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contain’d in this book is very skeptical” (Paragraph 27, included in Hume 2000a). In the *Enquiry*, he coyly avoids applying the label of ‘sceptic’ to himself (describing himself in Section 4 as “a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say scepticism”); but he provides a “skeptical solution” to his pivotal problem (in Section 5), and he endorses (in Section 12, Part 3) a species of scepticism as “useful and durable.”

<sup>4</sup> His 1994 book, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* draws other useful distinctions as well—such as that between skepticism that does and skepticism that does not accept its own self-refutation—but it addresses Hume’s skepticism only in passing. Fogelin expands and revises his earlier treatments of Hume’s skepticism in important ways—but without introducing additional distinctions among kinds of skepticism—in Fogelin (1998).

conclusions about skeptical topics—focusing (as Fogelin does) on Hume’s conclusions about induction, the senses, and reason. Finally, on the basis of this examination of the content and character of Hume’s conclusions, I will offer a revised characterization of Hume’s skepticism and a solution to the four puzzles posed by Fogelin’s original account; and these will allow a clearer understanding of the way in which Hume’s naturalism and his skepticism are mutually supporting.

### I. Classifications of Skepticism

At various places in his writings on Hume, Fogelin in effect distinguishes possible kinds of skepticism along six different dimensions. We may call these their *domain*, their *character*, their *object*, their *origin*, their *degree*, and their *persistence*.

*Domain.* Perhaps the most obvious distinction among varieties of skepticism concerns their domain—that is, the sets of propositions toward which they are directed. The domain of a given instance of skepticism may be either *general* or *limited*. General skepticism concerns all propositions whatsoever; limited skepticism is directed only toward propositions of a particular subject matter or other kind. Hume recognizes many skeptical domains. Among those that Fogelin considers at length are propositions concerning unobserved “matters of fact” affirmed through (what we now call) induction and propositions concerning the existence of bodies (i.e., external physical objects, which Hume also calls “continu’d and distinct existences”) accepted through (what Hume calls) “the senses.” Fogelin draws special attention, however, to Hume’s often-neglected treatment, in *Treatise* 1.4.1 (“Of scepticism with regard to reason”) and 1.4.7 (“Conclusion of this book”) of an argument intended to show that reason operating alone would ultimately subvert itself. This self-subversion would occur, according to Hume, through the repeated application of a process of revising the probability of judgments by consideration of the

reliability of the faculties that produce them. Since, according to Hume, this involves a reduction first of “knowledge to probability” and then of probability to “nothing,” Fogelin argues that *this* kind of Humean skepticism, at least, “transcends its specific target, reason, and yields a skepticism that is wholly general” (1983: 400; 1993: 104).<sup>5</sup>

*Character.* The character of skepticism as Fogelin describes it may be *theoretical*, *prescriptive*, or *practicing*. *Theoretical skepticism* is a positive stance toward the view that there is a lack of “rational grounds, warrant, or justification” for assenting to the propositions of a specified domain. *Prescriptive skepticism* is a positive stance toward the view that one ought not to assent—typically issuing in a recommendation to resist or refrain from assent—to the propositions of a specified domain. *Practicing skepticism* is a stance of actual doubting, or refraining from assent to, the propositions of a specified domain. Of course, theoretical skepticism about a domain can provide one basis for prescriptive skepticism about it; and prescriptive skepticism about a domain, if acted upon, can lead to practicing skepticism about it. Nevertheless, as Fogelin emphasizes, any these kinds of skepticism may occur without the occurrence of any of the others.<sup>6</sup> As Fogelin sees it, Hume’s position embodies theoretical

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<sup>5</sup> Fogelin goes on to mention one possible exception: beliefs about the immediate contents of one’s own current experience.

<sup>6</sup> Prescriptive skepticism may occur without any basis, or with a basis other than a consideration of rational warrant; theoretical skepticism can occur without a view that one should doubt, either through unconcern or as a result of some practical reason not to prescribe doubt; and real practicing doubt may or may not occur regardless of prescriptions and views about rational warrant. Thus, for example, a faith-based religious position could include both of the following simultaneously: theoretical skepticism without prescriptive skepticism about certain articles of faith allowed to be *rationaly unwarranted* but nevertheless thought deserving of assent on the basis of faith, and prescriptive skepticism without theoretical skepticism about certain results of scientific inquiry allowed to be *rationaly warranted* but nevertheless deemed heretical. A believer might accept all of these religious commitments and yet find herself (to her possible chagrin) actually doubting some of the articles of faith but not others, and actually doubting some of the heretical theories but not others.

skepticism, prescriptive skepticism, and practicing skepticism, but in importantly different ways.<sup>7</sup>

*Object.* The object of skepticism may be either *epistemological* or *conceptual*. As Fogelin explains it, *epistemological skepticism* does not concern the intelligibility of a domain of propositions but only the basis for assenting to propositions within it, whereas *conceptual skepticism* concerns the very intelligibility of a domain of propositions. So defined, these both seem to be species of theoretical skepticism—concerned, respectively, with denying grounds for assent *without* questioning intelligibility and denying grounds for assent *by* questioning intelligibility.<sup>8</sup> As Fogelin observes, most of Hume’s skepticism—including his skepticism in such domains as induction, the senses, and reason—seems clearly epistemological rather than conceptual, and that is therefore the focus of Fogelin’s concern, as it will be of mine.<sup>9</sup>

*Origin.* The origin of skepticism may be either *antecedent* or *consequent*. The distinction between antecedent and consequent skepticism is one of two distinctions that Hume himself draws and emphasizes in Section 12 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. As Hume explains it, the former is

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<sup>7</sup> When Hume writes, “All the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence” (THN 1.4.1.6), for example, he appears to Fogelin to be expressing theoretical skepticism; when Hume writes, “In general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner” (EHU 12.24), he appears to be expressing prescriptive skepticism; and when Hume writes, “I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion as more probable or likely than another” (THN 1.4.7.8), he appears to be expressing a practicing skepticism.

<sup>8</sup> However, it would be a simple enough task to extend the epistemological/conceptual distinction into the realm of prescriptive skepticism (by distinguishing *recommendations to doubt while granting intelligibility* from *recommendations to doubt while questioning intelligibility*) and also into the character of practicing skepticism (by distinguishing *doubt while granting intelligibility* from *doubt while questioning intelligibility*).

<sup>9</sup> Fogelin argues quite rightly that, while Hume expresses conceptual skepticism about some topics, the extent of Hume’s conceptual skepticism has often been overstated, in part as a result of its appropriation by logical empiricists.

a species of scepticism, antecedent to all study and philosophy, which ... recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties .... (EHU 12.3)

He contrasts this with

another species of scepticism, consequent to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. (EHU 12.5)

Fogelin (1985) classifies Hume's skepticism concerning the topics of induction and reason's potential self-subversion, among others, as instances of antecedent skepticism,<sup>10</sup> and he also classifies *some* of Hume's skepticism concerning belief in external bodies (specifically, that minimizing or denying the role of reason) as antecedent. In contrast, he classifies much of Hume's account of morals (which displays the workings of moral sentiments) and his positive explanation of belief in bodies (which displays the various fictions and confusions that give rise to the belief in "continu'd and distinct existence") as consequent skepticism.<sup>11</sup>

*Degree.* The degree of skepticism may be either *unmitigated* or *mitigated*. For example, an unmitigated theoretical skepticism about a domain embodies the view that assent to any

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<sup>10</sup> Fogelin classifies Hume's skepticism concerning natural religion and miracles as antecedent as well.

<sup>11</sup> Fogelin 1993 characterizes the *antecedent/consequent* distinction in terms of *argumentative* and *genetic* skeptical strategies:

When using the *argumentative* strategy, Hume adopts the common sceptical ploy of presenting sceptical arguments to show that some class of beliefs is not capable of rational justification.... What I have called Hume's *genetic* strategy reflects his idea of a scepticism that is consequent upon science and enquiry. A system of beliefs can be discredited by its disreputable provenance. (1993: 93).

In discussion, however, Fogelin has indicated that he now regards this *argumentative/genetic* distinction as importantly different from Hume's *antecedent/consequent* distinction—especially because antecedent skepticism, for Hume, is methodological rather than strictly argumentative. Hence, Fogelin himself is not now committed to the particular classifications of skeptical topics as antecedent or consequent proposed in Fogelin 1985.

proposition within it is *utterly* without rational ground, warrant, or justification; a mitigated theoretical skepticism embodies only the view that the rational ground, warrant, or justification of assent to such propositions is limited, or minimal, or less than generally supposed, or less than is desirable, or otherwise falls below some specified or implied standard. Similarly, an unmitigated practicing skepticism would consist in a *total* lack of assent, whereas a mitigated practicing skepticism would consist only in *some degree* of uncertainty, caution, or less-than-wholehearted assent. This distinction of degree is central to the second of the two distinctions between kinds of skepticism that Hume draws and emphasizes in Section 12 of the *Enquiry*—although he does not use the term ‘unmitigated’, preferring instead the terms ‘Pyrrhonian’ and ‘excessive’. (Fogelin also uses the term ‘radical’.) Hume does use the term ‘mitigated’, however, which he uses interchangeably with ‘Academic’. (Fogelin also uses the term ‘milk and water’.) Hume himself distinguishes two ways in which skepticism can be *mitigated* or *Academic*. The first consists in “a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty” and is therefore a limitation of *degree* (EHU 12.24). The second, however, consists in “the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding,” leaving aside “distant and high enquiries” and “sublime topics” (EHU 12.25) and is hence more properly a limitation of *domain*. Despite Hume’s broader usage of ‘mitigated’, I will follow Fogelin in using the terms ‘unmitigated’ and ‘mitigated’ to mark only a distinction of degree. Fogelin interprets Hume’s treatment of reason’s potential for self-subversion through iterated judgments of probability (THN 1.4.1) as expressing a general epistemological theoretical skepticism that is wholly unmitigated or “Pyrrhonian”—that is, as expressing the view that all beliefs whatever are utterly without rational warrant. He also judges Hume’s discussions of beliefs resulting from induction and the senses to express unmitigated theoretical skepticism about those specific

domains. He observes, in contrast, that Hume's recommendation of a "degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty" as the constant accompaniments of "a just reasoner" (EHU 12.24) expresses a thoroughly *mitigated* general prescriptive skepticism.

*Persistence.* Finally, the persistence of skepticism may be either *constant* or *variable*. It is constant if the skeptic maintains the same degree of skepticism through time and reflection; it is variable if the degree of skepticism increases or decreases with changes in the skeptic's perspective or focus of attention. In his earlier writings (1983 and 1985) on Hume, Fogelin contrasts the apparent constancy of the unmitigated general theoretical epistemological skepticism that he finds in Hume with the apparent variability of Hume's practicing and prescriptive general skepticism. Although Fogelin identifies episodes that he regards as constituting unmitigated practicing and prescriptive skepticism—as well as other episodes in which practicing and prescriptive skepticism are altogether absent—he concludes that for the greater part of his philosophical writing, Hume is a mitigated practicing and prescriptive skeptic (1983: 399), practicing and recommending the same Academic modesty and caution that he describes and praises as "useful and durable" in Section 12 of the *Enquiry*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>With these classifications in hand, we can now understand what Fogelin means when he concludes that "Hume's mitigated skepticism is the causal consequence of the influence of two factors: Pyrrhonian doubt on one side and natural instinct on the other" (1983: 410; 1985: 150). He means that, on Hume's view, a variable but general unmitigated practicing skepticism—which results from attention to (irrefutable) arguments for unmitigated theoretical skepticism—is weakened by the natural resistance of the strong belief-engendering mechanisms of human nature in such a way as to yield a mitigated practicing skepticism (which may itself contribute causally to a mitigated prescriptive skepticism).

We are also in a position to understand Fogelin's reasons for claiming that there is "mutual support" between Hume's skepticism and Hume's naturalism. On the one hand, Fogelin suggests, Hume's unmitigated theoretical skepticism obliterates all differences of rational warrant among beliefs and hence *permits* the Humean skeptic to hold and express, undogmatically, whatever beliefs are *natural* to him—and, as it happens, the pursuit of a naturalistic program of offering causal explanations of the mind is *natural* to Hume. On the other hand, these natural causal explanations of the mind's operations in turn support and reinforce Hume's skepticism—for these explanations seem to reveal the mind's many cognitive weaknesses and so render his unmitigated theoretical skepticism all the *more* natural. In a final, ironic twist of convergence, Fogelin remarks, Hume's naturalistic explanations of the mind's operations turn out to include causal explanations of the various episodes of skepticism that occur in the course of Hume's own philosophical thinking.

## II. Four Puzzles

As attractive and comprehensive as this characterization of Hume's skepticism and its relation to his naturalism is, it leaves us with at least four puzzles. These concern, respectively, the manner in which Hume *begins* his consideration of skeptical domains, the manner in which he *conducts* his consideration of skeptical domains, the manner in which he *concludes* his consideration of skeptical domains, and the manner in which he *proceeds after* his consideration of skeptical domains.

*First Puzzle.* The first puzzle concerns the manner in which Hume begins his consideration of skeptical domains. Hume famously concludes in *Treatise* 1.3.6 that the inferences we call "inductive" (and which he designates by a variety of other terms) are "not determin'd by reason." On Fogelin's account—as on many others—this conclusion expresses Hume's unmitigated theoretical skepticism about induction. Yet Hume does not seem to treat this conclusion as expressing skepticism of any kind at all—neither mitigated nor unmitigated, and neither theoretical, nor prescriptive, nor practicing. In arguing for and drawing this conclusion, he expresses no hint of skeptical doubt and neither commends nor even mentions restraint of assent. Nor does he give any indication that his conclusion concerns grounds, warrant, or justification in any way. The conclusion occurs, not as part of an investigation of warrant or justification, but as part of an investigation of one of three psychological elements (namely, "the inference from the impression to the idea") in the occurrence of beliefs deriving from the relation of cause and effect; Hume's famous conclusion—namely, "not reason"—is the negative answer to the same causal question to which "custom or habit" proves to be the positive answer. Furthermore, none

of the *premises* of Hume's argument are premises about warrant or justification.<sup>13</sup> It is more than a hundred pages after the famous conclusion, in *Treatise* 1.4.7.3, that Hume finally draws *any* connection between it and skepticism,<sup>14</sup> and then his final observation is simply this: induction's dependence (along with the dependence of the senses and memory) upon the "seemingly trivial" operation of the enlivening of ideas constitutes "an infirmity common to human nature." Thus, it appears that Hume's manner of drawing his famous conclusion about induction in the *Treatise* is not compatible with interpreting it as an expression of unmitigated theoretical skepticism. Parallel, though not quite identical, remarks apply to Hume's treatment of induction in the *Enquiry*.<sup>15</sup>

*Second Puzzle.* The second puzzle concerns the manner in which Hume *conducts* his consideration of skeptical domains—specifically, in relation to what we have called the *source* of skepticism. Fogelin (at least in 1985 and 1993a—but see note 11 for an important qualification) classifies most of Hume's important theoretical skepticism as antecedent rather than consequent. Yet in describing the distinction between *antecedent* and *consequent* skepticism in Section 12 of

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<sup>13</sup> To be sure, he does claim that inductive inferences "presuppose that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same"; and he asserts that this presupposition cannot arise from reasoning. But he does not argue or assert that inductive conclusions could only have "warrant" or "justification" if this presupposition *did* arise from reasoning. He also asks (THN 1.3.6.4) at one point whether either demonstrative or probable reasoning can "afford any just conclusion" concerning the uniformity of nature; but by 'conclusion', he typically means *act of concluding* (see also note 22), and 'just' (as reported by the *Oxford English Dictionary*) had eighteenth century meanings of *appropriate, suitable, proper or regular*.

<sup>14</sup> Hume does not so much as mention the *topic* of skepticism in the body of the *Treatise* until seven sections (over thirty-five pages) after his famous conclusion about induction—and then the reference is a passing one unrelated to the famous conclusion (THN 1.3.13.12, where the topic is "general rules").

<sup>15</sup> The topic of skepticism is introduced at the outset of Section 5 of the *Enquiry*, immediately following the discussion of inductive inference in Section 4; but it is quickly dismissed with the observation that, if inductive inference is not produced by reasoning, then it must be produced by another principle of "equal weight and authority." The systematic discussion of skepticism is reserved for the final section, Section 12. However, some of the terminology of *Enquiry* IV (especially the prominent uses of 'begging the question' rather than the *Treatise*'s more straightforwardly causal locutions and 'founded on', which is potentially ambiguous between causal and justificatory senses) seems intended prepare the way for the subsequent consideration of skeptical applications.

the *Enquiry*, Hume himself clearly identifies antecedent skepticism not with his own skepticism but with Descartes's methodological doubt. Hume's complete description of it is as follows:

There is a species of scepticism, antecedent to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Descartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject.

It must, however, be confessed, that this species of scepticism, when more moderate, may be understood in a very reasonable sense, and is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments, and weaning our mind from all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion. To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and examine accurately all their consequences; though by these means we shall make both a slow and a short progress in our systems; are the only methods, by which we can ever hope to reach truth, and attain a proper stability and certainty in our determinations. (EHU 12.4)

Here Hume clearly rejects all antecedent skepticism other than the moderate or mitigated kind that amounts merely to preparatory caution. He abuses rather than endorses the “Cartesian” view that we must be assured of the veracity of our faculties “by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful.”

Having rejected all but the mildest antecedent skepticism, Hume then goes on to write:

There is another species of scepticism, consequent to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. Even our very senses are brought into dispute, by a certain species of philosophers; and the maxims of common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology. As these paradoxical tenets (if they may be called tenets) are to be met with in some philosophers, and the refutation of them in several, they naturally excite our curiosity, and make us enquire into the arguments, on which they may be founded. (EHU 12.5)

This paragraph serves as his immediate introduction to all of the skeptical considerations—including those concerning the senses and the external world, “abstract reasoning,” and induction and unobserved matters of fact—that he discusses in the *Enquiry*. Similarly in the *Treatise*, Hume does not even begin to confront skepticism until the end of Section 2 of Part 4 of Book 1, *after* his investigation of the understanding is nearly complete; and each of the skeptical considerations that he then addresses draws crucially on particular results of his investigations

concerning the manner of human cognitive functioning. Evidently, then, Hume regards his arguments in *every* skeptical domain as giving rise specifically to consequent skepticism.<sup>16</sup>

*Third Puzzle.* The third puzzle concerns the manner in which Hume *concludes* his consideration of skeptical domains. In the *Treatise*, he does so by endorsing, at the end of Book 1, a normative principle governing the basing of assent on reason that we may call the “Title Principle”:

Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to.

Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (THN 1.4.7.11)

Here, Hume tells us that some beliefs are not just permitted but *ought* to be assented to, and assented to because they result from reason as employed under certain specified circumstances. But to say that we *ought* to assent to some judgments because they are deliverances of *reason* seems to entail that belief in these propositions is *rationally warranted*. Thus, Hume’s concluding adoption of the Title Principle seems incompatible with his maintaining an unmitigated theoretical skepticism.

*Fourth Puzzle.* The final puzzle concerns the manner in which Hume *proceeds after* his consideration of skeptical domains. He does not renounce his previous endorsement, in the Introduction to the *Treatise*, of “the experimental method” of reasoning, and he continues to evaluate some beliefs as better supported by reasoning than others throughout Books 2 and 3,

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<sup>16</sup> As indicated in note 11, Fogelin has more recently rejected the identification of antecedent skepticism with what he calls “argumentative skepticism,” while continuing to characterize “genetic skepticism” in terms that match Hume’s characterization of consequent skepticism. Hence, one might consider a tripartite distinction of skepticism into antecedent, argumentative, and consequent/genetic. But the fact that Hume clearly regards *all* of his skeptical considerations in the *Enquiry* as instances of consequent skepticism strongly suggests that he does not see himself proposing *any* of what Fogelin has called “argumentative skepticism”—unless, that is, it is simply as *part* of a strategy of genetic, or consequent, skepticism. Indeed, since (as we shall see) *all* of Hume’s skepticism depends on arguments about the causal origins of beliefs, it might be best to characterize all of his skepticism as both argumentative *and* genetic. For this reason, I have not tried to introduce the argumentative/genetic distinction into the main text.

despite his consideration of relevant skeptical domains in Book 1. In Section 10 of the *Enquiry*, Hume endorses the beliefs of the “wise,” who “proportion their belief to the evidence,” in contrast to the beliefs of those who accept testimony for the occurrence of miracles—a selective endorsement that appears incompatible, as Fogelin has remarked, with the unmitigated theoretical skepticism about induction that Fogelin and others find in Section 4 of the *Enquiry*. How can Hume maintain that some beliefs in a domain are better supported by reasoning or evidence than others, if he is simultaneously an unmitigated theoretical skeptic about that domain?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> One approach to resolving this apparent contradiction would be to deny that Hume’s supposed unmitigated theoretical skepticism involves any *belief* in the view that assent to propositions is rationally unwarranted. Thus, one might follow the lead of Fogelin’s interpretation of historical Pyrrhonism in his *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (1993b) and propose that Hume’s unmitigated theoretical skepticism consists not in *believing* but instead simply in *stating, putting forward, or arguing for* the conclusion that all beliefs, or all beliefs in a domain, are rationally unwarranted. (In effect, this would constitute drawing a seventh distinction among kinds of skepticism: a distinction among *stances* with which skepticism is held or embodied.) Although such an interpretation might leave contradictions in Hume’s *pronouncements*, it would remove them from his *beliefs*. Another approach to avoiding this apparent contradiction would be to limit unmitigated theoretical skepticism to the *highest* levels of Hume’s belief system. That is, one could (i) interpret Hume as sometimes holding higher-order beliefs to the effect that lower-order beliefs are rationally warranted, but (ii) insist that, for any such higher-order belief in warrant, Hume always holds a *still-higher*-order view that the belief in the warrant of that belief is itself unwarranted. This would, however, render the domain of Hume’s supposed unmitigated theoretical skepticism unexpectedly *limited* and, indeed, constantly subject to change.

In fact, however, in his later writings (1993a, 1998), Fogelin does not adopt either of these alternatives. Instead, he proposes a “perspectival” interpretation of Hume, according to which Hume writes from at least three different perspectives—one “gentlemanly,” one “wise,” and one “Pyrrhonian”—that are in undeniable conflict with one another. The wise Hume, according to this interpretation, judges some beliefs more favorably than others, while the Pyrrhonian Hume makes an unmitigatedly negative epistemic assessment of all beliefs. According to Fogelin, none of these three Humes is any more the “real” Hume than any other. Each perspective is said to be governed by these two principles:

What a person believes and the degree to which he believes it is a function of the light in which he surveys the subject at that particular time. (1998: 164)

When we survey something in a particular light, we will think it *fitting and proper* to assign the degree of belief to it that we do. (1998: 164)

Fogelin characterizes these judgments of “fittingness and propriety” of belief as “epistemic evaluations,” so it seems that they constitute judgments of rational grounds, warrant, and/or justification. But if this is correct, then Hume’s unmitigated theoretical skepticism will not be constant after all, but variable—indeed, only occasional. While there will admittedly be diachronic contradictions in Hume’s position, at least there need be no synchronic ones—or none, anyway, beyond the Pyrrhonian Hume’s occasional judgment that it is epistemically “fitting and proper” to believe the defining claim of an unmitigated theoretical skepticism that presumably falls within its own scope. Note, however, that while Hume’s presumed general unmitigated theoretical skepticism may retain some relations of *support* with his naturalism, on this interpretation, it will also be in direct *conflict* with his naturalism (contrary to Fogelin 1985; see note 12), since the naturalistic program as now understood will include the endorsement of naturalism’s own results as rationally warranted (i.e., as “fitting and proper”), a positive judgment that an

### III. Hume's Conceptions of Skepticism and Reason

In order to resolve these puzzles, we must first understand how Hume conceives of *skepticism* and how he conceives of *reason*. Hume recognizes a variety of what he calls “sceptical topics.” The concluding section of Book 1 of the *Treatise* offers a series—indeed, a crescendo—of five such topics.<sup>18</sup> The concluding section of the *Enquiry* surveys an overlapping a list of skeptical topics.<sup>19</sup>

*Hume's Conception of Skepticism.* Hume mentions both “sceptical dispositions”—i.e., dispositions to practicing skepticism<sup>20</sup>—and “sceptical principles.” Some of these “sceptical

unmitigated general theoretical skepticism must deny. Intriguing as it is, this “three-Hume” interpretation also raises the question of which Hume it was who sent the manuscripts of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* to the publisher—and why, when he did so, he did not first delete those passages written by the other Humes with which he disagreed.

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, these are (in order) (i) the dependence of inductive reasoning, the senses, and memory on the psychological process of the “enlivening of ideas” in the absence of convincing arguments to show that this process is an epistemically reliable one; (ii) the “contradiction of the modern philosophy,” which offers a causal argument to show that secondary qualities such as color and heat are not in bodies themselves, thereby robbing us of the capacity to conceive distinctly of how bodies exist, since primary qualities cannot exist alone; (iii) the inconceivability of necessary causal connections in the objects themselves; (iv) reason’s potential to subvert itself through repeated application of iterated revisionary judgments of probability concerning the reliability of our faculties; and (v) a “very dangerous dilemma” that results from seeing that reason fails to subvert itself only through a seemingly “trivial” feature of the imagination, whereby it cannot sustain the power of the iterated reflections that would be required—the dilemma results when reason cannot by itself find and defend a principle for determining which features of the imagination to accept and which to reject. For a fuller presentation of each of these topics, see Garrett 1997, Chapter 10.

<sup>19</sup> The skeptical topics of the *Enquiry* are organized around three domains (in the following order): (i) the senses, (ii) demonstrative or abstract reasoning, and (iii) probable reasoning. Concerning the senses, he offers three topics: the “trite” and popular one that our senses sometimes deceive us; the more “profound” argument that external bodies cannot (as the vulgar suppose) be our perceptions and cannot be inferred to exist by reasoning from our perceptions; and the “profound” argument concerning “the contradiction of the modern philosophy” (see note 16). Concerning abstract or demonstrative reasoning, he offers just one topic—the paradoxes of infinite divisibility into which abstract reasoning seems to lead us—and he “hints” at a Humean solution in a footnote. Concerning probable reasoning, he offers two topics: the “popular” one that disagreement about matters of fact is prevalent, and the more “philosophical” one that inductive inference rests on “custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which . . . like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful” (EHU 12.22). Notable by their absence from the *Enquiry* are reason’s potential self-subversion by repeated applications of probability and the “very dangerous dilemma” that results from it.

<sup>20</sup> Hume often uses the term ‘sceptical doubts’ for practicing skepticism, but he sometimes uses just ‘scepticism’—as when he writes of falling “back into diffidence and scepticism” (*An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* 9.13) and when he describes “Academic scepticism” as “a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty” (EHU 12.24).

principles” are evidently *practical* principles—i.e., principles of prescriptive skepticism.<sup>21</sup> However, Hume also writes of “*speculative* principles of scepticism” (*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* [Hume 1935] I: 134; italics added). When he suggests what such speculative principles might be, some are formulated in terms of reason’s incapacity to accomplish particular tasks,<sup>22</sup> while others are formulated more generally, in terms of the degree of “fallaciousness” or “unfitness” of “our faculties” (EHU 12.5).

Hume recognizes two ancient skeptical schools: *Pyrrhonian skepticism* and *Academic skepticism*. As Julia Annas (2001) has recently argued, Hume does not exhibit, and evidently did not possess, deep historical knowledge of these two schools. The substantive distinction between them, as he applies it, is limited to one of degree and domain. As we have already observed, he sees Academic skepticism as refraining from enquiry and belief concerning “high and distant” matters beyond human reach, but as otherwise practically accepting and prescriptively recommending some propositions as more probable than others while maintaining and recommending restraint from certainty and dogmatism. In allowing that the Academics treat some propositions as more probable than others, Hume is following a traditional—though disputed—interpretation of Academic skepticism. He sees Pyrrhonian skepticism, in contrast, as prescriptively recommending the *total* suspension of belief and as claiming, in at least some cases, the practical achievement of such total suspension of belief. He does not so much as mention the Pyrrhonian distinction (made by Sextus) between the evident and the non-evident, nor the Pyrrhonian principle of acting in accordance with appearances while suspending judgment. Although Hume recognizes a distinction between *sensory impressions* and *beliefs*, he

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<sup>21</sup> For example, he writes of “the sceptic who [holds] that no system ought ever to be embraced with regard to such subjects” (*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* VIII: 186) and of Academic skepticism’s “talk of ... renouncing all speculations which lie not within the limits of common life and practice” (EHU 5.1).

<sup>22</sup> Thus, “the sceptic continues to reason and believe, even though he asserts that he cannot defend his reason by reason” (THN 1.4.2.1).

would surely reject any further distinction within the realm of ideas between (what a Pyrrhonian might call) *motivating cognitive appearances* and *judgments*. *Motivating cognitive appearances*, *judgments*, and *beliefs* are simply the same thing for Hume—namely, lively ideas. Such ideas are always (or practically always) required to direct human beings in acting on their desires or passions. If lively ideas are present, for Hume, then belief is present; if such ideas are absent, then inaction must follow. Thus, while he denies that Pyrrhonists can achieve general or broad suspension of judgment or belief for more than a few moments of despair or amazement (EHU 12.23), he also holds that achieving a durable state of Pyrrhonian doubt, if it were possible, would result in total inaction. Although episodes of practicing Pyrrhonism are necessarily brief, on Hume’s view, they can nevertheless be highly salutary, for a “tincture” of such Pyrrhonian doubt—the largest size in which it can be obtained, in fact—is useful for abating the “pride of the learned” (EHU 12.24); being “once convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt” naturally encourages a more useful and durable mitigated practicing skepticism. Hume writes that “the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* skepticism [is] that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour” (EHU 12.23). Presumably Hume means, at least primarily, that this is the chief objection to *practicing* Pyrrhonism.

Although Hume does not recognize a distinction between *belief* and (non-sensory) *cognitive appearance*, he regularly employs a distinction between lower-order states (including beliefs) and higher-order attitudes towards those states. These higher-order attitudes include attitudes of approval and disapproval. When the lower-order states in question are beliefs, these higher-order attitudes include what we may call *acceptance-as-true* and *rejection-as-false*. Because Hume not only *exhibits* but also discusses and *evaluates* species of skepticism—which include states of doubt, prescription, and belief—we must distinguish between the *embodiment of* a species of

skepticism and the *endorsement* of a species of skepticism. One *embodies* a species of skepticism whenever one directly instantiates that kind of skepticism— in the case of practical skepticism, for example, by doubting; in the case of prescriptive skepticism, by prescribing or affirming the rightness of doubt; and in the case of theoretical skepticism, by taking up a positive stance (such as belief) toward a view concerning rational grounds, warrant, or justification. One *endorses* a species of skepticism, in contrast, when one takes a higher-order attitude of approval toward the embodiment of that species of skepticism.<sup>23</sup> One obvious application of this distinction is in describing the relation between practicing skepticism and prescriptive skepticism, for the latter is a kind of endorsement (namely, recommendation or affirmation-of-rightness) of the former. However, the full scope of the distinction is broader than this particular application, for one may also endorse or fail to endorse the embodiment of theoretical skepticism, and one may even endorse or fail to endorse the embodiment of prescriptive skepticism (which, as noted, is itself a kind of endorsement). Endorsement is *considered*, we may say, when it follows and is based on a review of all of the relevant considerations that the endorser is able to discover; endorsement becomes *authorial* when an author promulgates a work with the intention that his or her endorsement be part of what is conveyed to the target audience of the work. Typically, of course, authors of non-fiction works *accept-as-true* the beliefs that are expressed by the statements they make in a work, and this acceptance-as-true becomes an authorial endorsement when the work is promulgated. However, this is not always the case; for example, a diary may express the *temporary* acceptance-as-true of a belief that is rejected or supplanted later in the work and is therefore not authorially endorsed.

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<sup>23</sup> Thus, there may be as many specific *kinds* of endorsement as there are specific kinds of attitudes of approval and disapproval.

*Hume's Conception of Reason.* Speculative skeptical principles, as Hume conceives them, concern the capacities or incapacities, the fitness or fallaciousness, of “reason” specifically or “our faculties” more generally. The naturalistic cognitive and conative psychology that constitutes what Hume calls “the science of man” is an investigation of the operations of human faculties, which faculties include (among others) imagination, memory, the senses, the passions, the moral sense—and reason. It is often claimed that Hume uses the term ‘reason’ in many different senses. In fact, however, he consistently uses it in a single sense—as a term in cognitive psychology designating the faculty of making inferences and engaging in argument. As such, it is one faculty among others, although it is a crucial one.<sup>24</sup> He does, however, recognize two distinct operations of reason: demonstrative reasoning and probable reasoning. When Hume writes of what can or cannot be done by reason, he is addressing the specific question of what can or cannot be produced by exercises of our inferential faculty. Thus, for example, he asks concerning inductive inferences “whether we are determined by reason to make the transition, or by a certain association and relation of perceptions” (THN 1.3.6.4); he writes that “belief arises [in a particular case] immediately, without any new operation of the reason or imagination” (THN 1.3.8.10); he notes the principle that “reason alone can never give rise to any original idea” (THN 1.3.14.5); he writes of “the reason of animals” (THN 1.3.16); he declares that “our reason must be considered as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect ... but such a one as may be frequently prevented” (THN 1.4.1.1); he asks whether it is “the senses, reason, or the

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<sup>24</sup> Some have supposed that Hume must reject faculties, but he refers to them and invokes them almost constantly. He treats “S has a faculty for doing A” as equivalent to “S has a power to do A,” and he treats both as trivial consequences of “S does A.” It is not surprising that Hume makes such ready use of faculties, as he understands them, for their existence is entailed by his fourth and fifth “rules for judging of causes and effects” (THN 1.3.15.6) which require that sameness of effects must always be the result of some commonality in the causes. Wherever we find a certain kind of mental effect, there must be a commonality of cause, which we may therefore invoke by ascribing a mental “faculty” for producing that effect. He does think, however, that the ancient philosophers and their followers have abused the notion of “faculty” (THN 1.4.3.10) by supposing that one can informatively *explain* the occurrence of A-ing simply by citing the existence of a faculty of A-ing without explaining the nature and manner of operation of that faculty.

imagination, that produces the opinion of a continued or of a distinct existence” (THN 1.4.2.2); he notes that “reason is incapable of dispelling ... clouds of philosophical melancholy and delirium” (THN 1.4.7.9); and he argues that “reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition” (THN 2.3.3.4). While the faculty of reason is one of the chief tools for investigating human nature—and therefore enjoys an obvious provisional authority—describing something as “produced by reason” is not primarily to praise it, but to explain it.

In light of the fact that reason is, for Hume, just one of the natural faculties involved in belief, we can and should distinguish among three different properties of beliefs: *production by reason*, *epistemic merit*, and *rational support*. A belief is *produced by reason* if and only if it results from an operation of the inferential faculty. A belief has *epistemic merit* if and only if it deserves or is worthy of belief or assent. These are different properties: a belief might have epistemic merit even though it was not produced by reason (memories or beliefs about immediate sense experiences are likely examples), and a belief might lack epistemic merit even though it was produced by reason (for example, if the kind of reason involved turned out to be radically defective or untrustworthy). Finally, a belief has *rational support* if and only if it has epistemic merit *because* of the manner in which it is produced by reason. Hence, a belief might be produced by reason *and* have epistemic merit, and yet still lack rational support—because its epistemic merit did not *derive from* its production by reason.

Of course, a belief cannot have rational support if it does not arise through an exercise of the inferential faculty at all—it cannot receive support *through* its origin in reason if it *has* no origin in reason. However, a belief might have epistemic merit without rational support—depending on what kind of features or origin the belief did have (perhaps in relation to other faculties) and on the relation of those features or that origin to the property of epistemic merit.

This is the very prospect that Hume raises when he writes, concerning the crucial step in all inductive inferences, that “if the mind be not engaged by argument [i.e., reason] to make this step, it must be induced by some other principle of equal weight and authority” (EHU 5.2); but it is a prospect that can be obscured by terms such as ‘rational grounds’, ‘rational warrant’, or ‘rational justification’, all of which are potentially ambiguous, as many writers use them, between *epistemic merit* and *rational support*. Given Hume’s capacity to distinguish these two properties, we may replace the potentially ambiguous term ‘theoretical skepticism’ with two more precise terms: *rational support skepticism*, we may say, is the view that assent to propositions in a given domain will lack rational support; *epistemic merit skepticism*, we may say, is the view that assent to propositions in a given domain will lack epistemic merit.

#### IV. Hume’s Conclusions

With these further distinctions in mind, we are now in a position to examine Hume’s conclusions in the primary skeptical domains of induction, the senses, and reason, and to determine what kinds of skepticism they express. I will survey these domains in the order in which they appear in Hume’s rehearsal of skeptical topics in the final section of *Treatise* Book 1.

*Induction and Beliefs Concerning Unobserved Matters of Fact.* We have already noted one of Hume’s conclusions concerning induction, which he presents in the *Treatise* as follows:

When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin’d by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination (THN 1.3.6.12)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The *Enquiry* version reads, “Even after we have experience of the operations of cause and effect, our conclusions from that experience are not founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding.” (EHU 4.15).

As attention to the argument for this conclusion reveals, and as its location in the text suggests, this conclusion is a causal claim about what reason *does not produce*. Specifically, Hume claims that, in every inductive inference, there is a step taken by the mind in which it moves *from* past experience of a constant conjunction plus an impression of a token of one conjunct-type *to* a belief in the existence of a token of the other conjunct-type. Hume calls this move “the presumption” or “presupposition” that “nature is uniform” or that “the future will resemble the past,” and he argues that this move is not itself caused by any further inferential component but rather by the mechanism of custom or habit. This is not to say that inductive inferences are not themselves *instances* of reasoning—he consistently calls them that in the course of the very argument in question—but rather that a key transition in these inferences or reasonings is not *causally mediated by another, component* piece of reasoning. (This is in implicit contrast with Locke’s account of demonstrative reason, in which larger demonstrative inferences *are* mediated by simpler component demonstrative inferences; see Garrett 1998 and 2001).

Although this conclusion is itself a conclusion in cognitive psychology, it also implies rational support skepticism specifically about the “presumption” of the uniformity of nature, since it shows that that presumption is not caused by reasoning at all.<sup>26</sup> (In actual inductive reasoning, Hume holds, we “make” the presumption by engaging in a *movement of thought* rather than by *forming a belief in a proposition*; but we can later formulate the presumption in the form of a proposition.) However, Hume’s conclusion neither expresses nor entails any epistemic merit skepticism. Indeed, it does not even express or by itself entail any rational support skepticism about the *beliefs resulting* from inductive inferences—as contrasted with the *presumption* on which those inferences rest. For Hume consistently holds (and it would be hard

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<sup>26</sup> This implication for rational support skepticism is particularly suggested by the *Enquiry* version of the conclusion—for although ‘founded on’ is typically a causal locution for Hume, and is one here, it also naturally suggests (epistemic) support.

to deny) that beliefs attained through inductive inference are themselves produced by operations of probable (i.e., inductive) reason.<sup>27</sup> Nor, it may be added, does Hume's cited conclusion about induction express any prescriptive or practicing skepticism.<sup>28</sup>

Although Hume does not express practicing skepticism about induction when he reaches this conclusion, he does, of course, *ultimately* discuss practicing skepticism about induction—and he does so just where one might reasonably expect, in his rehearsal of skeptical topics at the end of *Treatise* Book 1 (where he confronts and undergoes practicing skepticism) and in *Enquiry* Section 12 (where he describes practicing skepticism without undergoing it). He holds that practicing skepticism about induction arises naturally from (i) the realization that we cannot “give a reason” for our making the presupposition of the uniformity of nature and (ii) the realization that the presupposition itself depends on custom.<sup>29</sup> In the *Treatise*, Hume expresses—and in the *Enquiry* he discusses—both practicing skepticism and *concern* about the possibility of epistemic merit skepticism, and he does so in a way that is based *in part* on these results about induction. Nothing he says, however, constitutes either an embodiment or an endorsement of either unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism or unmitigated prescriptive skepticism about induction.

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<sup>27</sup> When Hume writes of “our conclusions from experience” as not being “founded on reasoning” in the *Enquiry*, he is quite clearly referring to our *acts of concluding* rather than to the *beliefs* that result from these acts—as can be seen from attention to the locutions that he treats as synonymous (see also note 13).

It is worth noting that the presumption of the uniformity of nature can be given a kind of *secondary sustenance* by reason, even though it cannot be *produced by* reason: for once the presumption has been made and many inductive arguments have occurred, one might then generalize back to the uniformity of nature from the collected conclusions of these many individual inferences.

<sup>28</sup> As we have seen, the *Treatise* version entirely avoids the topic of skepticism, while Hume begins the section of the *Enquiry* that follows the corresponding conclusion (Section 5) by reassuring his readers that the key movement of the mind is caused, if not by reason, then by something “of equal weight and authority.”

<sup>29</sup> In the *Treatise*, the emphasis is on the claim that the enlivening of ideas by custom is a seemingly trivial property of the imagination. In the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that custom is an instinct that, like other instincts, *may* (by an inductive argument!) “be fallacious.”

*The Senses and Belief in Bodies*. Concerning belief in an external world of (“continu’d and distinct”) bodies perceived by the senses, Hume concludes in the *Treatise* that

[Both vulgar and philosophical beliefs in continued and distinct existences depend on] trivial qualities of the fancy [i.e., of the imagination] ... conducted by false suppositions. (THN 1.4.2.56)

He draws similarly negative conclusions in the *Enquiry* (EHU 12.7-14). In both cases, the argument depends on an intermediate conclusion:

’Tis impossible ... that from the existence of any of the qualities of [perceptions], we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the [continued and distinct bodies beyond our perceptions], or ever satisfy our reason in this particular. (THN 1.4.2.47)

Hume does allow in the *Treatise* that the belief in bodies arises, *in part*, from irregular “reasonings” that are “oblique and indirect,” and which require “the cooperation of some other principles” of the imagination (THN 1.4.2.20-21). As the quoted passage indicates, however, he holds that demonstrative and probable reasoning from our sensory experiences alone is insufficient to produce the belief, and he also holds that, without the occurrence of confusions made by the imagination, reasoning from our sense experiences would lead us not to accept but to abandon the belief. Hence, this intermediate conclusion strongly suggests an unmitigated rational support skepticism concerning the sense-based belief in the existence of bodies. In the *Treatise*, intense consideration of his main conclusion about the senses and the line of argument leading up to it induces him to write:

I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses....  
But to be ingenuous, I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more

inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence. I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system.... What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them? (THN 1.4.2.56).

This is a memorable expression of temporary unmitigated practicing skepticism about beliefs in bodies resulting from the senses, and it implies a temporary attraction to unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism about them. It does not go so far as to express an unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism about the senses, however; for even if epistemic merit (and not just rational support) were to *require* a “solid and rational system,” the fact still remains that “I cannot conceive how p” does not yet entail “not-p.” More importantly, even if the passage did express unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism about the senses, it is clearly identified as a report of temporary sentiments; it is certainly not an authorial endorsement of unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism. Nor does it constitute any attempt on Hume’s part to express a considered or authorial endorsement of unmitigated epistemic merit (or prescriptive) skepticism about the senses.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Concerning what Hume calls a “contradiction of the modern philosophy” on the topic of secondary qualities, he concludes:

There is a direct and total opposition between our reason and our senses; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect [about secondary qualities], and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body. (THN 1.4.2.15)

This conclusion provides an additional basis for rational support skepticism about the belief in bodies and another cause for practicing skepticism about both the senses and inductive reasoning, practicing skepticism that he expresses in a series of rhetorical questions (THN 1.4.7.4). However, the conclusion does not constitute an endorsement of unmitigated merit or prescriptive skepticism.

Concerning the illusion that we are aware of and can conceive necessary causal connections between causes and effect themselves, Hume concludes:

*Reason and the Iterated Probability of Causes.* Concerning reason’s potential to subvert itself through repeated applications of revisionary judgments—“scepticism with regard to reason”—Hume concludes:

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 this 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. (THN 1.4.1.6)

*This* passage, at least, might seem to be an endorsement of unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism and a source of unmitigated prescriptive skepticism. Once its context and terminology are understood, however, we can see that it is not—although it indeed makes a truly remarkable claim. Briefly, Hume’s argument is this: because our faculty of reason is a cause that sometimes but not always leads to truth, we can apply to it the kind of probable reasoning that he describes earlier in the *Treatise* as “the probability of causes” (THN 1.3.12). This involves revising the level of confidence one feels concerning an original judgment by a consideration of the proportion of cases in which such judgments have been right and wrong in the past. Crucially, but for reasons too complicated to explore here (see Garrett 1997, Chapter 10), he claims (i) that the normal operation of the probability of causes in this way would always result in a diminution of the original degree of conviction or assent; (ii) that the same process can be applied again to the new judgment that one’s faculties were accurate in assessing the probability that one’s

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When we trace up the human understanding to its first principles, we find it to lead us into such sentiments, as seem to turn to ridicule all our past pains and industry, and to discourage us from future enquiries. (THN 1.4.7.5)

While Hume’s description of his sentiments about how things “seem” constitutes a clear expression of practicing skepticism, it is, again, far from an endorsement—and even farther from a considered or authorial endorsement—of either epistemic merit skepticism or prescriptive skepticism.

faculties were operating accurately in the first judgment, in a way that would ultimately, in accordance with the probability of causes, further reduce the degree of conviction or assent to the original judgment; and (iii) that this process could, in accordance with the probability of causes, be iterated indefinitely until the original judgment lost all conviction or assent. Thus, Hume claims to discover that the very faculty of reason that produces psychological assent would also, unless prevented or deflected, ultimately destroy that same psychological assent through repeated self-application. It is to this causal outcome that Hume is referring when he writes of a “a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence.” The term ‘evidence’, in this conclusion, is simply a synonym for ‘belief’; here, as everywhere else in the *Treatise*, it refers not to epistemic merit, but rather to “evidentness”—that is, a quantity of psychological assent.<sup>31</sup> In saying that “all the rules of logic require” this diminution and extinction, he is referring to his claim that this application of the “probability of causes” is a standard one of the kind described in his “rules for judging of causes and effects”—which he has earlier called “all the LOGIC I think proper to employ in my reasoning” (THN 1.3.15.11).

Remarkably, when Hume *first* draws this conclusion about reason’s potential self-subversion, it does not even serve as an occasion for *practicing* skepticism. Instead, it serves chiefly as an occasion to investigate *how* reason is prevented from destroying itself through its own operations in this way. His conclusion is that reason is prevented from operating in this way by a “trivial feature of the imagination”—namely, that whereby

after the first and second decision ... the action of the mind becomes forc’d and unnatural,  
and the ideas faint and obscure ... the posture of the mind is uneasy ... and the spirits are not

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of passages supporting this interpretation, see Garrett 1997: 228. The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that this is a standard eighteenth century meaning of ‘evidence’. The *Enquiry* also uses the term ‘evidence’ in the sense of *material evidence*—i.e., as a term for features of the world that support inference.

govern'd in their movements by the same laws, at least not to the same degree, as when they flow in their usual channel. (THN 1.4.1.10)

When he announces this discovery, he employs it as confirmation of his theory that belief consists in the liveliness or vivacity of ideas.

In the final section of Book 1, however, the conclusion *does* contribute to the general practicing skepticism induced by the rehearsal of skeptical topics, and it also becomes the occasion to discover a final skeptical topic: the difficulty of finding a *prescriptive standard* by which to determine *which* operations of reason should be approved. This difficulty leads to what Hume calls “a very dangerous dilemma.” He claims to have discovered that it is merely a feature of the imagination that allows us to avoid succumbing to reason’s self-destruction, a feature that does so by weakening the efficacy of “refin’d and elaborate” argument. Yet how can we prescribe *accepting* that feature and *rejecting* the refined and elaborate arguments that would subvert reason’s operations? First, the feature seems roughly on a par with other features of the imagination that lead to admitted absurdities; second, accepting the feature and rejecting refined and elaborate arguments cuts off much of science, which also contains refined and elaborate arguments; and third, the very argument that we *must* accept the feature and reject refined and elaborate arguments is itself a refined and elaborate argument. Yet we cannot simply reject the feature and accept all refined and elaborate arguments without accepting the view that reason *should* annihilate all belief through iterated self-application.<sup>32</sup> The intense contemplation of this result and the other elements of his skeptical rehearsal elicit from him his most striking

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<sup>32</sup> For this reason, Hume writes that we are thus left with no choice but “betwixt a false reason and none at all” because “very refined reflections have little or no influence upon us, and yet we cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence, which implies a manifest contradiction” (THN 1.4.7.7).

expression of unmitigated practicing skepticism—an ideal example of what, in the *Enquiry*, he will call a “tincture of Pyrrhonism”:

The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion as more probable or likely than another. (THN 1.4.7.8)

The final phrase of this passage, which concerns how its author “looks at” the probability of opinions, may well *hint at* a temporary embodiment of unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism. However, it does not *explicitly express* even a temporary embodiment of unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism; for one may find that an opinion *seems* improbable while still judging that it *deserves* to be found more probable. In any case, though, the passage certainly does not imply *any* higher-order attitude of *endorsement* for unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism, let alone a fully considered or authorial endorsement of it; for the passage is labeled as the report *only* of a transitory state of mind, occurring at a certain stage of Hume’s investigation.<sup>33</sup> While the practicing skepticism expressed by the passage is undoubtedly intense, the passage also contains no hint of prescriptive skepticism.

Hume describes this state of mind as “philosophical melancholy and delirium.” It cannot be sustained, he reports, but instead gives way, first, to an attitude of “indolence and spleen,” in which he finds that he must continue to believe and act, but rejects philosophy because of his recollection of the pain that the rehearsal of skeptical topics has caused him and the difficulty of showing that philosophy will lead him to truth. This state of “indolence and spleen,” however,

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<sup>33</sup> In *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, Hume complains about the fact that his opponents had quoted this passage to characterize his skepticism despite his plainly labeling it a few pages later as merely the transitory product of “melancholy and delirium.” Janet Broughton has pointed out to me that this passage from the *Treatise* resembles many of Hume’s other remarks about skepticism and belief in its reference to physiological causes (in this case, heating of the brain).

gives way in turn to a return to philosophy itself, motivated by two passions—curiosity and ambition—and by the reflection that philosophy is a safer guide than is religion in matters about which we cannot help but speculate. In returning to philosophy, Hume has already found himself attracted to and operating on the prescriptive Title Principle that we noted earlier: “Where reason is lively and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate on us” (THN 1.4.7.11). This principle, while originating partly from his passions rather than solely from reason itself, provides a solution to the “dangerous dilemma” of determining which aspects of reasoning and of the imagination to approve: it allows refined and elaborate reasoning that engages us, while allowing us to ignore reason’s unengaging potential self-subversion. While still aware of his “skeptical principles”—that is, his discoveries of the “many infirmities” to which human cognitive nature is subject—he also reflects that those very infirmities provide him a reason to be “diffident of his philosophical doubts as well as his philosophical conviction” (THN 1.4.7.14). The result is a renewed determination to pursue philosophy in a skeptical spirit—that is, with a mitigated practicing skepticism. At no point has he expressed a fully considered or authorial endorsement of unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism or unmitigated prescriptive skepticism. Instead, he concludes by endorsing the Title Principle, which implies that some beliefs, at least, do have rational support and should receive our assent. As Annas has remarked, Hume is, by ancient standards, a dogmatist—though, I would add, a mitigated one, just as he is a mitigated skeptic.

### **Hume’s Skepticism and Hume’s Naturalism**

With this understanding of Hume’s conclusions, we are now in a position to re-characterize his skepticism, in accordance with our revised categories of classification.

*Hume's Skepticism Re-characterized.* Hume's epistemological skepticism concerns many domains. All of it is consequent skepticism—based on his investigations of human cognitive operations—with the exception of a very mitigated preparatory caution that he both practices and recommends. His practicing skepticism is variable: it is unmitigated when he considers skeptical topics intensely, and this temporary unmitigated practicing skepticism is also potentially general. He sometimes reports temporarily losing his practicing skepticism entirely when he views matters in a particularly convincing way (THN 1.4.7.15). However, he at least frequently achieves and maintains a mitigated general practicing skepticism. His prescriptive skepticism, which recommends and endorses that achievement, is, at the end of his investigations, constant, general, and mitigated—except for the special domain of “high and distant enquiries,” which (according to the *Enquiry*, at least) are to be avoided altogether and hence constitute a domain for unmitigated prescriptive skepticism. Once Hume has completed his investigation of our faculties, his rational support skepticism is constant and unmitigated—but limited in domain primarily to classes of beliefs that he has discovered are not produced by standard reasoning (such as the belief in the continued and distinct existence of bodies) or are not produced by reasoning at all (such as the presupposition of the uniformity of nature). His unmitigated rational support skepticism does not extend to the results of either demonstrative or inductive (“probable”) reasoning generally. Intense contemplation of rational support skepticism within its appropriate domains is—along with other skeptical topics that show the “infirmities of human nature”—among the causes of temporary unmitigated practicing skepticism, and it thereby helps to provide a “tincture of Pyrrhonism.” Finally, his consideration of skeptical topics leads Hume to entertain with despair, near the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, the *prospect* of general unmitigated constant epistemic merit skepticism. Perhaps he even implies, although he does not

clearly state, that he has (as the result of the heating of his brain) temporarily *embodied* such skepticism. As author, however, he neither asserts nor endorses it. Instead, he ultimately asserts and authorially endorses the Title Principle, and he accepts a general epistemic merit skepticism that is constant but mitigated.

*Solutions to Four Puzzles.* With this understanding of Hume's skepticism, we are now in a position to resolve the four puzzles we discovered concerning Fogelin's earlier characterization of Hume's skepticism. The first puzzle was: *If Hume's famous conclusion in Treatise 1.3.6—namely, that a key step in inductive inference is “not determin'd by reason”—expresses unmitigated theoretical skepticism about induction, then why does he offer it without any mention or consideration of skepticism?* The solution is that Hume's famous conclusion does not express such skepticism; rather, it is a purely causal claim in cognitive psychology. While the conclusion obviously has implications for rational support skepticism concerning the principle of the uniformity of nature, Hume need not and does not consider those implications until his rehearsal of skeptical topics many pages later, at the end of Book 1.

The second puzzle was: *If all of Hume's skepticism concerning induction and reason, as well as much of his skepticism concerning the senses, is antecedent skepticism, then why does Hume seem to reject all antecedent skepticism with the exception of a mild and mitigated preparatory attitude of caution?* The solution is that Hume's skepticism is not antecedent. Rather, he conceives all of his skeptical topics as instances of consequent skepticism, deriving from investigations into the actual operations of human reason and other human faculties. Skepticism results not from *a priori* considerations of any kind, but arises only insofar as his investigations produce disturbing or disquieting results about the nature of those faculties.

The third puzzle was: *If Hume is a general unmitigated theoretical skeptic, then why does he conclude his discussion of skeptical topics in the Treatise by endorsing the Title Principle, which seems incompatible with such skepticism?* The solution is that Hume is not a general unmitigated theoretical skeptic; instead, he accepts the Title Principle because he finds that it provides a prescriptive epistemic principle that he can both follow and approve. His investigations do lead both to unmitigated rational support skepticism about some propositions (including the uniformity of nature and the existence of bodies) and to a variable practicing skepticism based in part on anxiety about general unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism—but not to a considered or authorial assertion or endorsement of either (i) general unmitigated rational support skepticism or (ii) general unmitigated epistemic merit skepticism.

The fourth puzzle was: *If Hume is a general unmitigated theoretical skeptic, then why does he continue to regard some beliefs as rationally better supported or more deserving of assent than others, even after his consideration of skeptical topics?* The solution, once again, is that he is not a general unmitigated theoretical skeptic, for he is neither a general unmitigated rational support skeptic nor a general unmitigated epistemic merit skeptic. The Title Principle allows for the possibility that some beliefs have epistemic merit and that some of them have this epistemic merit as a result of their production by reason.

*Hume's Skepticism and Hume's Naturalism.* An appealing and common conception of the relation between Hume's naturalism and his skepticism is as follows. Hume's project is a naturalistic one with two phases—in the negative first phase, Hume gives radical skeptical arguments to show that a class of beliefs lacks something like rational grounds, warrant, or justification in order to “clear the way” for a naturalistic explanation of them; in the positive

second phase, Hume provides the naturalistic explanations themselves. Hume's skepticism is therefore simply in the service of his naturalism and is happily limited by it.

Fogelin has argued vigorously over the years that this common conception will not do—on the grounds that, once powerful radical skeptical arguments have been unleashed, they cannot be so easily tamed or neatly *limited by* naturalism, because, on the contrary, they will inevitably demand to be applied as well to the *outcome* of naturalism. I agree with Fogelin that the conception he attacks will not do; but I dispute a central part of that conception which he has not questioned: namely, that all or most of the *first* stage of Hume's strategy constitutes a piece of radical *skepticism*—drawing, as such skepticism must do in order to constitute a *first* stage, on strong *a priori* standards about the conditions that legitimate beliefs must meet. As I read Hume, he propounds no such *a priori* standards; and the initial, “negative” phase of his standard strategy, in which he shows that certain beliefs are not produced by reason, is not itself skeptical, but naturalistic.<sup>34</sup> Far from employing skepticism *antecedently*, to clear the *way* for naturalism, Hume's procedure is naturalistic from the start: he begins by determining what natural operations—including but not always limited to reason—do *not* produce a belief or movement of the mind, and then he shows what *does* produce it instead. The *consequent* consideration of skeptical doubts that might result or of skeptical principles that might follow from his conclusions is deferred until the cognitive psychology is nearly concluded; only then does Hume face the question of whether what he has learned about the faculties he has been employing allows him to approve of their continued application. For most of the final section of Book 1 of the *Treatise* the answer to that question is in doubt—but the final outcome is a mitigated and

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<sup>34</sup> After all, Hume holds that *some* of our affirmations—in the domain of mathematics, to take an uncontroversial example—are produced by demonstrative reasoning; but this is not in any way a local *failure* of his naturalism. Conversely, he and Locke agree that “intuitive” knowledge (i.e., immediate apprehension of relations of ideas) is *not* itself produced by any reasoning or inference; but Hume does not consider that fact to constitute any kind of skeptical challenge to it.

limited endorsement of his own reliance on reason and the senses, an endorsement that can withstand his awareness of the many limitations of human cognitive nature just discovered. Thus, naturalism leads naturally to a crisis of unmitigated practicing skeptical doubt; and the psychological defeat of that unmitigated practicing doubt incorporates the adoption of the only principle of epistemic merit that can now sustain a return to naturalism. This return to naturalism can occur, however, only in conjunction with a prescriptive and epistemic merit skepticism that is both constant and general—but mitigated.<sup>35</sup>

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