

Hume and the Irrelevance of Warrant

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Section I: Introduction

There are many ways to interpret Hume's argument about induction. Traditionally, the argument has been treated as radically sceptical¹, where "sceptical" means that we have no reason whatsoever to treat any of our inferences from the observed to the unobserved as warranted, or to hold as justified any of the beliefs produced by such inferences.² In the last few decades, it has been argued that the scope of Hume's argument is more limited; he does not argue that any account of probable inference is unwarranted, but only that a "rationalist" or "deductivist" account suffers such a fate³. Such an interpretation leaves open the possibility that Hume's own account of probable inference, presented in the later sections of Part 3 of Book I of the *Treatise*⁴, is adequately warranted, and that our beliefs in the unobserved are justified. Although very different, both classes of interpretation presume that the argument is primarily concerned with the warrant of inference or the justification of belief.

Similarly, Hume's arguments in 1.4.1, "Of scepticism with regard to reason", have traditionally been held to be radically sceptical, showing that we have no reason to believe anything whatsoever, and that all our beliefs are completely unjustified.⁵ More recently, it has been argued that the scope of Hume's argument is more limited, targeted only at "rationalist" or "intellectualist" accounts of reason, and that Hume's own account of reason remains unscathed.⁶ Such an approach turns Hume's argument here, as in 1.3.6, into a *reductio* of traditional theories of reason, paving the way for Hume's own account to emerge unscathed.⁷ Once again, though very different, both these interpretations presume that Hume's arguments here are primarily concerned with the warrant of reason, and the justification of beliefs.

I wish to argue that Hume's main concern in these arguments has little to do with warrant or justification, though they can still be treated as sceptical. I will suggest, in the last section of this paper, that the sense in which Hume is a sceptic is quite different from the radical or extreme scepticism traditionally attributed to him. Hume argues in 1.3.6 that an appeal to reason cannot explain how we come to have beliefs in the unobserved, while in 1.4.1 he argues that, left to its own devices, reason cannot account for the fact that we retain beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments. Most interpreters of Hume, whether or not they treat him as an extreme sceptic, treat him as concerned with the justification of beliefs, beliefs the existence of which is deemed to be unproblematic. I think that his primary concern is with the creation and retention of beliefs,

especially beliefs in the unobserved. Questions of warrant and justification come later, and are largely irrelevant to these two famous arguments.⁸ Furthermore, I wish to argue that the scope of Hume's arguments are not limited to outmoded, rationalist conceptions of reason, nor is Hume's position meant to be simply negative. Hume's arguments show that reason cannot be considered as a faculty functioning in isolation from the feeling or sensitive side of our natures. It is not so much that our conception of reason has to be expanded; rather we have to see it as functioning in harmony with this other aspect of human nature.⁹ Note that I am not saying that Hume is not a sceptic; I am just saying that these arguments of Hume's are not intended to show lack of justification or warrant.

I shall proceed as follows. I first wish to concentrate attention on the *solutions* Hume gives to the problems he presents in 1.3.6, commonly called the problem of induction, and in 1.4.1, "Of scepticism with regard to reason". I shall then argue that these solutions make no sense at all considered as solutions to problems concerning justification, but make perfect sense if they are taken to be primarily about explanation. I shall then reassess those problems, arguing that they are indeed problems of explanation. After considering some objections to my interpretation, and answers to them, I shall conclude with an assessment of the scope of Hume's arguments, and the nature of his scepticism.

Section II: Two Solutions

Consider these two solutions of Hume's:

1) The origin of beliefs formed as the result of causal inference:

Hume's solution comes in two parts:

a) The nature of the inference:

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.... The inference... depends solely on the union of ideas.... The principles of union among ideas, I have reduc'd to three general ones, and have asserted, that the idea or impression of any object naturally introduces the idea of any other object, that is resembling, contiguous to, or connected with it. (THN 1.3.6.12-13, SBN 92)

Thus tho' causation be a *philosophical* relation, as implying contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction, yet 'tis only so far as it is a *natural* relation, and produces an union among our ideas, that we are able to reason upon it, or draw any inference from it. (THN 1.3.6.16, SBN 94)

b) The nature of belief:

Our ideas are copy'd from our impressions, and represent them in all their parts. When you wou'd any way vary the idea of a particular object, you can only increase or diminish its force and vivacity.¹⁰ If you make any other change on it, it represents a different object or impression.... So that as belief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity. An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION." (THN 1.3.7.5, SBN 96)

Hume sums up both parts of this solution on the next page:

Reason can never satisfy us that the existence of any one object does ever imply that of another; so that when we pass from the impression of one to the idea or belief of another, we are not determin'd by reason, but by custom or a principle of association. But belief is somewhat more than a simple idea. 'Tis a particular manner of forming an idea: And as the same idea can only be vary'd by a variation of its degrees of force and vivacity; it follows upon the whole, that belief is a lively idea produc'd by a relation to a present impression, according to the foregoing definition. (THN 1.3.7.6, SBN 97)¹¹

2) The retention of beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments:

...[A]fter the first and second decision; as the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure; tho' the principles of judgment, and the ballancing of opposite causes be the same as at the very beginning; yet their influence on the imagination, and the vigour they add to, or diminish from the thought, is by no means equal. Where the mind reaches not its objects with easiness and facility, the same principles have not the same effect as in a more natural conception of the ideas; nor does the imagination feel a sensation, which holds any proportion with that which arises from its common judgments and opinions. (THN 1.4.1.10, SBN 185)

No wonder, then, the conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy. (THN 1.4.1.11, SBN 186)

It seems to me very likely that someone coming to Hume studies for the first time, if asked what are the problems to which these positions of Hume's are presented as solutions, would respond as follows. The first problem is the question, how do we come to have beliefs in the unobserved? Hume's solution comes in two parts: he explains the inference from the observed to the unobserved by use of his principles of association, and he explains the degree of belief we have in the results of such inference in terms of his theory of belief as a more forceful and vivacious idea. The extra force and vivacity of the belief obtained as the result of causal inference comes from its association with an impression. The second problem is presented at the beginning of "Of scepticism with regard to reason". There Hume presents what he takes to be good arguments to show that knowledge resolves into probability and that probability reduces to nothing. But even though one "can find no error in the foregoing arguments" (THN 1.4.1.8, SBN 184), we still continue to believe. This is an apparent tension that must be resolved; Hume's solution is to appeal to his theory of belief and belief formation. The question of why we retain belief reduces to the question of why certain ideas retain their force and vivacity in the light of countervailing arguments. And Hume's solution is to explain how it is that certain sorts of complex and subtle arguments have little or no effect on the production or removal of that force and vivacity.

I think these apparently naive formulations of the problems Hume was grappling with in these important sections of the *Treatise* are in fact correct. I say apparently naive because though most students of Hume accept that the solutions as adumbrated above are roughly speaking adequate characterizations of Hume's solutions, many would regard the formulations of the problems as leaving out their most important feature. That is to say, the problems as I have outlined them make no mention of warrant or justification. But surely we all know that questions of justification are central to the problem of induction and scepticism with regard to reason. The problem of induction just is, it may be said, how and to what extent are we justified in believing the results of inductive inference? And the results of the early negative arguments of scepticism with regard to reason just are that all conclusions of demonstrative reasoning are only probable, and, further, that we have no warrant whatsoever in believing the results of probable inference. But I want to argue that these are incorrect construals of Hume's problems, and that the question of warrant or justification is by and large irrelevant to Hume's concerns, at least in these sections.

Section III: The Principle of Charity Argument

According to Hume, it is undeniable that we have certain beliefs in the unobserved, and retain them even in the face of sceptical arguments. Hume is concerned with the explanation of how it is that we come to have these beliefs, and how it is we manage to retain them. The justification of these beliefs, and the warrant of the sort of reasoning that produces them, i.e., probable reasoning, are not issues Hume is concerned with in these sections. My best argument for this view rests on the principle of charity. Suppose all sides agree on my characterization of Hume's solutions. If the problems are as I described them, then these solutions are right on target. We may disagree about whether they are ultimately the best solutions, are even whether they are any good at all. But at least they squarely address the problems and attempt to find adequate solutions for them. But if the problems are really problems about justification and warrant, then Hume's solutions are hopeless. They make no mention of warrant or justification and thus completely avoid the allegedly central issue. I am not the first to have noticed that there is a tension between what are standardly taken to be Hume's problems, and the solutions to them that he offers. Until recently, the most important way to resolve the tension is to treat Hume's arguments as directed against an outmoded conception of reason.

Section IV: Hume and an Outmoded Conception of Reason

According to this line of thought,¹² Hume is concerned to attack, in both the negative argument about causal reasoning, and in "Of scepticism with regard to reason", an outmoded conception of reason. Hume shows reason, on the outmoded conception, to be unwarranted, and the beliefs it produces to be unjustified. Both his negative arguments and his positive arguments are concerned with justification, but his negative arguments are not universal in scope. They leave room for a conception of reason, developed in the later stages of Part 3 of Book I, that are immune to the negative arguments. This position is internally consistent, but doesn't jibe with any reading of the text that sees Hume's solutions as not primarily concerned with warrant. Perhaps the most striking textual evidence against this view is that in the middle of Hume's presentation of his positive conception of probable reasoning, he repeats with emphasis his negative claim: "*that there is nothing in any object, consider'd in itself, which can afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion beyond it; and, that even after the observation of the frequent or constant conjunction of objects, we have no reason to draw any inference concerning any object beyond those of which we have had experience*" (THN 1.3.12.20, SBN 139). Now if the original negative argument was about justification, then this presentation of its conclusion must be as well. But if Hume's positive account is supposed to include an account of the warrant of his own theory of reason, why does he reiterate his negative conclusion, *with full generality*, in the

middle of his positive account? My main concern about this interpretation of Hume is that it doesn't do justice to the scope of Hume's negative arguments. This is an issue I will return to later in this paper.

Section V: Why Warrant seems important

For the moment, let us assume that my reading is correct, and ask why anyone would interpret Hume's negative arguments as being largely concerned with justification and the warrant of reason, when his solutions so clearly are not? There is one historical consideration. Hume's contemporary critics, and his 18th and 19th century successors, did not see him as essentially a sceptic about probable reasoning, and about reason in general. They characterized him as a metaphysical sceptic about causation.¹³ The issue wasn't epistemological justification about beliefs; it was the metaphysical status of causation. In fact, the earliest formulation of our modern problem of induction that I have found is in Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*, published in 1912. And even there, the problem is not formulated with reference to Hume. My hunch is that as that problem became established at the beginning of modern analytic philosophy, and that as philosophy became dominated by questions of epistemological justification, it was natural enough to read into Hume the first formulation of the modern epistemological problem of justification. And by extension, it was natural enough to read "Of scepticism with regard to reason" the same way.

But scholars don't usually read texts in one way without any grounds at all, and I am not suggesting there is nothing in Hume to support the common reading. The primary grounds, I suspect, for the common reading of Hume as being largely concerned with warrant, is that problems we have been discussing are formulated in terms of, are indeed explicitly about, reason. If ever a concept was laden with normativity, it is 'reason'. It might seem virtually impossible to make a positive or negative argument about reason without raising questions of warrant and justification. If Hume shows that beliefs formed as conclusions of probable inferences are not based on reason, what else could this mean except that such beliefs are unreasonable, that we would hold them without justification, and that the process by which we arrive at them is unwarranted? When Hume shows that the probability of any belief must reduce to zero, what else could this mean except that we have no reason to hold these beliefs? I will argue that this account misunderstands Hume's account of reason in general, and in particular misunderstands what Hume meant by "determined by reason". Reason is the inferential faculty, the faculty that discovers truth by means of inference. And when Hume says we are not determined by reason, when we come to have a belief in the unobserved on the basis of experience, he is saying that such beliefs are not produced by that faculty, at least as traditionally

conceived.

Hume is concerned, in these early sections of Part 3, not with the questions of whether probable reasoning is warranted, and whether the conclusions of probable reasoning are justified, but with the question of how we come by beliefs in the unobserved *at all*. Note that in some respects, this is a more radical worry than the traditional one. It is undeniable that in certain circumstances we come to have beliefs in the observed. The question is, how do these beliefs arise? One possible answer is that they are produced by the faculty of reason, that “we are determin’d by reason to make the transition” (THN 1.3.6.4, SBN 88) from the observed impression to the unobserved belief. Hume's negative argument shows that this answer doesn't work, and he goes on to give his own answer in terms of the association of ideas and his theory of belief. The problem is, how are these beliefs produced, not how are they justified. The question of warrant is largely irrelevant at this point. The conclusion of Hume's negative argument about probable reason is not that probable reasoning is unreasonable, but that the activity of probable reasoning, i.e., the production of beliefs, cannot be explained by traditional theories of reason.¹⁴

There is ample textual evidence for this view. In the *Treatise*, Hume asks “Whether experience produces the idea by means of the understanding or of the imagination; whether we are determin’d by reason to make the transition, or by a certain association and relation of perceptions.” (THN 1.3.6.4, SBN 88-89)¹⁵ The talk is of “production” and “make the transition”. He is concerned with the production of beliefs, of the transition from observed impressions to unobserved ideas. But the traditional view requires us to treat all this as a concern with the justification of a belief whose existence is somehow unproblematic. And again, in the *Abstract*, Hume says “However easy this step may seem, reason would never, to all eternity, be able to make it.” (THN Abs 16, SBN 652). Hume's point is, “How do we make this step?”, not, “Once made, how is this step justified?” I have already shown that Hume states his negative conclusion, and his solution to the problem thus created, explicitly as one about how beliefs are produced, not about how and to what extent beliefs (whose production is somehow unproblematic) are justified. In the *Abstract*, Hume emphasizes that his solution to the problems depend on his account of belief and that, in approaching them this way, he is answering “a new question unthought of by philosophers.” (THN Abs 17, SBN 652) This point is also emphasized in the *Appendix* (THN App 1-9, SBN 623-27). Further evidence can be gleaned from how Hume sets up his negative argument. Hume subdivides the task of explaining causal inferences, which he takes to be inferences from the observed (an impression) to the unobserved (an idea of something existing, even though we have not observed it), into three sub-tasks:

First, The original impression. *Secondly*, The transition to the idea of the connected cause or effect. *Thirdly*, The nature and qualities of that idea. (THN 1.3.5.1, SBN 84)

Hume presents the first issue only to set it aside. We do not and cannot know the ultimate causes of our impressions of the senses. The second issue is a matter of explaining how we get from the observed impression to the unobserved idea. What Hume has to say about this transition comes in Section vi, "Of the inference from the impression to the idea". The problem throughout is how we get from the one to the other. Hume shows that traditional accounts of reason fail to explain this transition. Hume gives his own explanation in terms of the association of ideas. Having explained how the idea is produced, Hume then goes on to explain why it is a belief, and not a mere conception. This is the third part of his explanation.

Section VI Hume and the problem of induction

I should emphasize that I am not denying that there is a problem of induction that is largely concerned with justification. I am claiming only that that is not Hume's problem. Hume's problem, with which what I call the negative argument about probable reasoning is concerned, is that reason cannot explain the production of a certain class of ideas. Nor am I denying that there is an important relation between the problem of induction and Hume's negative argument about probable reasoning. I am denying only that the relation is one of identity. Finally, I am not denying that the issue of warrant or justification is important, and important for Hume. It is one thing to explain how beliefs arise from past experience. It is another to argue that the results of such probable reasonings are preferable to the results of superstition and bigotry.¹⁶ But I am denying that these issues are central to Hume's concerns in the early sections of Part 3, and in 1.4.1 as well.

Section VII Probable Reasoning and Warrant

There are several other issues about probable reasoning, warrant, belief and justification. First, it is, of course, true that, as Hume goes on to develop his own account of probable reasoning, there is a role that normativity plays. There is no doubt that he has in mind correct and incorrect instances of probable reasoning, and appropriate and inappropriate ways of forming beliefs. Contiguity and resemblance can inappropriately enliven an idea so as to make it a belief or at least belief-like, and we must resort to general rules to counteract their effect (THN 1.3.9.6, SBN 110). There are those species of probability that are "receiv'd by philosophers, and allow'd to be reasonable foundations of belief and opinion" (THN1.3.13.1, SBN 143) But there is also

unphilosophical probability, and again we must resort to general rules to counteract its effect (THN 1.3.13.11-12, SBN 149-50). Most significantly, there are “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects” (1.3.15). That is to say, there are right and wrong ways of making causal judgments. All this is undeniable evidence of normativity in Hume’s account of probable reason in Part 3 of Book 1 of the *Treatise*. His account of the origin of our beliefs is, to this limited extent, an account of justified beliefs. But these issues don’t arise until after the negative argument of 1.3.6 has been presented, and don’t show that that negative argument was primarily concerned with justification. Furthermore, these normative issues are of limited scope; the big issue of the authority of reason is not raised until much later. That is, Hume can present a theory of reason, both demonstrative and probable, with a criterion of right and wrong ways of using reason, while leaving it an open question whether we ought to choose the dictates of reason over, say, superstition and bigotry. We might have a normative criterion for the correct use of reason, but wonder whether reason itself is something to be followed. Consider Roman augury by the inspection of a sacrificed sheep’s entrails. There is clearly a right and wrong way of performing such actions, and the practice is clearly normative; priests devoted lifetimes to developing their skills. But we might still wonder whether the practice was warranted. I am suggesting that Hume provided us with normative criteria for correct and incorrect uses of reason in Part 3, but didn’t really consider the deeper questions of the warrant and authority of reason until later in Part 4.

Secondly let us remember that since Hume’s argument, as I interpret it, is not about warrant, then *a fortiori* it is not about the denial of warrant. Suppose, counterfactually, that the results of Hume’s argument showed that we are determined by reason when we make causal inferences. It would follow that probable reasoning was an appropriate activity of the faculty of reason functioning properly. Probable reasoning would then be warranted in virtue of being based on reason, i.e., being an activity of the faculty of reason. We could then go on to raise the larger question of the warrant of the faculty of reason in general, but that would be another matter. It does not follow from this that since Hume has shown that we are not determined by reason when we make probable causal inferences, that he has shown that such inferences are not warranted. It follows only that such inferences are not warranted in the way it had been traditionally held that reason bestows warrant. There may be (and had better be) some other way to warrant such inferences. So the conclusion of Hume’s negative argument about causal reasoning doesn’t settle the issue of warrant; it leaves it open.

Thirdly, let us consider the Uniformity Principle. One might argue in the following way: suppose the overall drift of Hume’s account is as I say. Nonetheless, one might argue, the issue of the warrant of probable reasoning and the justification of beliefs plays a crucial role in Hume’s

negative argument, the argument against explaining probable reasoning by appeal to the faculty of reason. Hume claims that "If reason determin'd us, it wou'd proceed upon that principle, *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*" (THN 1.3.6.4, SBN 89) (the Uniformity Principle). Hume then says that he will "consider all the arguments, upon which such a proposition may be suppos'd to be founded" and "see whether they afford any just conclusion of this nature." This talk of "the founding of arguments" and of "just conclusions" is, surely, normative, and so, it might be argued, the warrant of reasoning and the justification of beliefs must play a crucial role. I could accept the apparent full force of this argument without it affecting the main point I want to make, but in fact the argument has less force than might first appear. My main point is that Hume's primary purpose is not to show that beliefs which extend beyond that which we have experienced are unjustified, but to show that their very existence cannot be accounted for by reason. And this point, I maintain, can be applied to the Uniformity Principle itself, and our belief in that principle. The concern isn't whether the Uniformity Principle is justified. The concern is whether it is something we can believe or know, prior to our engaging in probable reasoning, so that it might explain how we do in fact reason probably. If it were available to us, it would serve, much as the idea of necessary connection might have served, to facilitate the transition from the impression to the idea. Moreover, it would facilitate the transition in such a way that in making the transition, we would be "determin'd by reason". Hume's conclusion is that it is not something that we believe or know prior to our engaging in probable reasoning, and so it cannot be used to explain the origin of that practice. It may be true that, just like any other belief, if the Uniformity Principle were a conclusion of reason, prior to our engaging in probable reasoning, then it would be a justified belief. But it is also true that, as for any other belief, just because it is not initially warranted by reason, it does not follow that it has no explanation at all, or that we fail to think that it is true. And this is just as well, because Hume argues that after we do engage in the practice of probable reasoning, explained in Hume's way, we do come to believe in the Uniformity Principle and make use of it in some of our more reflective causal reasonings.¹⁷ For example, our appeal to the principle allows us to make a causal judgment after only one experiment. Probable reasoning, its origins explained Hume's way, can account for the Uniformity Principle, but the Uniformity Principle can't account for the origins of probable reasoning.

Fourthly, there is the question of whether or not Hume considers beliefs to be the result of reason. We must not forget that, like the Roman's did augury, Hume treats reason as being primarily concerned with truth. He more than once¹⁸ describes reason as including, and perhaps being exhausted by, "our demonstrative and probable reasonings". Now the beliefs we have as a

result of probable reasoning are true or false, and they are, *ex hypothesi*, the products of probable reasoning. Such beliefs are then the result of reason. Furthermore, Hume must be able to say this in order to make the contrast he needs when considering reason and the passions, and reason and moral distinctions. On the other hand, Hume denies that we are “determin’d by reason” when we form our beliefs in the unobserved. So Hume appears both to affirm and deny that such beliefs are the result of reason. Recall the account outlined in Section IV above. According to this view, Hume was attacking an outmoded conception of reason. Proponents of this view have a way out of our current problem: they can claim that when Hume denies that we are “determined by reason” in the production of causal beliefs, he is speaking only of an outmoded rationalist conception of reason. But by Books II and III, when he contrasts reason and the passions, he is using his own, new conception of reason, as developed in Part 3 of Book I. In showing that when we make the transition from the observed to the unobserved we are not determined by reason, Hume has shown that reason, considered as a faculty that operates on our ideas and discovers connections among them, cannot explain how we make this transition. Our beliefs in the unobserved must be explained in another way. Hume never wavers from this position throughout Book I of the *Treatise*. He reaffirms it, for instance, in 1.4.1, “Of scepticism with regard to reason”, when he says that the sceptical arguments of that chapter have been put forward

only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv’d from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.* (THN 1.4.1.8, SBN 183)

On the other hand, these words are not purely negative. At the stage in the *Treatise* in which they occur, Hume has just finished giving, in the latter half of Part 3 of Book 1, his own account of probable reasoning and belief. Furthermore, he remained justly proud of these positive accounts. In the *Abstract*, he says

The celebrated *Monsieur Leibniz* has observed it to be a defect in the common systems of logic, that they are very copious when they explain the operations of the understanding in the forming of demonstrations, but are too concise when they treat of probabilities... The author of the *treatise of human nature* seems to have been sensible of this defect..., and has endeavoured, as much as he can, to supply it. (THN Abs 4, SBN 647)

And of belief, he says

What then is this *belief*? And how does it differ from the simple conception of any thing?
Here is a new question unthought of by philosophers. (THN Abs 17, SBN 652)

Obviously, Hume is not simply a negative sceptic about probable reasoning and our belief in the unobserved. On the other hand, it will not do simply to say that Hume sketched his own account as an alternative to existing alternatives, that his account is just one of many that fill the same role. By continually emphasizing that probable reasoning is not, in the end, based on reason, Hume shows that he is not just giving an alternative account of probable reasoning, but is changing the whole picture of the structure of human understanding. Hume's task is much easier to understand when one realizes that both the problems he faces, and the solutions he gives, have more to do with the explanation of the nature and occurrence of beliefs than with their justification. Hume thinks both that probable reasoning is not based on reason and that he can give an account of probable reasoning in other terms that is still really an account of reasoning. This combination is only possible once one realizes that to hold that probable reasoning is not based on reason does not imply that such reasoning is unreasonable or unwarranted, or that the beliefs produced by such a process are unjustified. Hume goes to develop an account of probable reasoning and belief formation, not as the activity of an independently functioning faculty of reason, but in terms of impressions, ideas, their properties, and the way they interact.

Section VIII "Scepticism with regard to reason"

As with probable reasoning, so with "Scepticism with regard to reason". It is not my purpose to give a full account of Hume's arguments in *Treatise* 1.4.1, but only to adjust our view of what the negative arguments early in the section really show, in light of Hume's solution to the problem thus posed. In the probable reasoning case the issue was the *origin* of our beliefs; in the scepticism with regard to reason case, the problem is the *retention* of beliefs. Hume's concern is to explain the presence of beliefs, not their justification.

As in the probable reasoning case, it is tempting to think of the arguments in 1.4.1 as being directed toward the conclusion that we are not justified in holding any belief that is a conclusion of reason, and that reason itself is unwarranted. But then Hume's solution seems to miss the point; explaining how we nonetheless retain our beliefs in the light of these sceptical arguments says nothing about their justification. Hume's solution would have no impact whatsoever on the conclusion of the negative argument. But if the point of the negative argument is to raise the question of why we continue to have the beliefs we have, in spite of sceptical arguments, then his solution, whatever one thinks of its merits, is at least on target.

Hume describes the result of the first negative argument, in 1.4.1, as "all knowledge degenerates into probability" (THN 1.4.1.1, SBN 180) or "all knowledge resolves itself into probability" (THN 1.4.1.4, SBN 181). It is tempting to think of this result as maintaining that this sceptical argument shows that, contrary to appearances, there is no such thing as demonstration.¹⁹ But this would be mistaken. The process of demonstration yields knowledge and certainty. Hume's first argument purports to show that, as we are prone to error, we must make a probability judgment about whether we have performed the demonstration correctly. Consider the very first sentence of this section: "In all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error" (THN 1.4.1.1, SBN 180). This doesn't cast doubt on the existence of demonstration, and the production of certainty and knowledge by demonstration; it casts doubt on the adequate functioning of the faculty by which demonstrative reasoning is produced. Demonstration produces a result which is believed with full certainty.²⁰ But consideration of our fallible natures may lessen the degree of conviction with which that belief is held. We have started down the slippery slope. Note that the subject matter here is not the warrant of demonstrative reason (Hume is not arguing that there is no such thing as correct demonstration), nor is it the justification of the belief to which it leads. It is the degree of conviction with which that belief is held.

Section IX Suspension of judgment

Then Hume, of course, goes on to argue that the same sort of consideration can apply to any probability judgment, including the probability judgment we may make about the result of a piece of demonstrative reasoning. Our inherent fallibility is always a consideration, weakening the force with which the belief is held. As this sort of judgment can reiterate, the result is that the degree of belief is eventually reduced to nothing; we are left with a mere idea, with none of the force and vivacity that characterizes a belief: "Let our first belief be never so strong, it must infallibly perish by passing thro' so many new examinations, of which each diminishes somewhat of its force and vigour" (THN 1.4.1.6, SBN 183). The point isn't that a belief, with full force and vigour, is seen to be unjustified; rather, it is that because the force and vigour continually decrease, the idea seems in danger of ceasing to be a belief at all.

It is not my purpose to evaluate this argument. There are many well known objections. A probability judgment about the credence of a probability judgment might just as well increase the probability of the original judgment as decrease it. And there is no reason to suppose that a succession of reiterated judgments will end with a zero degree of probability. As Hume never repeats this argument, outside of the *Treatise*, unlike the negative argument about probable

reasoning, it may well be that he later came to see it as flawed. But we should bear in mind that if the issue is the force and vivacity that distinguishes a belief from a mere idea, then considerations of justification and mathematical degrees of probability according to the calculus may be irrelevant, and these objections may miss the point. In one place, Hume characterizes his conclusion this way: "If belief, therefore, were a simple act of the thought, without any peculiar manner of conception, or the addition of a force and vivacity, it must infallibly destroy itself, and in every case terminate in a *total suspension of judgment*" (THN 1.4.1.8, SBN 184, emphasis mine). The point is precisely not that we end up with a highly reliable belief in the falseness of our original belief; rather, we end up with a suspension of judgment, that is to say, with no belief at all. We must remember that Hume is providing the argument of a sceptic here, not one of a negative dogmatist.²¹

If Hume is not concerned with justification in this section, why does he consider the arguments with which he is dealing sceptical? If these arguments do not purport to show that the beliefs we hold as a result of probable reason are not justified, in what sense are they sceptical? The arguments are directed against the faculty of reason, which Hume conceives of at this stage as the conjunction of properties of the imagination that account for our demonstrative and probable reasonings. The product of demonstrative reasoning, and intuition, is knowledge; the product of causal and probable reasoning is belief. But the conviction we have concerning a known proposition is a conviction that it is true, and the assent we give to a belief is assent to it as true. The degree of assent, or amount of force and vivacity, just is what we consider to be the likelihood of the belief's being true. "Our reason", Hume says in the opening paragraph of this section, "must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect." If it turns out that the products of reason lose their force and vivacity, then they will cease to be beliefs. That is, they will cease to be ideas to which we assent as true. That would be a sceptical result, but not because it is a matter of showing beliefs to be unjustified. It is a matter of showing that they cease to be beliefs, i.e., they cease to be things to which we assent as true. Furthermore, Hume's response to these sceptical arguments is perfectly appropriate: in showing that beliefs survive, i.e., retain their force and vivacity, he has shown that we still assent to them, i.e., we still take them to be true. I will return to the issue of Hume's scepticism in the last section of this paper.

Section X Evidence as "evidentness"

In the reiterated series of probability judgments that appear to lead to total suspension of judgment, Hume says the first judgment about the original judgment “must weaken still farther our first evidence... and so on *in infinitum*; till at last there remains nothing of the original probability” (THN 1.4.1.6, SBN 182). In THN 1.4.1.8, SBN T 184, he again speaks of “continually diminishing the original evidence”, and when he repeats the result of this argument in “Conclusion of this book”, he says: “For I have already shown, that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life” (THN 1.4.7.7, SBN 267-8). It is difficult not to think of “evidence” here in an epistemological way. Surely, one might argue, “weakening evidence” is a matter of reducing evidential grounds, and hence the argument here must be about justification, or its lack.

This point loses much of its apparent force when one considers the possibility that Hume’s talk of the evidence of a belief concerns, not its grounds, but its degree of *evidentness*. That is to say, a belief’s degree of evidence is the degree of whatever it is that turns an idea into that belief, ie. its force and vivacity. What the sceptical arguments purport to do is to reduce the force and vivacity of any belief and threaten to turn it into a mere idea.²²

One can argue against reading “evidence” as “evidential grounds”, and hence for reading “evidence” as “evidentness” in the following way. How could a subsequent judgment affect the original evidence, when “evidence” is treated as “evidential grounds”? It is not as if the original evidence turns out to be false or misleading; it is just that it ceases to have the effect on us that it originally did. What is weakened is my confidence or degree of belief in the first judgment. And it is weakened because we have come to think we may have made a mistake in evaluating the relationship between the evidential grounds and our first judgment. The evidence, as evidential grounds, still stands; it is just that it no longer has the effect on us that it first did. The evidence, as evidentness of our belief, is weakened.

Further grounds for treating “evidence” as “evidentness” in 1.4.1 is that Hume, as we shall see, frequently uses “conviction” as an alternative term for “evidence”, e.g., in the very last sentence of the section. But there is no doubt that for Hume the “conviction” of a belief just is the degree of force and vivacity the idea possesses

Whatever one thinks of the matter in 1.4.1, it must be admitted that there are cases where one is compelled to interpret “evidence” as “evidentness”. Perhaps the clearest example is in THN 1.3.13.3, SBN 144, where Hume is speaking of the difficulty of retaining a high degree of belief

in the conclusion of a probable argument that takes us far from the source of that conviction, i.e., far from the original impression which provides the extra force and vivacity that turns an idea into a belief:

‘Tis from the original impression, that the vivacity of all ideas is deriv’d, by means of the customary transition of the imagination; and ‘tis evident this vivacity must gradually decay in proportion to the distance, and must lose somewhat in each transition...Nay ‘tis seldom such reasonings produce any conviction; and one must have a very strong and firm imagination to preserve the evidence to the end, where it passes thro’ so many stages.²³

Here as elsewhere, Hume treats “conviction” and “evidence” as terms that refer to the force and vivacity that turn mere ideas into beliefs.

It is true that in at least one place, Hume uses “evidence” to mean something more like “evidential grounds”. In the famous words in “Of Miracles”, he says “A wise man, therefore proportions his belief to the evidence.” On the other hand, in the sentence immediately preceding this one, he speaks of “evidence” as “degrees of assurance”, i.e., “evidentness”. Furthermore, it must be remembered that in the *Enquiry*, as in the Appendix to the *Treatise* and in the *Abstract*, Hume drops the claim, so distinctive of his treatment of belief in the *Treatise*, that what distinguishes beliefs from mere ideas is the very same thing that distinguishes all ideas from impressions, ie. force and vivacity. So it is not clear that selections from the *Enquiry* can be used to settle disputes of this nature concerning the *Treatise*.

Section XI Hume’s Solution

So Hume's answer to the sceptical argument in 1.4.1 is entirely appropriate. In Hume's own theory, the degree of confidence in our beliefs is a matter of an idea's having extra force and vivacity. The complexity and abstruseness of the sceptical argument is such that, as it reiterates, its "influence on the imagination" (THN 1.4.1.10, SBN 185) weakens, so that it can have little or no impact on the force and vivacity of an established belief. Hume's argument here works only if one remembers, not only his theory of belief, which is crucial for understanding both 1.4.1. and the negative and positive arguments about probable reasoning, but also his theory of reasoning, which has the following feature: as the chain of ideas which constitutes an instance of reasoning lengthens, the force and vivacity transmitted to the last idea in the chain tends to lessen. This feature of Hume's theory of reasoning has its origins in his dealing with reasoning as essentially concerned with discovering the connection of ideas, and it is related to Descartes' and Locke's theory, where demonstration is less certain than intuition, because of its greater complexity. For

Hume, instances of complex reasoning where the force and vivacity of the conclusion isn't lessened require special explanation, which Hume frequently gives.²⁴ But the sceptical arguments of 1.4.1 are not among them, and our beliefs survive intact. We already knew *that* our beliefs survived; Hume argues that only *his* theory of reasoning and belief can explain this. The unique capacity of his theory to explain the persistence of our beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments Hume considers perhaps the greatest strength of his theory. As he says in another place, where I suspect he is looking ahead to the arguments of 1.4.1: "Without considering these judgments as the effects of custom on the imagination, we shall lose ourselves in perpetual contradiction and absurdity." (THN 1.3.13.20, SBN 155)

Like most of Hume's arguments, the arguments of 1.4.1, both the sceptical ones and Hume's responses, cannot be understood in isolation. To understand 1.4.1, we must also understand Hume's overall project of a science of human nature. At the very least, we must understand, 1) the sparse building blocks of impressions, ideas and their interrelations, 2) his theory of reasoning as a chain of ideas and his theory of belief as a forceful mode of conception, and 3) the point of the negative arguments about probable reasoning early on Part 3 and his positive account presented later on. If we see the sceptical arguments in 1.4.1 as a matter of epistemological justification, or as showing that we have no reason to believe anything at all, then Hume's response seems baffling and inappropriate. But if we see the arguments as showing how our degree of confidence in our beliefs might lessen on reflection, then his answer, which shows how the right theory of belief and reasoning explains why our confidence does not in fact lessen, seems entirely appropriate and in keeping with his overall account.

Section XII Worries about warrant

Book I is called "Of the Understanding", and Part 3 is called "Of knowledge and probability". Part 3 is where Hume criticizes alternative pictures, and develops his own account of reason, both with respect to knowledge and probability. Reading Part 3 in abstraction from our own concerns with justification on the one hand, and from worries about Cartesian doubt on the other, it should perhaps not surprise us that the issues of warrant and justification are not at the fore. It is perhaps more surprising that Part 4, "Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy" starts with a section largely unconcerned with warrant and justification. To some extent, Hume is here talking of systems that are not his own and is making sceptical arguments the subject of his discussion. If Hume had picked, as his target for exposition and dissection, a sceptical argument we were familiar with, either from the ancient or early modern period, we would be in a better position to understand and evaluate his claims. To a certain extent, this is the approach Hume takes in the last section of the 1st *Enquiry*. But in the *Treatise*, it is pretty difficult on careful

reading - or so I have argued - to see the concerns with justification or warrant where we would expect them. Nonetheless, 1.4.1 does present sceptical arguments. Hume speaks mainly of the diminution of the original probability or evidence, i.e., the decline in the feature that distinguishes beliefs from mere ideas. This is caused by our awareness of “the weakness of that faculty, which judges” (THN 1.4.1.6, SBN 182). So part of what we are doing, when we consider these sceptical arguments, is reflecting on “the truth and fidelity of our faculties” (THN 1.4.1.6, SBN 182). This is a sceptical argument; it produces doubt. But it doesn’t produce it by focusing on warrant or justification. It focuses on whether reason, or the inferential faculty, reliably produces truth.

Immediately after concluding “Let our first belief be never so strong, it must infallibly perish by passing thro’ so many new examinations, of which each diminishes somewhat of its force and vigour” (THN 1.4.1.6, SBN 182-3), Hume goes on to make this contrast: “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.” It is one thing to consider the objects on which I reason; it is another and more serious matter to consider the “natural fallibility of my judgment” and “the truth and fidelity of our faculties.”

Hume shows great confidence in accounting for the extra feeling that turns an idea into a belief at the beginning of 1.4.2. “We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but ‘tis vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.” (THN 1.4.2.1, SBN 187) Once again, we will expect Hume to account for both the idea of the existence of body and for what accounts for the extra force and vivacity that turns this idea into a belief. And, once again, the issue isn’t one of justification. Nature has esteemed the issue of such beliefs “an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations.” But in this section Hume will face something he has not yet faced, or at least not faced head on: the question of whether and to what extent our beliefs are true. To believe something is to believe it to be true; and though we believe “the principle concerning the existence of body”, we “cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity.” The problem is that Hume has already argued, as far back as 1.2.6, that we have no idea of external existence. So, in this section, he is faced with the task of not only accounting for the extra force and vivacity that turns an idea into a belief, but also that of explaining the origin of a simulacrum of an idea we know in advance to be, not only false, but impossible. The talk becomes more and more of “fallacy and illusion” (THN 1.4.2.5, SBN 189), of “loose standards of equality” (THN 1.4.2.22, SBN 198), of principles “too weak to support alone so vast an edifice” (THN 1.4.2.23, SBN 198), of explaining why we “not only *feign* but

believe this continu'd existence.” (THN 1.4.2.41, SBN 208) Hume finally realizes that he is trying to explain why we believe something that is not just false, but incoherent. By the end of 1.4.2, the confidence with which Hume opened this section is completely gone²⁵. He says:

“I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou'd be the conclusion, I shou'd draw from the whole of my reasoning. 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. (THN 1.4.2.56, SBN 217)

He speaks of “gross illusions” and “absurdity”, and finally says, “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, SBN 218)? Hume starts to worry about justification when he starts to try to explain beliefs he knows to be false. And this worry continues throughout Part 4. In section 4, he concludes “there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses” (THN 1.4.4.15, SBN 231); and in section 6 (“Of personal identity”), the talk is of nothing so much as fictions. It is no wonder then, that by section 7 (“Conclusion of this book”), Hume appears to be close to an intellectual breakdown: “We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all.” (THN 1.4.7.7, SBN 268) Hume does face the question of warrant head on at this point, and gives the beginning of an answer, one which is in fact much better developed in the 1st *Enquiry*. But that is the subject for another paper.²⁶

Section XIII “Reason alone” and the scope of Hume’s arguments

Part of what Hume shows in his negative argument concerning probable reasoning is that when we form beliefs about the unobserved, the mind “is not determin'd by reason” (THN 1.3.6.12, SBN 92), and his solution shows, in part, that “all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation” (THN 1.3.8.12, SBN 103). Hume summarized the negative results of 1.4.1 as showing “that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.” (THN 1.4.7.7, SBN 267-68), and his solution shows, in part, that “*belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.*” (THN 1.4.1.8, SBN 183) But what is the scope of these claims? Is Hume arguing that no account of reason, not even his own, can explain the origin and persistence of beliefs? It appears not. Hume explicitly calls probable inferences “reasonings”²⁷. And the results of such “reasonings” are beliefs. Indeed, beliefs are distinguished from similar belief-like states precisely because they are

the result of causal reasoning (THN 1.3.9.7, SBN 110). Causal reasoning just is the process of belief formation, where beliefs are distinguished from mere ideas by their extra force and vivacity, and reasoning is the process that produces not just the presence of the idea, but also its extra force and vivacity. If Humean reason is the faculty that produces inferences or “reasonings”, and if such inferences have beliefs as their upshot, then the workings of reason explain both the origin of beliefs in the unobserved, and the persistence of beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments. Furthermore, in Book II, Hume argues that “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” (THN 2.3.3.1, SBN 413), and in Book III, he argues, partly on the basis of Book II’s claim, that the “rules of morality, therefore, are not the conclusions of our reason” (THN 3.1.1.6, SBN 457). But if the conclusion of Book I is that reason, under any conception, does not explain the origin and persistence of our beliefs, these later claims are vacuous: if there is no substantive role that reason plays, then nothing is ruled out by the apparently controversial claims about reason, the passions and morality.

We have, then, a genuine dilemma. On the one hand, Hume claims that when we form beliefs in the unobserved, we are “not determin’d by reason”. On the other hand, causal or probable reasoning just is a matter of producing beliefs. If reason is the faculty that produces inferences or reasonings, then to deny that when we make such inferences we are “determin’d by reason” seems virtually contradictory.

Those who claim that Hume's negative arguments are directed only against outmoded "rationalist" conceptions of reason have a clear response. Their obvious move is to say that the negative arguments about reason in Book I are limited in scope, applying only to conceptions of reason that Hume wished to argue against. On this view, Hume’s own account of reason survives unscathed. Those who have held this view have typically thought that Hume’s arguments about reason, both negative and positive, primarily concern themselves with warrant and justification. We could improve matters by taking this approach, but changing our conception of Hume’s arguments so that we see them as being primarily concerned about the explanation of the origin and persistence of beliefs. At some suitably general level of description, this must be correct. It would be idle to pretend that Hume had no account of reason, different from his opponents, that he thought could better explain our beliefs. That would be tantamount to not taking his positive accounts seriously.

But there are problems even with this modified view. Hume’s negative claims certainly appear to be general in scope, and there is no hint that he doesn’t intend them to be applied to any account, even his own. The negative claim about probable reasoning is repeated with full generality in

THN 1.3.12.20, SBN 139, right in the middle of the development of his positive account, and the conclusion of the negative argument of 1.4.1 is repeated, again with full generality, in “Conclusion to this book”: “For I have already shown, that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.” (THN 1.4.7.7, SBN 267-68)

This picture replaces one dilemma with another. Treating Hume’s negative arguments about reasoning as having fully general scope seems to devalue his positive account and to render vacuous the claims about reason and the passions in Book II, and reason and morality in Book III. Treating his negative arguments as having a more limited scope seems to devalue the negative arguments, and goes against Hume’s repeated assertions of their force, assertions he makes with all the appearance of full generality. One way out is take seriously the qualification Hume makes when he summarizes the argument of 1.4.1. There he says reason, or the understanding, *when it acts alone* utterly subverts itself. The qualification “acts alone” is reminiscent of a similar qualification Hume makes when discussing reason and motivation: “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” (THN 2.3.3.1, SBN 413).²⁸ An attractive way of accounting for the force of “alone” in the passions and morals case²⁹ provides us with a clue about how to resolve our current dilemma.

When Hume says that reason alone can never provide a motivating impulse, and hence of itself cannot account for moral distinctions, he does not intend to rule out the following sort of case: Judy, Elizabeth and Carol all tell me that Sarah is a good and kindly person. On the basis of this testimony, I conclude that Sarah is virtuous, and this may motivate me to form various thoughts and to attempt various deeds. But my conclusion is a result of a paradigm piece of probable reasoning. How is it compatible with Hume’s well known limitations on the effects of reason on motivating impulses and morality?³⁰ One suggestion I find attractive is as follows: let us suppose that there could be a creature, capable of forming ideas as copies of impressions, and of performing acts of Humean reasoning, but who was incapable of feeling any passions or sentiments. Apart from receiving impressions of sensation, such a creature’s thought processes would be limited to “reason alone”. Could such a creature perform the act of reasoning that results in the conclusion that Sarah is virtuous? The answer is, surely, no, and not because of any flaw in her reasoning ability. *Ex hypothesi*, that ability remains intact. Rather, the problem is that as she has never experienced any passions or sentiments, she has never had the relevant impression from which to form the idea of virtue, and *a fortiori*, she will never be in a position to have that idea, as it applies to Sarah, enlivened so as to have the belief that Sarah is virtuous.

That reason of itself can never account for moral distinctions means that a creature with all her rational capacities intact, but deficient in passions and sentiments, will be incapable of making moral judgments. It does not mean that moral judgments can never be the conclusions of arguments. On the contrary, the fully Humean being is capable of understanding some arguments closed to the purely rational creature.³¹

I suggest a similar approach should be taken with our current conundrum. When Hume says that the understanding, when it acts alone, entirely subverts itself, he means that a purely rational creature, whose nature is, apart from the ability to experience sense impressions, entirely without a sensitive part, will be in danger of falling prey to the sceptical arguments of 1.4.1. In this context, a purely rational creature lacks, not just the passions of Book II, but that aspect of our nature that allows us to feel and react to the extra force and vivacity that characterizes beliefs as opposed to mere ideas. This is entirely in accord with Hume's summary of his solution to the problem posed by the negative arguments of 1.4.1: "*that all our reasoning concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our nature.*" (THN 1.4.1.8, SBN 183). It is the sensitive part of our nature that allows us not just to distinguish beliefs by their extra force and vivacity, but also to retain beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments.

Similarly, Hume's development of his theory of probable reasoning lays special emphasis on the production of beliefs as characterized by extra force and vivacity, and this emphasis is behind the hyperbole of his remark that "all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation" (THN 1.3.8.12, SBN 103). A purely rational creature would lack this sensitive aspect of our natures. And Hume's negative argument about probable reasoning, the argument that shows that we are not determined by reason when we form beliefs in the unobserved, can now be seen in this light. To say that we are not "determin'd by reason" in the production about beliefs just means that a purely rational creature of the sort envisaged would be incapable of performing such feats of reasoning. This defect is not due to any lack of reasoning capacity, but is rather due to the fact that such a creature lacks a crucial part of our nature, i.e., the sensitive part. Reason cannot do its job in isolation; it functions properly only when it is imbedded in a feeling creature.

The view that treated Hume's negative arguments as having a narrow scope in effect treated them as *reductios*, reducing "rationalist" conceptions of reason to absurdity, leaving the way open for Hume's own positive account. I argued that Hume's negative arguments should be treated as having full generality, and as applicable to any account of reason, including Hume's own. This claim must now be qualified. Hume's negative arguments apply to any account of

reason that treats it as a faculty that can function independently of the rest of our nature. That is, I too treat Hume's arguments as *reductios*. They reduce to absurdity any conception of reason that treats it as a faculty capable of functioning alone. For Hume, when we try to imagine such a faculty functioning alone, we cannot see how it can produce beliefs, nor can we see how it can maintain those beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments. In the Humean picture, there is something incoherent, or at best unstable, about the notion of "reason alone". Any creature that has sense impressions has, to some extent, a "sensitive" part". And if beliefs could exist without their characteristic feeling, they would not exist for long:

If belief, therefore, were a simple act of thought, without any peculiar manner of conception, or the addition of a force and vivacity, it must infallibly destroy itself, and in every case terminate in a total suspension of judgment. (THN 1.4.1.8, SBN 184)

Reason, and beliefs which are reason's products, are imbedded in a human nature that is partly characterized by our ability to have impressions, to feel. When we try to imagine beliefs in us as simple acts of thought, we "lose ourselves in perpetual contradiction and absurdity" (THN 1.3.13.20, SBN 155). "Reason alone" isn't really a state we could be in. Reason functions in us only because we have a sensitive nature. Perhaps the main point of Hume's arguments about probable reasoning and scepticism with regard to reason is that we cannot give an account of our ability to reason and form beliefs if we treat reason as a faculty in isolation from the rest of our nature.³² It is not that Hume produces a new account of reason as an independently functioning faculty. It is rather that he sees the answer to his negative arguments as refusing to treat reason as an independently functioning faculty at all.

So now there is a way out of our dilemma. Hume does intend his negative arguments about probable reasoning to function with full generality: they apply to any account of reason that treats it as an independent faculty. But it does not follow from this that Hume gives us no account of reasoning or belief formation, one on which beliefs can be described as resulting from reason, nor does it follow that the arguments about reason and the passions, and reason and morality, are based on a completely vacuous conception of reason. When Hume says that reason can explain neither the production nor the retention of belief, he means that reason alone, functioning in isolation from the sensitive part of our natures, is not up to the job. But when reason is considered as working in harmony with the whole, feeling person, and dealing with beliefs as characterized by their extra force and vivacity, then it is perfectly appropriate for him to talk of beliefs, and perhaps even moral judgments, as the products of probable reasoning. So Hume can explain how we come up with beliefs in the unobserved, by appeal to the association

of ideas and the treatment of probable reasoning as a species of sensation. And he can explain how we retain beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments, by appeal to his theory of belief as more properly part of the sensitive than the cogitative part of our natures. If one wants to think of such an account as an account of the faculty of reason, that is fine, as long as one remembers it is not an account of an independently functioning faculty. It is an account of our ability to reason in terms of the whole, feeling person. It is worth noting that this way out of the dilemma is available only when one has dropped the idea that Hume's negative arguments have anything to do with the warrant of reason or the justification of belief.

Section XIV: Concluding remarks on Hume and scepticism

"Scepticism" can mean many things. I suppose in the last hundred years it has most commonly meant something like the position that holds that knowledge is impossible, that our beliefs are unjustified and that the processes by which we come to have these beliefs are unwarranted or unreliable. Earlier, I argued that the negative arguments of 1.4.1 were rightly seen as sceptical, not because they undermined justification, but because if they remained effective, beliefs would disappear altogether and we would lose all contact with truth. But much more needs to be said. Hume's scepticism is quite pervasive. After outlining, in the *Abstract*, the main argument of Part 3 of Book I, he says "By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive that the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding" (THN Abs 27, SBN 657). Part 4 of the *Enquiry*, where the negative argument about probable reasoning is found, is called "Sceptical Doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding." Part 5 is called "Sceptical Solution to these Doubts." The last section of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, "Conclusion of this book," contains a discussion that leads to the dangerous dilemma, to the choice between "a false reason and none at all," to talk of the "manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason," and culminates with Hume's admission "that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another" (T 268-69).³³ All this makes it sound as if I can't be right about 1.3.6 and 1.4.1, or even if I am right about them, it certainly looks as if Hume reaches radical sceptical conclusions later in *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry*.

Hume is a sceptic, but it doesn't follow that he thinks probable reasoning is unwarranted and that the beliefs we reach by means of it are unjustified. First of all, let us note that the above quotations from "Conclusion of this book" should not be cited for support of a thesis out of

context. The structure of that chapter is notoriously difficult to unravel.³⁴ The despairing quotes occur in the context of an oft changing and complex dialectic. It is not the case, I would maintain, that they are an expression of Hume's final view. The sceptical despair is later in that very chapter characterized as "the sentiments of my spleen and indolence" (THN 1.4.7.11, SBN 270). The dangerous dilemma is resolved by what Don Garrett calls "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." Although Hume does say "In all the incidents of life, we ought still to preserve our scepticism", he also says "A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction" (THN 1.4.7.14, SBN 273) and that it is "only proper we shou'd in general indulge our inclination in the most elaborate philosophical researches, notwithstanding our sceptical principles." These are not the words of the modern sceptic, who takes knowledge to be impossible. They seem to me instead to be the words of an enquirer who has learned a proper modesty in light of his discovery of the limitations and imperfections of our cognitive faculties. Remember that when he described his philosophy as "very sceptical" in the *Abstract*, he went on to characterize that scepticism as tending "to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding" (A 657). It is this modesty, which results from an awareness of our limitations, which characterizes Hume's scepticism. Hume wouldn't claim, on the grounds of imperfect faculties, that knowledge is impossible or that all our beliefs are unjustified. Those are the claims of a negative dogmatist, not a true sceptic.³⁵

In "Conclusion of this book," Hume summarizes his previous arguments as showing that the "memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of ideas" (THN 1.4.7.3, SBN 265). This is a sceptical result, as it shows the weakness and "imperfections of human reason" (THN 1.7.3.8, SBN 268). It is reflection on this that leads to the dangerous dilemma and the manifold contradictions. While the sceptical result remains, the despair reflection on that result produces is only temporary. In the end, Hume thinks that we ought to be as diffident about our doubts as about our beliefs, and that we ought to continue our enquiry, as Hume does in Books 2 and 3 of *Treatise*, all be it with the proper caution and modesty. Characterizing Hume's scepticism as a matter of modesty and caution about the understanding, derived from an awareness of its limitations, explains not only why Hume calls the main argument of Part 3 "very sceptical" in the *Abstract*, but also why Sections 4

and 5 of the *Enquiry* are called “Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding” and “Sceptical Solution of these Doubts.” The doubts are sceptical because Hume argues that reason and the understanding are much more limited than we might first have thought. They can’t even explain how we make causal inferences. The solution is sceptical because it explains these inferences, and the beliefs in which they result, in terms of the imagination and its properties.³⁶ Unlike Descartes, Hume’s solution isn’t a matter of showing that reason and the understanding, when properly utilized, are just fine. Instead he gives an alternate account of causal inference in terms of custom or habit. In effect, Hume absorbs reason and the understanding into the imagination. This characterization of Hume’s scepticism further explains why Hume responds to at least the first of the two sceptical sections that begin Part 4 of Book 1 of the *Treatise* with a ringing endorsement of his theory of belief. But the main evidence for this interpretation comes in section 12 of the *Enquiry*.

Hume rejects excessive Cartesian antecedent scepticism, which "recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties" (EHU 12.3, SBN 149). But he accepts a "more moderate" antecedent scepticism, which "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" (EHU 12.4, SBN 150). More importantly, Hume rejects excessive consequent scepticism, on the intriguing grounds that "no durable good [or benefit to society, as he says in the previous sentence] can ever result from it" (EHU 12.23, SBN 159). He embraces a mitigated consequent scepticism, as a remedy against dogmatism, that state in which the "greater part of mankind are naturally apt to" (EHU 12.24, SBN 161) find themselves.

Could "such dogmatical reasoners becomes sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations; such a reflection would naturally inspire them with modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists." Hume's enquiries have made him sensible of the imperfections of the human understanding, and this is the basis of his scepticism. To recommend scepticism is to recommend doubt. But Hume explicitly rejects the radical doubt common in most modern discussions of scepticism, *viz.* that knowledge is impossible. And he rejects it, not because he thinks the arguments are bad, but

because he thinks no good can come of accepting the arguments, either to oneself or to society. But great good can come, by acceptance of the moderate scepticism that undermines dogmatism, and encourages caution, modesty and reserve, both to enquiry and to society. This seems to me not only right about Hume, but, simply, right. It is the attitude we all ought to take in our enquiries, and our life.³⁷

Notes

¹. For a few examples, see D.C. Stove, *Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1973, *passim*, Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul) 1977 (“[Hume] rejects ‘reason’ or ‘the understanding’ as the source of such inferences on the grounds that none of them are ever reasonable or rationally justifiable.” p. 52), Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul) 1985 (“Hume concludes that no argument can justify our inductive inferences because no argument can justify the uniformity principle upon which they rely” p. 46). For more recent and sophisticated interpretations of Hume as a full-fledged inductive sceptic, see Kenneth Winkler, “Hume's Inductive Scepticism”, in Margaret Atherton, ed., *The Empiricists* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield) 1999, pp. 183-212, and Peter Millican, “Hume's Sceptical Doubts concerning Induction”, in Peter Millican, ed., *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2002, pp. 107-73.

². By and large I will speak of the warrant of inferences, or of the faculty responsible for inferences, and of the justification of beliefs, or of the content of beliefs. Also, inferences or reasonings are the activities of the faculty of reason. One has to be careful with “faculty” talk with respect to Hume, as he would not want in the end to be committed to anything more, in speaking of the “faculty of reason”, than something that can be cashed out in terms of the causes of inferences or reasonings. And just what inferences or reasonings would have to be determined by their observable characteristics.

³. See Tom Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1981, Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1991 (“If we read Section VI of Part III carefully, we will find the negative conclusions concern “intelligibility” in the narrow sense in which it means what we would call interdeducibility. The ‘reason’ whose limits Hume draws in Section VI is the tracer of ‘intelligible’ connections.” p.61).

⁴. All page references to the *Treatise* will be of the form “THN 1.2.3.4, SBN 34”, where “THN 1.2.3.4” refers Book 1, Part 2, section 3, paragraph 4 of David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton (Oxford 2000), and where “SBN 34” refers to page 34 of Hume's *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford 1987). References to the first *Enquiry* will be of the form “EHU 1.2, SBN 6”, where “EHU 1.2” refers to section 1, paragraph 2 of Hume's *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford 1999), and where “SBN 6” refers to page 6 of Hume's *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge (Oxford 1970).

⁵. See for instance Robert Fogelin, “Hume's Scepticism” in David Fate Norton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1993 (“It is clear in the *Treatise* that

Hume accepted the sceptical argument he put forward and explicitly embraced the radical sceptical consequences it entailed.” p. 101).

⁶. See Baier *op. ct.* William Morris, in “Hume’s Scepticism about reason”, *Hume Studies* 15 #1, 1989, takes a roughly similar line (“Here he is attacking the same intellectualist model of the rationally reflective epistemic agent in what should be its heartland -- the realm of relations of ideas and demonstrative argument.” p. 56). Morris’ paper is probably responsible for the recent surge of scholarly interest in 1.4.1, after some years of relative neglect.

⁷. For a criticism of Baier’s *reductio* approach to these arguments of Hume’s, see my “Reason, Reflection and *Reductios*”, *Hume Studies* 20 #2 1994.

⁸. I say “most interpreters of Hume”. When I first read earlier versions of this paper at the University of Western Ontario, in October 1995, and at the Hume Society Conference, Nottingham University, July 1996, I would have said “all other interpreters of Hume”. Since then, Don Garrett’s book, *Cognition and Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1997, has appeared, and in chapters 4 and 10 it takes a roughly similar approach to the arguments of 1.3.6 and 1.4.1 presented here. Louis Loeb, in “Causal Inference, Associationism, and Scepticism in Part III of Book I of Hume’s *Treatise*”, Patricia Easton ed., *Logic and the Workings of the Mind*, vol 5 North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy 1997, argues that Hume’s negative argument doesn’t show induction to be unwarranted and that the beliefs produced by his positive associationism “are justified provided they result from mechanisms that produce sufficiently stable or settled beliefs.” (p. 286). See also his *Stability and Justification in Hume’s Treatise* (Oxford 2002). Also, David Norton argues that Hume is more concerned in general with the problem of explaining how we come to have certain ideas than in the justification of belief. See, for instance, his entry on Hume in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 342-347.

⁹. See Garrett, p. 256 (footnote 1), while discussing Baier: “Baier sees Hume as ultimately enlarging the sense of ‘reason’ to include various propensities within its scope, whereas I see him as arguing for the need to supplement reason with other aspects of human nature...” See also note 32 below.

¹⁰. There is an important entry in the Appendix (THN App 22, SBN 636) where Hume weakens this claim. Although important for an overall understanding of Hume's theory of belief, this change of mind in the Appendix doesn't affect my main concern here. For my purposes, what is crucial to Hume's account of belief is that it concerns some feeling or other, and in the Appendix this aspect of Hume's account is, if anything, strengthened.

¹¹. Again, there is an important addition to this passage in the Appendix (THN App 1.3.7.7, SBN 628). See previous note.

¹². See Baier, and T. Beauchamp and A. Rosenberg.

¹³. Loeb argues persuasively that even Beattie thought that “Hume’s view that causal inference is not founded in reason poses no sceptical problem” (Loeb 1997, p. 285).

¹⁴. Part of the problem is that traditional interpretations take “determin’d by reason” simply to mean “is justified”. But I argue (see below), that “determin’d by reason” doesn’t mean “is justified”, but rather only entails it. So an argument that we are not determined by reason doesn’t itself entail that we are unjustified. It leaves the question of justification open.

¹⁵. See also THN 1.3.6.12, SBN 92: “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 idea of these objects, and unite them in the imagination.”

¹⁶. Accounts of Hume’s views about the warrant of probable reasoning are to be found in Baier, Garrett chapter 10, and in my *Hume’s Reason* (Oxford 1999), chapter 9.

¹⁷. “we have many millions (of experiments) to convince us of this principle; *that like objects, plac’d in like circumstances, will always produce like effects*” (THN 1.3.8.14, SBN 105). The case is parallel to that of the idea of necessary connection. In each case, we start out by considering whether we have an independent account of the idea of necessary connection (or the uniformity principle) that we could use in explaining a certain class of inference. In each case, it turns out that we don’t. But in each case, it also turns out that after giving an account of probable reasoning in terms of the association of ideas, we can use that account to explain how it is that we have the idea of necessary connection (or believe the principle of uniformity).

¹⁸. See Hume’s footnotes to THN 1.3.9.19, SBN 117-118 and to THN 2.2.7.6 (in Annotations, p. 515), SBN 371.

¹⁹. As Michael Lynch argued in “The Destruction of Reason”, Hume Society Conference, Park City, Utah, 1995. Fogelin (1993) argues that this is a consequence of Hume’s claim that “knowledge *degenerates* into probability”. Against Hume, Fogelin argues that “the fact that there may be some chance that a demonstrative argument is invalid does not change it into a different kind of argument.” (p. 103) Hume needn’t disagree with this. His claim that “knowledge degenerates into probability” only

implies that the result of a demonstration (knowledge) may have its force and vivacity lessened so that it turns into something that is only probable.

²⁰. For Hume's account of how demonstration produces certainty, see THN 1.3.7.3, SBN 95. For an extensive discussion of Hume's account of demonstration, see chapter 5 of Owen (1999).

²¹. The distinction is common in ancient scepticism: the sceptic aims at suspension of belief; the negative dogmatist aims to show that our commonly held beliefs are false. The distinction was buried in Descartes' methodological scepticism: treat any belief over which there was the least doubt or uncertainty as false. It is arguable that Hume is aiming for something closer to the ancient view of scepticism. Admittedly, this is clearer in the first *Enquiry* than in the *Treatise*.

²². This reading of "evidence" as "evidentness" is given as the first entry under "evidence" in the OED and in the glossary to THN, p. 575. It is the reading that Garrett gives for "evidence" both here and elsewhere in the *Treatise* (Garrett, p. 228), as does Lynch ("Hume and the Limits of Reason", *Hume Studies* vol 22 (April 1996), p. 104, note 12). William Morris, *op. ct.*, though he doesn't specifically talk about what Hume meant by "evidence", takes a similar line when he says "It is *my confidence* in having correctly assessed the probability that Hume claims should change." (p. 52).

²³. Garrett p. 228 directs our attention to this passage. See also *Hume's Reason*, chapter 8, for a more extended discussion of the importance of this and other passages, which occur in places other than 1.4.1, that speak clearly of the difficulty of retaining beliefs as the result of complex reasonings. Such discussions are of course crucial for understanding Hume's solution to the problem of sceptical arguments in 1.4.1.

²⁴. See THN 1.3.13.3-6, SBN 144-6; THN 1.4.7.7, SBN 268; THN 3.1.1.1, SBN 455. See *Hume's Reason*, chapter 8, for further details.

²⁵. It was David Norton who first pointed out to me the radical decline in confidence from the beginning to the end of 1.4.2.

²⁶. See *Hume's Reason*, chapter 9. See also Garrett, chapter 10, "Scepticism and Commitment".

²⁷. See for instance the footnote for THN 1.3.7.5, SBN 96-97, where Hume says "We infer a cause immediately from its effect; and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others, and more convincing than when we interpose another idea to connect the two extremes."

²⁸. See also THN 3.1.1.6, SBN 457: “Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular.”

²⁹. See Rachel Cohon and David Owen, “Representation, Reason and Motivation”, *Manuscripto* 20, 1997, pp. 47-46.

³⁰. This litmus test for any interpretation of Hume on reason, the passions and morality was suggested by Don Garrett during discussion at the Pacific APA, 1995.

³¹. I explore the possibility of such a purely rational creature in more detail in “Reason, Reflection and *Reductios*”.

³². This stress on reason functioning properly only when imbedded in a feeling creature is, broadly speaking, in the spirit of Baier’s bringing to prominence the sensitive side of our nature when discussing Hume’s views on reason. We disagree on how this is to be done, however. She sees Hume as enlarging our conception so as to include this sensitive side; I see him, not as enlarging our conception of reason, but as showing how reason can only function, not as an independent faculty, but in harmony with the other principles of the imagination. So on this matter, I side with Garrett. *op. ct.*, against Baier:

[M]y account differs in a number of ways that should be evident. Among the most important is that Baier sees Hume as ultimately enlarging the sense of ‘reason’ to include various propensities within its scope, whereas I see him as arguing for the need to supplement reason with other aspects of human nature but as using the term ‘reason’ univocally throughout his works to designate the inferential faculty. (Garrett, *op. ct.*, p. 256, footnote 1)

I differ from Garrett on just what is excluded when one considers “reason alone”, in isolation from the other principles of the imagination.

³³. Loeb (2002) and Ira Singer, “Nature Breaks Down: Hume’s Problematic Naturalism in *Treatise* I.iv,” *Hume Studies* 26 #2 2000, pp. 225-43, locate a radical scepticism in 1.4.7 of the *Treatise*.

³⁴. See Annetter Baier, chapter one, and Ted Morris, “Hume's Conclusion”, *Philosophical Studies* 89 2000, pp. 89-110, for some interesting revisionary views on this chapter.

³⁵. See also “Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh,” as found in the Past Masters on line edition of Hume’s works, p. 19: “All he means by these Scruples is to abate the Pride of **mere human Reasoners**, by showing them, that even with Regard to Principles which seem the clearest, and which they are necessitated from the strongest Instincts of Nature to embrace, they are not able to attain a full

Consistence and absolute Certainty. *Modesty* then, and *Humility*, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of *Scepticism*; not an universal Doubt, which it is impossible for any Man to support, and which the first and most trivial Accident in Life must disconcert and destroy.”

³⁶. It is difficult to see how one who held that the sceptical doubts of Section 4 involved lack of justification could hold that the sceptical solution of Section 5 was sceptical in the same sense.

³⁷. This paper presents a summary of one of the main themes of *Hume's Reason*. Different versions have been presented to the Hume Society Conference in Nottingham, 1996, to the Hume Colloquium II, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 2004, and to departmental colloquia at University of Western Ontario, University of New Mexico, Arizona State University, University of Florida, Princeton University and the University of the Bosphorus. Special thanks are due to David Norton, Don Garrett, John Biro, Ted Morris, Lorne Falkenstein, Houston Smit and David Schmitz.