Hume’s Practical Conciliation Of Science And Skepticism

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HUME’S PRACTICAL CONCILIATION OF SCIENCE AND SKEPTICISM

by

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DEDICATION

For Patricia—the true, the good, and the beautiful.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the question of whether David Hume is an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs—beliefs that are practically indispensible for life and science. On the one hand, Hume claims to be a skeptic, but on the other hand, he carries on with ordinary life and with a constructive program of research. The relationship of his science and skepticism remains a central and contested question in the literature.

I offer a practical conciliation of Hume’s science and skepticism. On my reading, Hume really is an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs. However, he thinks that we are practically permitted—even required—to ignore the skeptical arguments against these beliefs and retain them, in spite of the fact that they are epistemologically unjustified. This is his rationale for carrying on as he does with common life and science.

In order to establish that Hume is an epistemic skeptic, I first develop an account of Humean epistemic justification. I argue that he uses the term “philosophy” to refer to an epistemologically normative method of inquiry and belief-formation that governs all of the special sciences. For Hume, a belief is philosophically (that is, epistemologically) justified if and only if it is (a) produced by a propensity which is permanent, irresistible, and universal, and (b) the belief is undefeated.

Hume’s real skeptical challenges are defeater arguments from reason—an undermining defeater against the deliverances of reason and a rebutting defeater against belief in body. The Title Principle, which I interpret as a practical, rather than epistemic, norm, entitles us to ignore the rational defeaters of these core beliefs. But the limited
practical authority of philosophy does not open up the floodgates of epistemic irresponsibility. We are only practically justified in ignoring reason under the relatively rare circumstances specified in the Title Principle. Despite its liabilities, philosophy is still a safer and more agreeable method of inquiry than superstition. Hume’s overall goal is not to destroy philosophy but to put it in its proper place—subordinated to human interests, integrated into a well-rounded life.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DNR ........................................................................... Dialogues concerning Natural Religion
DP ............................................................................ Dissertation on the Passions
EHU .............................................................................. Enquiry concerning Human Understanding
L ........................................................... Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh
MOL ............................................................................. My Own Life
NHR ............................................................................ The Natural History of Religion
T ................................................................................. Treatise of Human Nature
INTRODUCTION

0.1 The Question: Is Hume an Epistemic Skeptic about Core Beliefs?

An old familiar narrative of Western philosophy depicts David Hume as an arch-skeptic. “Some of the great philosophers,” writes D.C. Stove, “are makers, others are breakers.”¹ Most philosophers, says Stove, would agree with him that Hume is “the breaker par excellence,” “pre-eminent as a skeptical or critical philosopher: one whose forte consists in casting doubt on accepted beliefs by exposing the weakness of accepted inferences.”² Stove is probably right about Hume’s reputation. Arguably, Hume’s destructive powers are chiefly what have earned him a place in the philosophical pantheon. But whether or not Stove is right about Hume is a different matter. For within the guild of Hume specialists, the nature and extent of his skepticism remains controversial. In particular, the specialists remain divided over the question “Is Hume an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs?”

The terms “epistemic skeptic” and “core belief” need some unpacking. Skepticism about any domain of belief can come in many different varieties.³ In general, the skeptic

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² Ibid.
points out some kind of deficiency or flaw in a belief. For example, a practical skeptic may claim that holding some belief violates prudential or ethical norms. A belief skeptic may claim that some belief is psychologically impossible to hold. A truth skeptic may claim that some belief is simply false. An epistemic skeptic denies that a belief is epistemologically justified. The main questions about Hume are about whether he is an epistemic skeptic, and about which beliefs, and why. However, defining skepticism in terms of epistemic justification may seem to trade one terminological ambiguity for another. We need to know what “epistemic justification” is, in order to know what the epistemic skeptic denies of our beliefs.

In contemporary epistemology, there is no uncontroversial definition of the nature of epistemic justification. We can get an initial grasp of the concept by way of contrast: beliefs formed by way of wild guesses or wishful thinking are not epistemologically justified. We have grounds on the basis of which we hold justified beliefs; ungrounded

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6 This seems to be what Fogelin means by “theoretical skepticism” and what Garrett means by “epistemic merit skepticism.” Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 5; Garrett, “Hume’s Conclusions,” 171.

7 William P. Alston, Beyond “Justification:” Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 11-28. Alston argues that we should dispense with the notion: “the perennial quest for what it is for a belief to be justified, and what are the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for such a status, is quixotic, of the same order as the search for the Fountain of Youth.” Ibid., 11.

beliefs are unjustified. As Robert Audi says, epistemically justified beliefs “are quite in order from the point of view of the standards for what we may reasonably believe.”

More specifically, three key ideas have figured largely into discussions of epistemic justification. First, philosophers often use justification in a deontological sense. According to this idea, a justified belief is one which we ought to hold or permissibly hold, from the epistemic perspective. If we do our epistemic duty, we are blameless, epistemologically justified in our believing. Second, we expect justified beliefs to typically turn out to be true (although some justified beliefs are false). Philosophers therefore often use “justification” to denote truth-conducivity, or probable truth. A justified belief is likely to be true, either because the grounds on which we hold it render it likely, or because it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process. Third, philosophers commonly suppose that epistemic justification is a necessary condition for knowledge, and that many of our justified beliefs are also items of knowledge. They often assume that justification is whatever it is that makes true belief into genuine knowledge (perhaps with a fillip for Gettier problems).

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9 Ibid., 2-3.
10 Ibid., 2. Audi repeatedly describes epistemic justification in terms of what is reasonable or rational. This locution is suggestive, but I do not find it ultimately helpful. It simply raises the question of what “reasonable” or “rational” means. If “reasonable” means “produced by the faculty of reason, that is, the faculty for making valid inferences,” then the only epistemologically justified beliefs are the conclusions of arguments—which is implausible, since it rules out introspective, perceptual, and memorial beliefs as justified. If we do not define “reasonable” in terms of our inferential faculty, then it seems to me we could only define it in terms of epistemic justifiedness—the very concept we were using it to explain.
11 Alston, Beyond Justification, 15-16.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 16.
14 Ibid., 16, 17.
The exact nature of epistemic skepticism varies depending upon the skeptic’s preferred account of epistemic justification. But generally speaking, the epistemic skeptic denies that a targeted belief is the sort we ought to hold, from the epistemic perspective; it is not the sort that typically turns out to be true; it lacks a feature which is necessary for knowledge. According to the epistemic skeptic, the targeted beliefs are more like wild guesses than intellectually respectable credences.

Skepticism can apply to any given domain of beliefs. Skepticism is more or less important depending on the domain of belief to which it is directed. Skepticism about the number of blades of grass on my lawn is trivial. Skepticism about the existence of God may be of more significance. Perhaps the most important domain to which skepticism might apply is the domain of what I call “core beliefs.” By “core beliefs,” I mean beliefs which are so deeply embedded in our scientific theories or ordinary lives that they are practically indispensable.

So when I ask “Is Hume an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs?” I mean, are there any beliefs which Hume thinks are practically indispensable to life and science, but which he also think are intellectually disreputable—that we ought not to hold, from that perspective which aims at truth? Even once we understand the question, it is not obvious that Hume’s texts afford an unequivocal answer. Three problems immediately complicate matters.

First, even within his first and arguably greatest work, A Treatise of Human Nature, Hume is not always clear about which arguments pose skeptical threats to their targeted beliefs, or about which of the targeted beliefs are core beliefs. For example, in Treatise 1.3.6, Hume argues that all inferences to unobserved matters of fact presuppose a

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principle of uniformity which itself cannot be supported by any non-circular argument from observational premises. He does not present this discovery here as a skeptical argument. But later he seems to imply that his discovery militates against the acceptability of inductive inferences (T 1.4.7.3). Also at this late point he introduces new skeptical worries about the status of memory and the senses (ibid.). Finally, when Hume first argues that we have no idea of objective necessary connections, he does not regard this conclusion as posing a skeptical challenge to a core belief (T 1.3.14; cf. EHU 7). Later in the Treatise he does (T 1.4.7.5).

Second, Hume’s skeptical arguments and his views of them seem to shift from the Treatise to the Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, even though he insists that his principles and arguments have remained essentially the same.17 For example, he presents his argument against the infinite divisibility of extension in the Treatise (Book I, Part 2), but not as a skeptical worry. In the first Enquiry, Hume presents this same argument as a skeptical problem, but one to which he has the answer (EHU 12.18-20). Hume’s skeptical argument against reason (T 1.4.1) and the “dangerous dilemma” it generates (T 1.4.7.6-7), which play such a crucial role in the Treatise, drop out of the first Enquiry altogether. Many commentators find these and other differences between the two works so significant that they do not even attempt to harmonize Hume’s philosophy across them.18

17 “Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called A Treatise of Human Nature…But…he [the Author] cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected” (EHU Advertisement).

18 For example, Donald C. Ainsle declines to integrate the Treatise and the first Enquiry, saying that despite its “thematic and argumentative overlap with the Treatise,” it “is best understood as having its own aims and arguments.” Ainsle, Hume’s True Scepticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16. Frederick F. Schmitt says he is compelled by the “stunning differences” between the two works to confine himself to the Treatise. Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology in the Treatise: A Veritistic Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2 n. 3. Louis E. Loeb is also compelled by the material changes in
Third, granting that Hume is a skeptic about some core beliefs, it is not obvious whether he is an epistemic skeptic about any of them. In order to determine whether Hume is an epistemic skeptic, we need to know what definition of epistemic justification (if any) he subscribes to. But here we encounter a difficulty. For although Hume talks directly about skepticism, he does not use the term “epistemic,” let alone the expression “epistemological justification.” We cannot assume that he thinks anything at all about the epistemic justification of belief, in which case the question as to whether he is an epistemic skeptic has no answer.

The only way to identify Hume’s account of “epistemic justification” (if he has one) is to look for the concept of epistemic justification in his corpus, lurking there under a different name. But since the concept of epistemic justification itself is a matter of debate, there is no consensus about what exactly it is we should be looking for in Hume’s corpus. The best we can do is to identify in Hume a notion that bears a family resemblance to the cluster of concepts that contemporary philosophers talk about when they talk about “epistemic justification.” Given the ambiguity of this task, it is unsurprising that

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Hume’s epistemology and skepticism to confine himself to the Treatise. Loeb, Stability in Hume’s Treatise (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ix. Fogelin confines himself to the Treatise in his two major books, Hume’s Skepticism and Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, although the last chapter of the latter book asserts a very substantial shift in Hume’s position on skepticism between the Treatise and the Enquiry. Fogelin, Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 139-158. Broughton also asserts that Hume is dissatisfied with his response to skepticism in the Treatise, and attempts a materially different response in the first Enquiry. Broughton, “Hume’s Naturalism and His Skepticism,” in A Companion to Hume, ed. Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 436. By contrast, it is fairly easy for Garrett to harmonize the Treatise with the first Enquiry. Garrett, Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 237-241. On Garrett’s view, none of Hume’s “skeptical” arguments in any of his works carry any epistemic presuppositions, so they do not immediately threaten the epistemic justification of their target beliefs. Rather, these arguments have “psychological power to produce doubt and uncertainty.” Ibid. 238. All of Hume’s skeptical arguments, howsoever different their form or target, have this psychological power.

19 As Alston points out, the term “epistemology” originated in the mid-nineteenth century. Alston, Beyond “Justification,” 1.
commentators have ascribed a range of fundamental epistemic concepts to Hume: reliability, truth and probable truth, coherence, extensiveness and constancy, stability, long-term consensus, reflexive self-confirmation and probably many more. There is no consensus either about which Humean terms or expressions denote epistemic justification. While commentators have often assumed that “reason” is a normative epistemic term for Hume, others argue that it merely names a cognitive faculty and implies neither epistemic approval nor disapproval. Similarly, while some think that Hume’s use of the term “evidence” carries with it implications of epistemic justification, others reply that it is a non-normative term that refers to psychological

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20 Schmitt attributes to Hume a reliability account of justified belief, which he locates in a broader “veritistic epistemology, according to which true belief is the chief non-instrumental cognitive value and the primary value in terms of which knowledge is to be understood.” Schmitt, *Hume’s Epistemology*, 1.
24 Loeb holds that for Hume, a belief is justified if and only if it results from a mechanism that “tends to produce stability in belief.” Loeb, *Stability*, 13.
27 For example, Garrett and Owen argue that “reason” is an epistemologically neutral term. Garrett, *Cognition*, 91-95; Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 205-6. Commentators who take the traditional view of Hume as a classic inductive skeptic must presuppose that “reason” is his epistemic success term: because causal inferences are not ultimately produced by reason, they are not epistemologically justified. For further discussion, see Chapter 3.
confidence-levels. Commentators also dispute whether Hume epistemologically
endorses inferences by calling them “just.”

The problem which exercises the most powerful influence on contemporary Hume
interpretation is not, however, any of the three preceding issues. The major problem is
that, on the one hand, Hume appears to be an avowed skeptic, and on the other hand, he
appears to be committed to a positive program of scientific inquiry. The effort to make
sense of Hume’s science and his skepticism has generated two main interpretive schools,
one of which affirms and the other of which denies that Hume is an epistemic skeptic
about core beliefs.

0.2 Epistemologically Skeptical Interpretations

A major line of interpretation sees Hume as an epistemic skeptic about core
beliefs. Hume’s major interpreters all the way through the nineteenth century read Hume
this way. According to Thomas Reid, Hume “built a system of scepticism, which leaves
no ground to believe any one thing rather than its contrary.” Immanuel Kant, for all his
respect for Hume, concludes that he “deposited his ship on the beach (of skepticism) for

28 Meeker argues for an epistemic meaning of “evidence.” Meeker, “Hume’s Iterative Probability
“evidence” merely means “evidentness,” or degree of confidence. Garrett, Cognition, 228; Owen, Hume’s
Reason, 185-188; Owen, “Scepticism with Regard to Reason,” Cambridge Companion to Hume’s Treatise,
ed. Donald C. Ainsle and Annemarie Butler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 102, 116,
131-2 n. 33. See my discussion in 4.1.5.
29 Loeb and Schmitt take “just” as an epistemic success term. Loeb, Stability, 43; Schmitt, Hume’s
Epistemology, 116-117. Owen argues that “just” inferences meet the internal norms for the proper function
of the faculty of reason, but are not necessarily epistemologically justified. Owen, Hume’s Reason, 205-6.
30 For a review of this early tradition of skeptical interpretation, see Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy
of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines, ed. Don Garrett (New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 3-8, 79-88; Garrett, introduction to Kemp Smith’s The Philosophy of David
safekeeping, where it could then lie and rot.”

In the late nineteenth century Thomas Hill Green provided a similar narrative of Hume’s place in the history of philosophy. Hume took Locke’s principles to their logical skeptical conclusion, thus raising the question which only Kant’s philosophy could adequately answer. Although Reid, Kant, and Green give different analyses of the origin of Hume’s skepticism, they all agree that he is an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs.

Contemporary epistemologists still regularly depict Hume as the archetypal inductive skeptic. Many Hume specialists in the twenty- and twenty-first centuries also continue to read Hume as an epistemic skeptic. Although they often offer widely varying accounts of Hume’s arguments at the level of detail, they see him as denying that one or more of our core beliefs are epistemologically justified.

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34 Ibid., 2-3.


The great advantage of this time-honored reading of Hume is that it easily makes sense out of what he says about skepticism. For one thing, Hume presents skeptical arguments in sections entitled “Of scepticism with regard to reason” (T 1.4.1), “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” (T 1.4.2), and “Sceptical doubts concerning the understanding” (EHU 4). He also presents catalogues of several skeptical arguments in “Conclusion of this book” (T 1.4.7) and “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy” (EHU 12, Parts 1 and 2). Hume even seems to express personal despair at points in the face of these skeptical arguments (T 1.4.2.56-7, 1.4.7.1-8). Furthermore, he endorses skepticism and self-identifies as a skeptic throughout his corpus. In the final section of Book 1 of the Treatise, he says “In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism…Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles” (T 1.4.7.11). In his “Abstract” of the Treatise, he describes his philosophy as “very sceptical” (A 27). In the first Enquiry he champions “the Academic or Sceptical philosophy,” which he also describes as “mitigated scepticism” (EHU 5.1-2, 12.24-26). Philo, widely regarded as the character who speaks for Hume in Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, is also a mitigated skeptic (DNR Part 1).37 One eminently plausible way to interpret this textual data is that Hume makes arguments which show that some of our core beliefs are not epistemically justified, and on this basis he adopts an epistemologically skeptical philosophy.

37 Philo expresses a position which verbally echoes and materially coincides with what Hume describes as “mitigated scepticism” in Section 12 of EHU. See especially Philo’s speech in DNR 1.8-12. Philo neither asserts nor denies explicitly that he is a skeptic. The other characters assert that he is one. Philo responds by clarifying his actual position.
However, the skeptical reading of Hume faces a great difficulty: making sense out of his positive scientific project. Even a casual survey of the titles of Hume’s works shows that his primary goal is not to tear down, but to build up the edifice of human beliefs. The title of the Treatise indicates that Hume’s aims are constructive, descriptive, and scientific, and the subtitle (being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects) substantiates this as well. He announces his project as “the science of man,” a science itself founded on “experience and observation” (T Intro 5-6). He stands on the shoulders of Bacon, Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler (T Intro 7). The work divides into three books, each of which constructively describes the understanding, the passions, and morals, respectively. Only the fourth part of the first book (“Of the Understanding”) deals with “the sceptical and other systems of philosophy.” Furthermore, Hume’s discussion of scepticism does not end his project: he goes on for another two books to constructively describe passions and morality. Hume recasts the three books of the Treatise in three stand-alone works, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, A Dissertation on the Passions, and An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals, each of which has the positive descriptive thrust of the Treatise. (The first Enquiry treats skepticism proportionally about as much as does Book 1 of the Treatise). In Hume’s Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary, he develops his views of political science, economics, aesthetic criticism, and other topics. And his six-volume History of England is obviously a work of constructive research. The Natural History of Religion, as its title indicates, provides a naturalistic account of the origins of religious

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39 In this context, by “moral subjects,” Hume does not mean “ethics” but “mental subjects.” Elsewhere he defines “Moral philosophy” as “the science of human nature” (EHU 1.1).
belief. Perhaps the only one of Hume’s works which is almost entirely negative, rejecting more claims than it establishes, is his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. But Hume’s target in that work is not what he regards as a core belief, but mere superstition.

Virtually Hume’s entire corpus develops or depends upon his positive, constructive theory of human nature. In the “Introduction” to the *Treatise* he says

‘Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another…In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security. (T Intro 4, 6)

Hume’s literary output shows that he never abandoned this position, but for the rest of his life attempted to expound the “compleat system of the sciences” founded on his science of man.

Hume’s positive scientific project raises two difficult questions for the skeptical reading of his work. First, how does Hume’s constructive goal of describing human nature relate to his negative goal of showing that our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified? This is a question about what Hume is trying to do. Second, does Hume provide any principled defense of moving on with a scientific project once he has exposed our core beliefs as epistemologically unjustified? If the first question is about what Hume is trying to do, then the second question is about how he is trying to do it.

Skeptical interpreters have proposed three main approaches to the first question, “How does Hume’s positive scientific goal of describing human nature relate to his
negative goal of showing that our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified?” First, some have simply denied that Hume ever really has a positive scientific project; his aims are only skeptical and destructive all along. Thomas Reid, for example, writes

> It seems to be a peculiar strain of humour in this author, to set out in his introduction, by promising, with a grave face, no less than a complete system of the sciences, upon a foundation entirely new, to wit, that of human nature; when the intention of the whole work is to show, that there is neither human nature nor science in the world.40

Reid’s suggestion—that Hume’s positive project is literally a joke—eliminates the need to answer the second question, as to whether Hume provides a principled defense of continuing on with science in the face of epistemic skepticism. However, the complete denial that Hume has a positive project is simply incredible and has no modern adherents.

Second, some skeptical interpreters propose that Hume does start out with a positive scientific project, but his skepticism sabotages it.41 Once Hume has denied that our core beliefs are epistemologically justified, he has in effect denied that any of his descriptive claims merit acceptance. Although Hume starts out with the sincere intention to develop a well-grounded science of man, he finds to his own chagrin that the project founders on skeptical problems. The *Treatise* is the candid record of a thwarted ambition.

The weakness of the skepticism-thwarts-science reading is its inability to answer the second question: what principled defense does Hume give for continuing with science in

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40 Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, Chapter 1, Section 5, 102a.
the face of skepticism? It is sometimes suggested that Hume keeps going with science because he cannot help it. Many commentators point out Hume’s insistence that our natural core beliefs simply will not go away permanently; they are incorrigible, and we resume them, willy-nilly, even in the face of the skeptical dilemma. But it is not clear how incorrigibility legitimizes epistemologically unjustified core beliefs, either in common life or in science. Hume says that beliefs inculcated by mere repetition from infancy are sometimes incorrigible (T 1.3.9.18). But he regards such beliefs as epistemologically unjustified and, often, practically deleterious. So incorrigibility alone will not legitimize Hume’s core beliefs. Adherents of the skepticism-thwarts-science position are committed to the view that Hume carries on with science and common life without having any viable principled reason for doing so. But this is deeply

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43 Many commentators make this point. See Stroud, Hume, 247-9; William Edward Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” Philosophical Studies 99 (Netherlands: Kluwer, 2000), 94; Michael Ridge, “Epistemology Moralized: David Hume’s Practical Epistemology,” Hume Studies 29(2), November 2003, 171-175; Meeker, “Hume: Radical Skeptic,” 37. Broughton, “Hume’s Naturalism,” 435-6. Fogelin seems to have increasingly lost confidence that Hume has a rationale for continuing with his scientific project. In Fogelin’s earlier work, he argues that after his skeptical crisis, Hume “can then turn, with perfect justification, to the factual question of how humans are able to form beliefs despite the skeptical arguments that can be brought against them” (emphasis mine). Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 146. But in his more recent work, Fogelin seems less sanguine. Hume simply blindly submits the natural beliefs of sense and understanding, pursuing philosophy when it seems fun to do so, but without any satisfying defense of it. Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 125-137.

44 Many commentators have expressed doubt about Hume’s ability to provide a principled rationale for carrying on in the face of skepticism. Reid sees Hume’s “absolute scepticism” as “destructive of…the science of a philosopher, and of the prudence of a man of common understanding.” Reid, Inquiry into the Human Mind, 95b. For Kant (and Green after him), only idealism can save science from Humean skepticism. Noonan says “It is not evident that these questions have any complete answers.” Noonan, Hume on Knowledge, 46. Durland argues more forcefully that no one has yet, nor is likely to ever, propose a satisfying account of how he might overcome his extreme skepticism. Durland, “Extreme Skepticism.” In different ways, Meeker and Singer both argue that even a naturalized epistemology does not save Hume from skepticism or give him a compelling rationale for moving on from it. Meeker, “Hume: Radical Sceptic”; Singer, “Nature Breaks Down.”
unsatisfying. It seems unlikely that a philosopher of Hume’s stature would leave such a massive problem running through in his entire corpus without addressing it somehow.

A third group of skeptical interpreters argue Hume does have a scientific project, and that he uses skepticism as a tool to support and motivate that project.\footnote{Stroud, \textit{Hume}, 1-16; Fogelin, \textit{Hume’s Skepticism}, 146.} Hume’s skepticism “clears the ground” for his naturalistic description of human nature. Once we see that all of our beliefs fall hopelessly short of rational epistemic standards, we are free to investigate the natural causal processes that produce those unjustified beliefs. The suggestion here seems to be along the lines of W.V.O. Quine’s proposal in “Epistemology Naturalized” that we quit the hopeless task of trying to provide epistemic foundations for science, and instead just proceed with science and see what it tells us about human nature.\footnote{W. V. Quine, \textit{Ontological Relativity and Other Essays} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969): 69-90.} Graciela De Pierris defends a variant of this interpretation. In De Pierris’ view, Hume’s radical skeptical reflections presuppose different normative requirements than those of science and ordinary life.\footnote{De Pierris, \textit{Ideas}, 20-21.} Normal science is insulated from radical skepticism: “even if we reach a negative (skeptical) conclusion at the second-order or meta-level, this does not \textit{by itself} imply that we must also reject the normative force of the methods employed in what we take to be our best first-order inquiries.”\footnote{Ibid., 21. There is an ironic convergence between De Pierris’ radical skeptical interpretation of Hume, and the view of Ainsle, who rejects skeptical readings. For Ainsle also concludes that Hume’s skepticism is restricted to a second-order level of inquiry, and is does not impinge on first-order scientific inquiry. Ainsle, \textit{Hume’s True Scepticism}, 243-5. Ainsle concludes that Hume is \textit{not} a total skeptic because his skepticism is restricted to the meta-level; De Pierris concludes that Hume is \textit{a} radical skeptic because he is a skeptic at the meta-level. When I talk about epistemic skepticism, I mean skepticism about first-order beliefs, regardless of what is happening at the meta-level. Understood in these terms, neither De Peirris nor Ainsle has a skeptical reading of Hume.} On De Pierris’ view, radical skepticism clears the ground for science in the sense that it
guards natural philosophers in the Newtonian tradition from drawing metaphysical or theological conclusions from their science.\textsuperscript{49}

This reading faces two problems. First, it relies on the dubious claim that Hume distinguishes epistemic from scientific normativity.\textsuperscript{50} If it turns out (as I hold) that Hume does not make this distinction, then he cannot insulate ordinary science from epistemic skepticism. Second, even if he distinguishes epistemology from science and dispenses with the former, Hume needs to provide a reason to prefer science and its deliverances to other live methodological alternatives, such as “superstition.” If Hume gives up the notion that his scientific account of human nature is epistemologically superior to religious accounts, then it is not clear why his account is preferable at all. In other words, Hume still has not given a principled defense of carrying on with science (rather than alternative methods of inquiry) in the face of skepticism.

0.3 Epistemologically Non-Skeptical Interpretations

Perhaps because of the difficulties that face the skeptical interpretation of Hume, since the early twentieth century many commentators have understood him as a scientist who is not ultimately an epistemic skeptic at all. Everyone must admit that Hume is some kind of skeptic, but we can call this the “non-skeptical tradition” in the sense that it denies that Hume is an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs.

\textsuperscript{49} De Pierris, \textit{Ideas}, 23, 296-306.
\textsuperscript{50} Alston notes that many of the pre-nineteenth philosophical works that we think of as making a contribution to epistemology, are actually “treatments of methods of intellectual inquiry or of the logic of science.” Alston, \textit{Beyond “Justification”}, 2. The idea of a clear distinction between scientific method and epistemology seems to be of recent vintage.
Norman Kemp Smith stands at the head of this non-skeptical tradition. Kemp Smith takes Hume’s statement that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (T 2.3.3.4) as a programmatic statement not only for Hume’s theory of motivation and morality, but also for his epistemology. As applied to Hume’s epistemology, the maxim means that reason not only is, but epistemologically ought to be, the slave of the natural beliefs. So our natural core beliefs are justified, regardless of whether reason supports or even opposes them. In short, Hume’s key move is to adopt a permissive epistemology, one in which instinct rather than argument is authoritative, and in which some instinctive beliefs that fall afoul of reason are epistemologically justified. Since natural core beliefs (whatever their relation to reason) retain their positive epistemic status, so too does Hume’s entire scientific project. Hume’s “skepticism” consists merely in restricting our enquiries to the domain of experience, distrusting our capacity for artificial speculation, and combating our credulous tendencies.

In general, recent non-skeptical interpretations follow the lead of Kemp Smith by attributing to Hume a permissive epistemology that saves the positive epistemic status of core beliefs which might appear to be threatened by skeptical arguments. More specifically, recent interpreters deal with Hume’s skeptical arguments in one of two ways. First, some readers think that Hume’s skeptical arguments do attack the epistemic justification of their targeted beliefs, but that Hume himself does not endorse the

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51 See his “The Naturalism of Hume (I),” in Mind, 14, no. 54 (April 1905), 149-173 as well as his further elaboration of his position in The Philosophy of David Hume. Garrett’s “Introduction” to The Philosophy of David Hume, and Loeb, Stability, 20-21, provide helpful summaries of the Kemp Smith reading.

52 Kemp Smith argues that Hume developed his theory of the passions and morality prior to developing his epistemology, and that he wrote Books II and III of the Treatise before writing Book I. The Philosophy of David Hume, Preface and Chapter 1. Book I applies the reason/feeling maxim to epistemology.

53 Ibid., 83-7.

54 Ibid., 132
presuppositions of these skeptical arguments.\textsuperscript{55} We may refer to these as \textit{reductio} readings, since they construe Hume’s skeptical arguments as \textit{reductio ad absurdum} arguments against assumptions he ultimately rejects.\textsuperscript{56} Second, some readers hold that Hume’s skeptical arguments are not even intended to discredit the epistemic justification of their targeted beliefs.\textsuperscript{57} They simply describe the loss of confidence that does or can occur when we reflect in certain ways; the arguments do not entail any epistemic evaluation of that loss of confidence. So Hume has no epistemic skepticism to overcome. Some non-skeptical interpreters do not fit neatly into these two categories, but nevertheless hold that Hume’s final epistemic position neutralizes the skeptical threats he may face.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} Owen points out that these readings do construe the skeptical arguments as epistemic. \textit{Hume’s Reason}, 198.

\textsuperscript{56} Annette C. Baier, an influential proponent of this kind of interpretation, calls Book I of the \textit{Treatise} constitutes a “\textit{reductio ad absurdum} of Cartesian intellect.” Baier, \textit{A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991): 21. Morris defends a version of this view in “Hume’s Conclusion.” Although Michael P. Lynch argues against the details of Morris’ interpretation of \textit{Treatise} 1.4.1, he also holds something like a \textit{reductio} view. Lynch, “Hume and the Limits of Reason,” \textit{Hume Studies} 22, no. 1 (April 1996): 89-104. Lynch’s Hume is running a kind of \textit{reductio ad absurdum} argument against those who think they can evade epistemic circularity. Ridge seems to think that Hume’s skeptical arguments first drive him to despair, and then drive him to change his epistemology by adopting the Title Principle as an epistemic norm which neutralizes the threats. “Epistemology Moralized,” especially 177-8, 196-8 n. 8, 189. According to Ainsle, total skepticism is generated by a false philosophy that demands proof of the reliability of our fundamental cognitive tendencies. Ainsle, \textit{Hume’s True Scepticism}, 240-241. \textit{Treatise} 1.4.7 narrates Hume’s own transition from false to true philosophy. Ibid., 238. For Ainsle and Ridge, the \textit{reductio ad absurdum} argument is one which applies to Hume’s own initial position, driving him to adopt another position.


\textsuperscript{58} Schmitt splits the difference between skeptical and non-skeptical readings of the \textit{Treatise} by arguing that, of the two core beliefs on which Hume focuses (belief in inferences and belief in bodies), the former is epistemologically justified and the latter is not. \textit{Hume’s Epistemology}, 368-375. Mounce also thinks that Hume escapes the force of the skeptical argument against reason (T 1.4.1), but succumbs to the force of the skeptical argument against belief in body (T 1.4.2). \textit{Hume’s Naturalism}, 49-61.
Nearly all non-skeptical readings crucially invoke Hume’s so-called Title Principle as his final epistemic norm which allows him to reject or overcome epistemic skepticism.\footnote{Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume, 131; Baier, Progress of Sentiments, 280; Garrett, Cognition, 234-5; Garrett, Hume, 227-237; Owen, Hume’s Reason, 217; cf. 203n12; Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 109; Ridge, “Epistemology Moralized,” 89; Schmitt, 368-375. Garrett is the first to have dubbed these lines “the Title Principle.” Ainsle is the exceptional non-skeptical interpreter who denies that the Title Principle is an epistemic norm. Ainsle, Hume’s True Scepticism, 233. As noted above, he confines Hume’s skepticism to the question of the ultimate justification of our cognitive tendencies, and thinks the ordinary beliefs and practices of science are insulated from this skepticism.} The Title Principle says

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. (T 1.4.7.11)

If the normative force of the “ought” (and “title”) in the Title Principle is epistemic, then Hume intends it to describe which propositional attitudes towards the deliverances of reason are epistemologically justified, and which are not. Lively deliverances of reason “ought to be assented to;” doubt and denial are epistemologically unjustified attitudes. On the other hand, we are epistemologically justified in doubting or even denying non-lively deliverances of reason, to which we have no propensity to assent. The Title Principle neutralizes the skeptical argument against reason (T 1.4.1), which is the argument that in turn generates a “dangerous dilemma” at the skeptical nadir of the Treatise (T 1.4.7.7).

As Hume points out, we have no propensity to follow reason down the long trail to recursive self-defeat which the argument against reason involves. A trivial quality of the imagination psychologically prevents us from putting much confidence in very refined conclusions such as these, no matter how sound the argument may be (T 1.4.7.6-7). So the Title Principle permits us to ignore the skeptical argument against reason, and
therefore to evade the dangerous dilemma too. The Title Principle therefore rescues Hume from this threat of skepticism.

Non-skeptical interpretations have several strengths. Most importantly, they easily account for Hume’s pursuit of science, since on this reading it faces no epistemic challenge. Furthermore, non-skeptical interpreters have rightly drawn attention to the pivotal role that the Title Principle plays in the conclusion of Book 1 of the *Treatise*.

But non-skeptical readings are not entirely satisfying. For one thing, they have to provide an attenuated account of how Hume’s final position is still in some sense skeptical. For example, Annette C. Baier says that Humean skepticism—what he calls “true scepticism”—collapses into mere open-mindedness, undogmatic diffidence, and fallibilism. For Don Garrett and Frederick Schmitt, Hume’s philosophy is skeptical because it requires us to doubt our skeptical doubts. For David Owen, Hume’s philosophy is “skeptical” in the sense that he does not rely on the isolated faculty of reason. For Donald C. Ainsle, Hume is a “true sceptic” in that he admits that there is no ultimate proof of the reliability of our cognitive faculties. But for none of these readers does Humean skepticism involve a denial of the epistemic justification of core beliefs.

It is not at all clear that an attenuated sort of “skepticism” really does justice to the importance that Hume seems to assign to his sort of skepticism. Any Baconian could

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60 Ainsle rightly poses this challenge to Baier’s *reductio* reading (he calls it a “dialectical interpretation”) and others like it. If Hume ultimately has an epistemic solution to the skeptical problems he raises, “Why then does Hume continue to call himself a ‘true’ sceptic? It seems that Hume should see himself as an *anti*-sceptic if his move to true philosophy means that the ‘desponding reflections’ are left behind. I will call this interpretive problem the *skepticism* problem: in what sense does Hume remain a sceptic at the end of CteB [Treatise 1.4.7, ‘Conclusion of this Book’]?” Ainsle, *Hume’s True Skepticism*, 237.

61 Ibid., 58, 27.


63 Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 220-223

64 Ainsle, *Hume’s True Skepticism*, 243-5.
espouse open-minded fallibilism. Dogmatists are only too willing to doubt their doubts and keep on believing, come what may. The superstitious do not rely on the isolated faculty of reason. And if the epistemic status of ordinary scientific beliefs is insulated from higher-order skepticism anyway, as Ainsle and De Pierris have it, it is hard to see why Hume would care very much about higher-order skepticism; it presents no live threat to the authority of science. Humean skepticism seems to be stronger and different than the forms that non-skeptical accounts can allow.

Because of the difficulties facing both skeptical and non-skeptical interpretations, the reconciliation of his science and skepticism remains a central question in Hume scholarship. On the skeptical reading, Hume provides a descriptive account of the understanding only to conclude that our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified. He then continues to write about human nature, the passions, morality, politics, economics, religion, history, and criticism, without giving any account of why we ought to believe him. On the non-skeptical reading, Hume mounts a number of “skeptical” arguments that do not actually threaten the epistemic status of any of our core beliefs. He furthermore describes his own philosophy as “very skeptical” even though he thinks that all of his assertions about the world are epistemologically justified. Both readings present us with a rather mystifying philosopher.

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65 Thus Garrett: “Can Hume’s ‘system of the sciences’ properly withstand his own skeptical arguments and conclusions? This is perhaps the most fundamental question in the interpretation of his entire philosophy.” Garrett, Cognition, 206. Cf. Garrett, Hume, 3, 214. Hume scholars often pose the problem in terms of the relationship between Hume’s “naturalism” and his skepticism. See Loeb, Stability, vii-viii; Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 2; Broughton, “Hume’s Naturalism,” 425-440.
0.4 A Way Through: Epistemic Skepticism and Practical Justification

My dissertation aims to resolve the apparent conflict between the skeptical and scientific aspects of Hume’s project. To begin with, my interpretation fundamentally agrees with the epistemologically skeptical reading of Hume. On my view, Hume denies that our core beliefs—inferential beliefs (probabilistic and demonstrative) and belief in enduring mind-independent objects—are ultimately epistemologically justified. These beliefs face insuperable defeaters from reason. So Hume is a radical epistemic skeptic. On the other hand, I argue that Hume nevertheless espouses the Title Principle, which permits him to ignore the skeptical challenges from reason and continue on with science and common life. The Title Principle is however a merely practical norm which practically justifies our ignoring the skeptical challenge, but which does not epistemologically justify our beliefs. My reading successfully answers both questions which epistemologically skeptical interpretations face. On the one hand, Hume aims both to pursue a scientific research programme, and to show that our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified. On the other hand, he has a principled reason—a purely practical justification—for pursuing science, even in the absence of epistemic justification.

In order to establish that Hume is an epistemic skeptic, I first develop an account of Humean epistemic justification. I argue that when Hume wants to talk about the sorts of

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66 My denial that the Title Principle is an epistemic norm distinguishes my reading from those of other readers cited above, including Owen (Hume’s Reason) and Ridge (“Epistemology Moralized”), who also emphasize the practical as well as epistemic value of following the Title Principle. It also sidesteps a criticism that has been leveled against their readings, namely, that Hume seems to distinguish moral and epistemic evaluation more sharply than these readings can. See Ainsle, Hume’s True Scepticism, 220 n. 5, citing Karl Schafer, “Curious Virtues in Hume’s Epistemology,” Philosophers’ Imprint 14, no. 1 (January 2014), 14, and Hsueh Qu, “Hume’s Practically Epistemic Conclusions?” Philosophical Studies 170, no 3 (September 2014), 501-524. On my reading, Hume’s practical evaluation of our core beliefs and his epistemic evaluation of the same are distinct and antithetical.
things that contemporary philosophers discuss under the heading of epistemic justification, he talks about “philosophy.” He uses the term “philosophy” to refer to a normative method of inquiry and belief-formation that governs all of the special sciences. For example, certain kinds of probabilistic inferences are “unphilosophical” and some kinds are “receiv’d by philosophers” (T 1.3.13.1). More broadly, philosophers approve of those belief-forming processes which are permanent, irresistible, and universal (T 1.4.4.1-2). They disapprove of those “trivial” belief-forming processes which lack these features. The norms of philosophy are distinct from prudential and moral norms. An action is prudent if it advances our own long-term self-interest. Morally, Hume approves of qualities which are immediately agreeable or useful to their possessors or to others (T 3.3.1.30; EPM 9.1). Philosophy does not evaluate beliefs or belief-forming processes on the basis of their agreeability or utility, either for oneself or others.68

While Hume is often explicit about what the norms of philosophy are, he does not explicitly reflect on the concept of philosophical normativity; that is, he does not

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67 I discuss Humean “philosophy” at greater length in Chapter 1. My identification of “philosophy” with Hume’s norms of epistemic justification is controversial and so far as I know no one attributes as much importance to it as I do. Lyons also assumes that “philosophy” is a set of normative epistemic principles which Hume endorses, but does not lay much emphasis on it. Lyons, “General Rules,” especially 274n15, 270-271. Garrett says little about the meaning of “philosophy,” just that it is comprised of “natural philosophy” and “moral philosophy.” Garrett, Cognition, 3-7. He does however say that Hume endorses philosophy, especially vis-à-vis “superstition.” Ibid, 6-7. Morris, by contrast, writes that “Hume typically speaks of ‘philosophers’ and their ‘usual’ practices, not to identify with them, but to dissociate himself from a generally accepted position with which he disagrees.” Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 95. Loeb divides Book 1 of the Ttaitise into a constructive epistemological phase in Parts 1-3, and a destructive skeptical phase in Part 4. Loeb, Stability, 12-20, especially 16-17. He ascribes to Hume an ambivalent relationship with “the philosophers.” In the constructive phase of his project, Hume aligns himself with the epistemic commitments of the philosophers. In the destructive phase, he distances himself from the epistemic commitments of the philosophers.

68 Hume does say that the belief-forming processes sanctioned by philosophy are, generally speaking, indispensably useful to human life (T 1.4.4.1). But there are exceptions to this general statement: following philosophy consistently leads to a suspension of our practically indispensable beliefs, as his skeptical challenges show (see Chapter 6). Furthermore, even granting that the philosophically approved belief-forming propensities are useful, the philosophers do not approve of them on the basis of their utility.
explicitly take up the question of what makes those norms and not others the correct philosophical norms. I think the most plausible account we can piece together is that philosophy sanctions those doxastic practices which are most likely to lead to truth. In the section “Of curiosity, or the love of truth,” Hume compares philosophy to hunting, and truth to the hunter’s quarry (T 2.3.10.8-9). The primary point of the comparison is to show how philosophy, like hunting, affords the pleasure of pursuit. But the analogy shows something else about the relationship between philosophy and truth: philosophy is the most likely method for obtaining truth, just as hunting is the most likely method for catching prey. The whole section (T 2.3.10) presupposes that the way to try to gratify the passion of curiosity (the love of truth) is to pursue reason and philosophy. Following philosophy may or may not be sufficient for arriving at the truth. It may not even be strictly necessary (sometimes we make lucky guesses). But philosophy is the method most likely to lead to truth. If truth is what we want, philosophy is the only serious

\[\text{Note that I do not say that the criterion for philosophically-sanctioned doxastic practices is reliability. On my reading, following philosophy does not necessarily or even probably lead to truth, frequently or at all. But the doxastic practices sanctioned by philosophy are more likely to lead to truth than are alternative practices. Hume opens the } \textit{Treatise} \text{ by expressing diffidence about whether truth is in human reach: “For if truth be at all within the reach of human capacity, ’tis certain it must lie very deep and abstruse; and to hope we shall arrive at it without pains, while the greatest geniuses have failed with the utmost pains, must certainly be esteemed sufficiently vain and presumptuous” (T Intro 3, italics mine). He eventually concludes that consistent adherence to philosophy does not lead to true or probably true beliefs, but to suspended judgment: “Philosophy wou’d render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it” (Abstract 27). If Hume’s criterion for philosophical norms were truth-conduciveness, and he found that his norms rendered him Pyrrhonian, he would have to reject his norms as philosophically unacceptable. As a matter of fact, when he does find that philosophical norms lead to global agnosticism, he does not reconsider the normative content of philosophy, but rather his commitment to philosophy (T 1.4.7). Even after he escapes Pyrrhonism by moderating his commitment to philosophy, he does not express confidence that truth is attainable: “we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination” (T 1.4.7.14, italics mine).} \]
methodological candidate.\textsuperscript{70} If the most likely method of arriving at truth is through philosophy, then it seems plausible to think that, by definition, philosophically-sanctioned doxastic practices are those practices most likely to lead to true belief.\textsuperscript{71}

Given this notion of Humean “philosophy” as that method of inquiry and belief-formation which constitutes our best hope at discovering truth, I claim that “philosophical” acceptability is usefully understood as what contemporary philosophers call “epistemic justification.” Philosophy’s norms, which govern doxastic practices, particularly in the context of the special sciences, are neither prudential nor moral. Philosophy does not aim at interest-satisfaction but at truth. Most contemporary epistemologists would probably regard our best scientific theories as paradigmatic examples of knowledge. Most would probably agree that if any beliefs are epistemologically justified, the products of the scientific method are. Since Hume’s “philosophy” constitutes his scientific method, we should understand it as epistemologically normative. At the very least, “philosophical” norms are the closest thing to epistemic norms that Hume has on offer. On my account of Humean epistemic justification, Hume is an epistemic skeptic about core beliefs if and only if he holds that some of our core beliefs fall short of the standards of “philosophy”—that method of inquiry and belief-formation that governs the special sciences.

In order to determine which arguments (if any) Hume really regards as epistemologically skeptical threats, we need to determine in more detail what the

\textsuperscript{70} After Hume admits that philosophy will not lead to truth, he has to recommend it over superstition on other grounds, namely, that it is safer and more agreeable (T 1.4.7.13). See 6.2.3.

\textsuperscript{71} As I discuss in 2.3, however, Hume does not attempt to justify philosophically-sanctioned doxastic practices by showing that they are those most likely to lead to true belief. In fact, the definitional concept of philosophical normativity plays no discernible role in Hume’s project. Hume is concerned with the justification of beliefs in terms of philosophical norms, not with the justification of philosophical norms in terms of a fundamental epistemic meta-concept.
standards of philosophy really are, since these standards are also Hume’s standards for epistemic justification. My reading of Hume’s epistemology is original, although in several respects it builds on the work of others. Hume has a propensity-based epistemology, wherein the epistemic status of a belief derives from the properties of the propensity that produces it.72 I also find in Hume a distinction between two levels of epistemic justification, defeasible justification and overall (or ultimate) justification.73 A defeasibly justified belief is justified for the time being; an ultimately justified belief is justified all things considered. Defeasibly justified beliefs may or may not prove to be ultimately justified. For Hume, a belief is defeasibly justified if and only if it is produced by a permanent, irresistible, and universal propensity. It is justified overall if and only if it is defeasibly justified and faces no undefeated defeaters. A defeater is an epistemic reason for rejecting a belief. Defeaters come in two varieties, rebutting defeaters and undermining (or undercutting) defeaters.74 A rebutting defeater for some belief \( P \) is a reason to believe that not-\( P \) is true. An undermining defeater for some belief \( P \) is a reason to believe that \( P \) is not defeasibly justified. Both sorts of defeaters show up in Hume, although of course not under their contemporary names.

72 In this respect I follow Loeb and Schmitt. Loeb, Stability, 12-13; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 28-29.
73 Lyons helpfully discusses defeasibility and prima facie versus ultima facie justification in Hume’s epistemology. Lyons, “General Rules”, 276n30. Schmitt makes heavy usage of defeasible versus overall justification in Hume’s Epistemology. He provides a helpful discussion of defeasible versus overall justification, both with respect to epistemology generally and to Hume in particular. Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 28-33. Schmitt adduces different textual grounds than I do for attributing to Hume the defeasible/overall distinction. Ibid. 29-30. But he rightly points out that “the distinction is essential equipment for a plausible epistemology” generally. Ibid. 30.
My reading of Hume’s epistemology finds important support in some often overlooked sections of the *Treatise* (T 1.3.9-13). Here Hume explains how second-order reflection upon our broadly natural belief-forming processes prompts us to form second-order corrective general rules against some of those processes. These corrective general rules can effectively suppress propensities. Suppressible propensities are obviously not permanent, irresistible, or universal, and so their deliverances are not even defeasibly justified. Hume makes extensive use of these corrective general rules, which shows the importance of the epistemic distinctions to which they are related.

With Hume’s epistemology in hand, we can sort through the confusing array of potentially skeptical arguments and determine which ones, by Hume’s own lights, really impugn the epistemic status of core beliefs. I conclude that Hume’s true skeptical arguments occur precisely in the sections of the *Treatise* we should expect: “Of scepticism with regard to reason” (T 1.4.1), and “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” (T 1.4.2). Both arguments display a similar pattern. The targeted core beliefs are defeasibly justified, but face defeaters from reason. In *Treatise* 1.4.1, Hume shows that all demonstrative and probabilistic inferences face undermining defeaters from reason itself. In *Treatise* 1.4.2, Hume shows that the vulgar belief in “continued and distinct existences” (enduring, mind-independent objects) faces a rebutting defeater from reason. No epistemic rehabilitation of these beliefs is possible. Hume’s other seeming skeptical arguments, both in the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*, presuppose commitments that conflict with Hume’s official positions. On closer examination it is clear that Hume uses them for merely rhetorical purposes.
Once we understand the nature of Hume’s real skeptical challenges (our core beliefs face defeaters from reason), we can see that the Title Principle provides a practical, rather than epistemic, response. Hume does not reconsider his epistemic norms in the face of his skeptical dilemma. He asks himself what is to be done, practically, in light of the fact that his epistemic norms demand that he suspend his core beliefs. The Title Principle answers to this practical problem, without changing his epistemic situation. It practically permits him to ignore his epistemic obligation to yield to reason, precisely when rational arguments defeat his core beliefs. This is why Hume emphasizes the practical justification for a moderated pursuit of philosophy and reason, while insisting that his final position is still (epistemologically) skeptical.

My proposal hinges upon the distinction between epistemological and practical justification. The distinction is not original to me. For someone like W.K. Clifford, who holds that it is ethically wrong, “always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” epistemic justification and practical justification are coextensive. But it is perfectly conceivable that epistemic and practical justification are not coextensive. It might be practically advantageous for me to believe (against my evidence) that I can beat cancer or leap across a wide crevasse: the mere belief will increase the likelihood that I will in fact beat cancer or make the jump. In fact, a few commentators have suggested that on Hume’s final position, our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified but that we are practically justified in holding them

76 As Fogelin notes, “Clearly, a philosopher can be a theoretical skeptic of the most general and radical kind without prescribing anything about holding beliefs and without himself following any such prescriptions.” *Hume’s Skepticism*, 5.
anyway. 78 Fogelin rightly identifies the Title Principle as a practical rather than epistemological norm. 79 For whatever reason, these commentators do not develop this insight as the key to reconciling Hume’s science and skepticism. 80 I aim to do so.

Many non-skeptical interpreters point out that following the Title Principle is practically motivated. 81 But I am not merely saying that the Title Principle is practically

78 Fogelin says that Hume is a theoretical but not a prescriptive skeptic. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 6-7. If Hume prescribes a return to the (theoretically unjustified) beliefs of common life and science, presumably he thinks they are practically justified. Singer notes that mitigated skepticism, while it may or may not resolve Hume’s epistemological problems, is “a *practical* compromise between extreme skepticism and ordinary belief,” and sanctions philosophy just insofar as it is useful and agreeable for some people. Singer, “Hume’s Extreme Skepticism,” 614-15, 618). Stroud also concludes that although Hume “is in no position to say that profound, careful philosophy is superior” to superstition so far as reliability goes, he “recommends the pursuit of the sceptical or academical philosophy as the best or perhaps the only way to achieve this most natural and therefore most blissful human condition.” Stroud, “Hume’s Scepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection,” in *The Empiricists: Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume*, edited by Margaret Atherton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 244, 247. De Pierris discusses the practical value of acknowledging radical skepticism (it wards off theology and metaphysics) and of continuing on with philosophy in spite of radical skepticism. De Pierris, “Hume’s Pyrrhonian Skepticism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 3 (July 2001): 361-3; *Ideas*, 296-306. But recall that she also asserts that ordinary philosophy proceeds at a different level, in terms of different epistemic norms, than radical skepticism. Ibid., 21. None of the above commentators seem to draw much attention to the practical/epistemic divergence or develop it very far.

79 Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 24

80 In his earlier work, Fogelin emphasizes that Hume’s skepticism “clears the ground” (somehow) for his scientific, naturalistic explanations of the mind. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 146-151. In his later work, Fogelin emphasizes that Hume’s response to radical skepticism—his “mitigated skepticism”—is a psychologically explicable event without any principled rationale. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, especially 5-7.

81 Kemp Smith writes that natural beliefs pass “the practical test of human validity.” Kemp Smith, “The Naturalism of Hume (I),” 152, 155-6. Garrett points out that following the Title Principle is apparently the best way to satisfy our own desires. Garrett, *Cognition*, 234. Elsewhere he writes that “the disposition to reason in accordance with the Title Principle does indeed achieve moral approval in the *Treatise* as a trait that is useful to its possessor.” Garrett, *Hume*, 232-233. Owen also stresses that Hume’s Title Principle recommends philosophy and reason (“not functioning in isolation, but embedded in a feeling creature”) on practical and moral grounds. Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 217, 211-223. Hume’s preference for philosophy and reason “is the same as his, and our, preference for virtue over vice. In each case the former is more pleasant and useful to ourselves and others.” Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 222. According to Singer, the Title Principle says that we should allow expedience to determine our beliefs. Singer, “Hume’s Extreme Skepticism,” 611. No one has emphasized the practical rationality of the Title Principle more than Michael Ridge in his excellent article, “Epistemology Moralized.” However, Ridge also says that the Title Principle is a “clearly normative epistemic principle.” Ridge, “Epistemology Moralized,” 189.
beneficial. That could be true even if it is an epistemic principle. I affirm that the Title Principle is a Humean practical (even moral) norm, since following it is immediately agreeable and useful both to ourselves and others; but I furthermore deny that the Title Principle is an epistemic norm. In fact, I think that the Title Principle, by telling us to sometimes ignore the deliverances of reason, stands in contradiction with Hume’s epistemic norms, which make no such exceptions to the authority of reason. Hume, over against the likes of Clifford, thinks that we are sometimes practically (even morally) obliged to flout our epistemic duty. This is how Hume gets past his skeptical dilemma without solving it. Our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified, but we are practically justified in continuing to hold them. The sound arguments from reason that defeat our core beliefs are not lively, and do not mix with any propensity, so they have no practical title to operate upon us. To suspend (or even attempt to suspend) our core beliefs is neither agreeable nor useful to anyone.

My reading has several advantages. First, it resolves the apparent contradiction between Hume’s science and his skepticism. Second, it helps us to sort through Hume’s otherwise confusing claims about his sceptical arguments. Third, it does so in a way that bears out Hume’s claim that his views are consistent between the Treatise and the first Enquiry. Fourth, my reading achieves these aims by way of a fresh account of Hume’s epistemology which is textually anchored in his idea of “philosophy.”

Here is a rough outline of how I will proceed. In order to understand the nature of Hume’s sceptical arguments, I begin with an account of his epistemic standards. Chapter 1 identifies the properties of the propensities whose deliverances are epistemologically

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82 Recall for example Clifford’s similar position, that epistemic and moral duties are distinct but inseparable.
justified, and discusses the distinction between defeasible and ultimate justification.

Chapter 2 finds additional support for this reading in Hume’s account of corrective general rules. Chapter 3 argues that Hume regards not only inductive inferences but also (more controversially) the vulgar belief in body as defeasibly justified.

With Hume’s epistemology in hand I then turn to his skeptical arguments. Chapter 4 explains Hume’s defeater arguments in *Treatise* 1.4.1 and 1.4.2. Chapter 5 shows that other seeming skeptical arguments, when viewed in light of Hume’s official epistemology and other commitments, are merely rhetorical. Finally, Chapter 6 considers Hume’s practical solution to the dilemma created by the epistemic defeat of his core beliefs.

0.5 Conclusion

On the present interpretation, Hume asks whether the pursuit of philosophy, the rigorous adherence to epistemic norms and the authority of reason, is always the most beneficial course of action. He concludes that it is not. It is in everyone’s best interest to hang on to core beliefs, even when they meet with rational defeat. As a matter of psychological fact we cannot get rid of these core beliefs anyway, even if we try. But the limited practical authority of philosophy does not open up the floodgates of epistemic irresponsibility, superstition, and irrationality. It simply puts philosophy in its proper place—subordinated to human interests, integrated into a well-rounded life.
CHAPTER 1: NATURAL BELIEFS AND EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

Introduction

In Chapters 1-3 I exposit Hume’s epistemology. Here in Chapter 1, I begin by establishing a textual starting place for determining Hume’s epistemic judgments (1.1). That starting place is his use of the term “philosophy.” In the Introduction I argued that Hume’s concept of philosophy comprises his epistemology. Here I develop further textual support for this claim, showing that philosophy is normative for the sciences, (1.1.1), and that philosophy is comprised of norms of belief-formation (1.1.2).

Next, I explain the content of philosophy (1.2). In short, philosophy sanctions undefeated narrowly natural beliefs (1.2.1). Natural beliefs do not have “artificial” causes; that is, they are not produced by intentional human efforts. Narrowly natural beliefs are natural beliefs which are produced by permanent, irresistible, and universal principles of the imagination. Narrowly natural beliefs are defeasibly epistemologically justified, but not necessarily overall justified, since they are still potentially vulnerable to epistemic defeat (1.2.2). I conclude by discussing the relationship of my account to other recent operation-based readings of Hume’s epistemology (1.3).
1.1 Hume endorses the epistemic norms of “philosophy”

1.1.1 Hume endorses “philosophy” in the context of the sciences

Throughout the *Treatise*, Hume refers to philosophy and the philosophers in two distinct ways: philosophy in principle and philosophy in actual practice. Hume’s remarks about actual philosophers and their theories can be laudatory, neutral, or critical. On the one hand, for example, he refers to George Berkeley and to John Locke as each “a great philosopher” in the course of appropriating some of their insights (T 1.1.7.1; 1.2.3.7). On the other hand, he criticizes ancient and modern philosophers (T 1.4.3-4).

But to speak positively or critically of particular philosophers or bits of philosophy is entirely different from discussing philosophy per se. Sometimes Hume speaks about “philosophy” and “the philosophers” in the most general terms, referring to that which is essential to and constitutive of philosophy. When he does so, he always either explicitly or implicitly aligns himself with and endorses philosophy as dictating the proper way to conduct science.83

To begin with, Hume’s very pursuit of the “science of man” entails his endorsement of—his submission to—philosophy (in most general sense) as a normative method. The relationship of philosophy to the particular arts and sciences is like the relationship of a king to his subjects: its “sovereign authority ought every where to be acknowledg’d” (T 1.4.5.34). Hume speaks interchangeably of “science” and “philosophy” (T Intro 1). Just as Hume can speak of “science” in the singular as well as its particular branches, “the sciences,” (for example, the science of man), so also Hume can speak of “philosophy” and its particular branches, such as natural philosophy and

83 Note that I do not say he always endorses philosophy as the proper way to become happy or useful. Hume does not unqualifiedly endorse philosophy from the practical perspective.
moral philosophy. He can variously describe his project both as a branch of science ("the science of man") and as a branch of philosophy (specifically, "moral philosophy") (T Intro 10). The picture here is fairly clear. "Philosophy" and "science" in general refer to a method constituted by a set of normative principles, and the particular branches of philosophy (or science) apply this method to different subject matter. So far as he participates in the sciences at all, Hume acknowledges the "sovereign authority" of philosophy, and endorses its norms.

Hume’s major point in the “Introduction” to the *Treatise* is to defend philosophy as a method and to announce his commitment to it in the development of the science of man. Many people, says Hume, claim that “the present imperfect condition of the sciences” constitutes grounds for rejecting philosophy altogether (T Intro 1-3). But Hume says he is doubling down on “abstruse,” painstaking reasoning in “the philosophy I am going to unfold” (T Intro 3).

His renewed commitment to the methodological integrity of philosophy (science) has three aspects. First, he hopes to reform the special sciences by starting with an investigation of the human mind itself, which has foundational significance for them all (T Intro 4, 7). Second, Hume aims to reform the foundational science of man through a methodological commitment to the authority of observation: “the only solid foundation we can give to [the science of man] must be laid on experience and observation” (T Intro 7). Third, Hume lays down methodological strictures concerning the formulation of general laws. On the one hand, “we must endeavor to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all

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85 More than once he emphasizes that he is not engaged in natural philosophy (T 1.1.2.1; 1.2.5.4; 1.3.8.8).
effects from the simplest and fewest causes” (Intro 8). But on the other hand, “any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical” (T Intro 8). The most general causal principles we can ever hope to discover will still express metaphysically contingent relationships. When “we have arriv’d at the utmost extent of human reason” we still “can give no reason for our most general and most refin’d principles, besides our experience of their reality” (T Intro 9).

Hume never retracts his endorsement of philosophy as normative for the sciences. Philosophy is not one method among others for pursuing the special sciences; it is the only method. The only alternative method of positive belief-formation and theory construction that Hume mentions is superstition (T 1.4.7.13), and this he categorically rejects. As I discuss in Chapter 6, Hume does qualify his endorsement of philosophy in one sense. Philosophy is normative for the sciences, but not for life. We are sometimes practically justified in ignoring the demands of philosophy. But insofar as we do deviate from philosophy, we are no longer engaged in the proper conduct of science.

1.1.2 “Philosophy” is comprised of doxastic norms

Throughout Book 1 of the Treatise Hume indicates many normative principles that comprise philosophy. These principles all govern our doxastic activities, those activities related to belief-formation. Already in the “Introduction” we have seen him lay down the authority of observation and rule out the postulation of objective necessary connections. Also in the “Introduction” Hume says that to accept propositions without
sufficient evidence, to deduce invalid consequences, or to espouse incoherent theories all
draw “disgrace upon philosophy”, presumably because they violate its norms (T Intro 1).

The faculty of reason is essential to philosophy. Philosophy brings questions
“before the tribunal of human reason” (T Intro 1). To reject all refined and elaborate
reasoning is to “cut off entirely all science and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.7). Philosophers
disapprove of maxims which are contrary to reason (T 1.3.9.19).

*Treatise* 1.3.13, “Of unphilosophical probability,” is devoted to describing four
kinds of probabilistic belief-formation processes that do not obtain the sanction of the
philosophers (T 1.3.13.1). These unphilosophical forms of probability are contrasted with
the probabilistic belief-forming processes which “are receiv’d by philosophers, and
allow’d to be reasonable foundations of belief and opinion” (T 1.3.13.1). These approved
forms of probability are those “which are deriv’d from an *imperfect* experience and from
*contrary* causes,” as well as probability arising from analogy (T 1.3.12.25).

In a passage of programmatic significance to which I will soon return, Hume
distinguishes between principles of the imagination which “are receiv’d by philosophy”
and those which are “rejected” by philosophy” (T 1.4.4.1). Philosophy approves of those
principles of the imagination which are “permanent, irresistible, and universal,” and
disapproves those which are “changeable, weak, and irregular” (T 1.4.4.1). In the next
paragraph Hume characterizes philosophically approved principles as “solid, permanent,
and consistent” (T 1.4.4.2). He gives as an example of an approved principle “the
customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes” (T 1.4.4.1). He

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86 “But as education is an artificial and not a natural cause, and as its maxims are frequently contrary to
reason, and even to themselves in different times and places, it is never upon that account recogniz’d by
philosophers” (T 1.3.9.19).
gives as an example of a “trivial propensity of the imagination” which philosophy
condemns the propensity to project internal emotions on external objects (T 1.4.3.11).

Hume identifies several more or less miscellaneous norms of philosophy simply in
passing. It is the duty of philosophers to clarify obscure ideas (T 1.3.1.7). 87 Philosophers
ought to define their terms as clearly and precisely as possible—but no more than is
possible (T 1.3.7.7). 88 Philosophers should be slow to accept new hypotheses (T
1.3.9.1). 89 They disapprove of beliefs which have been formed through education, that is,
through the mere brute force of repetition (T 1.3.9.19, 1.3.10.1). 90 True philosophy does
not predicate qualities of objects with which those qualities are incompatible (T
1.3.14.31). 91 True philosophy involves correcting our propensity to conceptual confusion
(T 1.4.6.6). 92 True philosophers do not successively assent to contradictory principles (T
1.4.7.4). 93

87 “If its [an idea’s] weakness render it obscure, ’tis our business to remedy that defect, as much as possible,
by keeping the idea steady and precise; and till we have done so, ’tis in vain to pretend to reasoning and
philosophy” (1.3.1.7).
88 Hume admits that the variety of terms whereby he defines the manner of conceiving those ideas which
constitute beliefs may seem “unphilosophical,” but in fact he counters that “in philosophy we can go no
farther, than assert, that it is something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from
the fictions of the imagination” (1.3.7.7). Here Hume is concerned to show that he does in fact abide by the
norms of philosophy, even if at first it may appear otherwise. The particular norm in view is that we ought
to give clear and precise definitions to our terms.
89 “A scrupulous hesitation to receive any new hypothesis is so laudable a disposition in philosophers, and
so necessary to the examination of truth, that it deserves to be comply’d with, and requires that every
argument be produc’d, which may tend to their satisfaction, and every objection remov’d, which may stop
them in their reasoning” (1.3.9.1).
90 “But as education is an artificial and not a natural cause, and as its maxims are frequently contrary to
reason, and even to themselves in different times and places, it is never upon that account recogniz’d by
philosophers; tho’ in reality it be built almost on the same foundation of custom and repetition as our
reasonings from causes and effects” (1.3.9.19). “But tho’ education be disclaim’d by philosophy, as a
fallacious ground of assent to any opinion, it prevails nevertheless in the world, and is the cause why all
systems are apt to be rejected at first as new and unusual” (1.3.10.1).
91 Hume implies this by saying that it is false philosophy which does make such predications.
92 “Our propensity to this mistake is so great from the resemblance above-mention’d, that we fall into it
before we are aware; and tho’ we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate
1.2 Philosophy sanctions undefeated narrowly natural beliefs

1.2.1 Narrowly natural beliefs

With this textual key in hand, we can now unlock in more detail the structure of Hume’s epistemology. I have already noted in passing many of the sorts of doxastic practices of which “the philosophers” approve and disapprove. Now I wish to give these norms a systematic exposition.

To begin with, the philosophers sanction only natural beliefs; they disapprove of artificial beliefs. Hume makes this point in the process of explaining why the philosophers do not approve of beliefs which are beaten into us by sheer repetition, or what he calls “education.”

But as education is an artificial and not a natural cause, and as its maxims are frequently contrary to reason, and even to themselves in different times and places, it is never upon that account recogniz’d by philosophers. (T 1.3.9.19)

The philosophers reject education on three distinct grounds. First, education is an artificial and not a natural cause. By this Hume means that in the process of education, beliefs are produced by the intentional activity of humans. Second, the maxims of education frequently contradict reason. Third, the maxims of reason frequently contradict the method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination” (T 1.4.6.6).

93 “Or in case we prefer neither of them, but successively assent to both, as is usual among philosophers, with what confidence can we afterwards usurp that glorious title, when we thus knowingly embrace a manifest contradiction?” (T 1.4.7.4).

94 Hume clearly does not mean, by “education,” the act of attending school or anything like that. He uses the term in a special sense.

95 Hume writes there is no word “more ambiguous and equivocal” than the word “nature” (T 3.1.2.7) He goes on to distinguish between several senses. Nature be opposed to miracles (T 3.1.2.7), to that which is “rare and unusual” (T 3.1.2.8), or to artifice (T 3.1.2.9). The “designs, and projects, and views of men” are artificial principles (that is, causes) in this sense. “Taking them to be free and entirely our own, ‘tis usual for us to set them in opposition to the other principles of nature” (ibid). Education is an artificial cause in this sense.
themselves. I take it that each of these three reasons is individually sufficient for the philosophers to reject education as a doxastic process and all of its deliverances as a class. Along with education, Hume condemns the artificial process of creating false memories by way of lie-repetition (T 1.3.5.6; 1.3.9.19).\textsuperscript{96} It appears then that the artificiality of a belief-producing process is alone sufficient to evoke the disapprobation of philosophy.\textsuperscript{97} Since Hume’s epistemology only sanctions beliefs produced by natural processes, we can appropriately call it a natural belief epistemology.

However, Hume does not sanction all natural belief-producing processes or their deliverances.\textsuperscript{98} He distinguishes between two kinds of principles of the imagination, one kind which is “receiv’d by philosophy,” and the other of which is “rejected” (T 1.4.4.1).

\textsuperscript{96} Note how Hume implicitly distinguishes the causes of self-deception from the influences of “nature:” “And as an idea of the memory, by losing its force and vivacity, may degenerate to such a degree, as to be taken for an idea of the imagination; so on the other hand an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment. This is noted in the case of liars; who by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to believe and remember them, as realities; custom and habit having in this case, as in many others, the same influence on the mind as nature, and infixing the idea with equal force and vigour” (T 1.3.5.6)

\textsuperscript{97} It seems fair to ask whether testimony can really pass for a natural belief-producing process by Hume’s lights. Clearly Hume regards some belief in testimony as justified, despite our tendencies to credulity (cf. T 1.3.9.10; EHU 10). He does not take up the question of its artificiality or its origin in human intentions.

\textsuperscript{98} The debate over the epistemic significance of Treatise 1.4.4.1-2 centers around three questions. First, does Hume agree with the judgments of “the philosophers” expressed in this passage? Morris rejects the claim that Hume endorses the principles of the “philosophers” either here in T 1.4.4.1-2 or anywhere else. Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 99-100. Others argue that Hume does agree with the philosophers, at least provisionally and for the moment. See Noonan, Hume on Knowledge, 128-30; Loeb, Stability, 154-162; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 286-312. I have argued that Hume does align himself with the philosophers throughout the Treatise, including here.

Second, are the philosophers making specifically epistemic judgments? Fogelin does not seem to take the passage as drawing an epistemic distinction. Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 89-92. Oliver Johnson also seems to think that in the passage, Hume is drawing a distinction, on pragmatic grounds, within the class of epistemologically unjustified beliefs. Johnson, The Mind of David Hume: A Companion to Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 274-6. On the other hand, Noonan thinks these are epistemic judgments. Noonan, Hume on Knowledge, 128-130. Loeb treats 1.4.4.1-2 as a central text for understanding Hume’s epistemic commitments. Loeb, Stability, 15, 154-162. P.J.E. Kail, citing Treatise 1.4.4.1, also agrees that the products of permanent, irresistible, and universal propensities are epistemologically justified. P.J.E. Kail, Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68. Schmitt views the passage as Hume’s criterion of
…I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of. The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ’d only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. For this reason the former are receiv’d by philosophy, and the latter rejected. (T 1.4.4.1)

The approved principles of the imagination, like the associative relation of causation, are “permanent, irresistible, and universal” (ibid). The disapproved principles, like the tendency to project our emotions on the world, are “changeable, weak, and irregular,” and “being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition” (ibid). Hume goes on to say that the philosophically-condemned principles are also “natural,” but only in the sense in which

defeasibly justifying operations. Schmitt, *Hume’s Epistemology*, 286-312. I have argued that the judgments of “the philosophers” and the norms of “philosophy” are consistently epistemic, so they are here as well.

Third, does Hume later abandon this epistemology? Noonan and Loeb both argue that Hume’s skeptical problems later force him to reject the epistemic principles expressed here in 1.4.4.1-2. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge*, 128-130; Loeb, *Stability*, 15, 154-162. I will argue later that he does not. Hume’s skepticism is not a crisis of his epistemic standards as such. It is a crisis about his core beliefs, which fall short of the epistemic standards he endorses.

Loeb rightly points out that Baier’s *Progress* and Garrett’s *Cognition* give almost no attention to this passage. Loeb, *Stability*, 156 n. 10. On their readings, Hume’s own epistemology should not come to expression until the Title Principle emerges in *Treatise* 1.4.7.11.
sicknesses are natural (T 1.4.4.2). I call the philosophically-sanctioned principles “narrowly natural,” and the philosophically-condemned principles “broadly natural.”

Hume’s endorsement of our natural faculties is also manifest in his rejection of Cartesian skepticism in the first Enquiry. There he describes Cartesian skepticism as “antecedent to all study and philosophy:”

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. (EHU 12.3)

Hume goes on to immediately reject Cartesian or “antecedent” skepticism.

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. (EHU 12.3)

Here Hume voices two objections. In the first place, Descartes demands that we start with some infallible original belief such as that “I exist.” Hume objects that the belief “I exist” is not uniquely self-evident and indubitable. In fact, he says, there are “others,”—other beliefs—“that are self-evident and convincing.” Hume goes on in the next paragraph to say that we ought “To begin with clear and self-evident principles” in

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99 Although I think that Hume has got Descartes pretty much right, the accuracy of his interpretation is beside the point for the purpose of establishing Hume’s own views.

100 Noonan misses Hume’s point when he says “The first [Humean criticism] is that there is no principle which has the status Descartes assigns to the cogito, the status of an indubitable truth, which cannot be fallacious or deceitful.” Noonan, Hume on Knowledge, 28. Hume’s point is that there are many truths which we are just as incapable of doubting as we are of doubting our own existence. Hume implies that these beliefs are justified, but does not give any indication as to whether he thinks that they are indefeasible or even infallibly true.
our researches (EHU 12.4).\textsuperscript{101} Hume thinks that we justifiedly hold some beliefs, not on the basis of other beliefs, but as self-evident. He objects to Descartes not because he begins with self-evident beliefs, but because he ought to hold more.

Second, Hume rejects the demand that we give a non-circular argument for the reliability of our faculties before we can justifiedly assent to their deliverances.\textsuperscript{102} He also endorses the use of our faculties, quite apart from our ability to confirm their reliability by way of a non-circular argument. The implication is that we are at least defeasibly justified in believing that our faculties are trustworthy. This belief is of course susceptible to defeat. We may discover that some of our natural doxastic propensities are trustworthy. If we discover that all of our faculties (or at least those that produce our core

\textsuperscript{101} Hume rarely uses the term “self-evident,” (a search of davidhume.org brings back nine occurrences), and no occurrence is as significant or illuminating as the occurrences in EHU 12 itself. We learn only that there are clear and indubitable self-evident principles when Hume writes “When the measure of a yard and that of a foot are presented, the mind can no more question, that the first is longer than the second, than it can doubt of those principles, which are the most clear and self-evident” (T 1.2.4.22). Little can be concluded from Hume’s qualified uses of “self-evident,” as when he writes that it is “in a manner self-evident” that all the causes of pride are related to the self (T 2.1.7.1), when he writes that “It seems a maxim almost self-evident, that the prices of every thing depend on the proportion between commodities and money, and that any considerable alteration on either has the same effect, either of heightening or lowering the price” (Mo 12, Mil 290). Hume says that “This reflection is self-evident” (T 3.3.1.5) referring back to the preceding paragraph, which says “If any action be either virtuous or vicious, ’tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character. Actions themselves, not proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never consider’d in morality.” Possibly Hume thinks that the reflection is self-evident in the sense that it is known by introspection of our own sentiments of approbation. Finally, Philo says that it is self-evident that the universe has a cause, insofar as it follows from the premise that “Nothing exists without a cause” (DNR 2.3). Demea asserts that the existence of God is self-evident (DNR 2.1), and Cleanthes that the similarity between the world and an artifact is self-evident (DNR 3.1), but it is not clear in what sense, if any, Hume himself would endorse their claims.

\textsuperscript{102} He seems to be expressing a version of the familiar regress argument which traditionally motivates foundationalist theories of justification. See e.g. Richard Fumerton, "Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification", \textit{The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy} (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/justep-foundational/>.
beliefs) are trustworthy, then we are in the predicament Hume calls “consequent skepticism.”

There is another species of skepticism, *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)

We are now in a position to express the different epistemic principles that generate antecedent skepticism (which Hume rejects out of hand) and consequent skepticism (whose threat Hume feels). Antecedent skepticism proceeds from the epistemic principle that a belief is justified iff it is the deliverance of a faculty whose reliability has been proven. Consequent skepticism proceeds from the epistemic principle that “science and inquiry,” which employ unverified natural faculties and rely on self-evident principles, give us defeasibly justified beliefs about our mental faculties—specifically, about the extent of their trustworthiness. In short, Hume thinks that at least some of our natural faculties give us defeasibly justified beliefs, even though we cannot give a non-circular defense of the reliability of those faculties. Our natural faculties are innocent unless proven guilty.

Those faculties which are merely broadly natural can be proven guilty, and the philosophers reject them. As Hume explains, the philosophers reject the bad sort of natural principles because they are “opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning” and “may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition” (T 1.4.4.1). Recall that the philosophers reject “education” not only because it is an artificial cause,
but also because “its maxims are frequently contrary to reason, and even to themselves in different times and places” (T 1.3.9.19). When the deliverances of a broadly natural principle “frequently” face defeat from reason or elsewhere, the principle itself is rejected by the philosophers as untrustworthy and useless. None of its deliverances are even defeasibly justified.

Hume gives us an example of one of these broadly natural but philosophically disapproved propensities.

There is a very remarkable inclination in human nature, to bestow on external objects the same emotions, which it observes in itself; and to find everywhere those ideas, which are most present to it. This inclination, ‘tis true, is suppress’d by a little reflection, and only takes place in children, poets, and the antient philosophers. (T 1.4.3.11)

Hume ridicules the “Peripatetics” for thus following “every trivial propensity of the imagination” (T 1.4.3.11; cf. 1.4.4.2). We might call this particular “trivial propensity” the Propensity to Project Internal Perceptions on External Objects (henceforth simply the Propensity to Project). The Propensity to Project is not irresistible, but is easily “suppress’d by a little reflection” (T 1.4.3.11).

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103 Loeb unfortunately misidentifies the propensity that Hume has in view in Treatise 1.4.4.1-2. Loeb, Stability, 156. Hume has just been criticizing the ancient philosophers for their belief in substrata, which derive ultimately from the propensity to “ascribe an identity to the changeable succession of connected qualities” (T 1.4.3.3). Since Hume is still criticizing the Peripatetics when he discusses the principles of which the philosophers do not approve in Treatise 1.4.4.1, Loeb assumes that Hume is still talking about the identity-ascribing propensity. In fact, in Treatise 1.4.3.11, Hume has changed the subject to another propensity which the Peripatetics indulge, the Propensity to Project. This is the propensity that accounts specifically for their belief in “sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum” (T 1.4.3.11). Loeb’s mistaken identification of the propensity in view in 1.4.4.1 undergirds his larger error of assuming that the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions is rejected in toto and that the vulgar belief in body therefore lacks even defeasible justification. Ibid., 154-162.
Note that it is not only particular deliverances of the Propensity to Project which can be suppressed by a little reflection, but the inclination itself. This makes good sense: the products of the propensity are necessarily false. They are conceptual confusions. We need only realize that a belief is such a projection to realize that it is false. Once we have seen that the propensity produces only falsehoods, we naturally form a general rule against receiving its deliverances. The general rule effectively suppresses the propensity. Since the propensity is resistible, its deliverances are not defeasibly justified. Hume says that “We must pardon the children, because of their age; poets, because they profess to follow implicitly the suggestions of their fancy: But what excuse shall we find to justify our philosophers in so signal a weakness?” (T 1.4.3.11). Children may be excused because they have not had time reflect upon the propensity and correct it. Poets are old enough to correct the propensity, but indulge it intentionally for artistic purposes, and do not assent to its deliverances (cf. T 1.3.10.10-11). Philosophers however are old enough to have reflected upon and corrected the propensity, and have no artistic reason for indulging it and assenting to its deliverances.

1.2.2 The epistemic defeat of individual beliefs

If the interpretation so far is correct, then the implicit defeater structure built into Hume’s epistemology calls for more focused discussion. For one thing, it is clear that when the deliverances of reason contradict the deliverances of other belief-producing processes, like education, it is not the former belief which becomes overall unjustified, but the latter. Philosophy endorses the epistemic authority of reason over most other sources of belief.
However, observation can defeat some deliverances of reason, namely, defeasibly justified inductive inferences.\textsuperscript{104} I may justifiably infer from past experience that the next swan I see will be white, but when I see that it is black, I should drop my inferential belief and retain my observational belief. It could almost go without saying that a Baconian scientist like Hume thinks his scientific generalizations, howsoever inductively supported or probable, are defeasible by further evidence. Hume says as much explicitly. In his discussion of prejudice, he specifically condemns as “unphilosophical” retaining what may be an otherwise justified inductive generalization (for example, “All Irishmen lack wit”) in the face of observed counterexamples (T 1.3.13.7).\textsuperscript{105} Hume gives us

\textsuperscript{104} Hume does not use the term “inductive inference.” Following the example of Garrett, I use this term however to conveniently cover all forms of nondemonstrative inference, which Hume refers to in terms of causal reasoning, probable reasoning, moral reasoning, or inferences from experience. Garrett, \textit{Cognition}, 76-77.

\textsuperscript{105} I discuss the correction of prejudice at much greater length in 2.2.6. The example is a bit more complicated than I have made out here. Hume’s text makes it sound like observation only defeats a rash, unfounded inference, rather than a justified inductive inference: “A \textit{FOURTH} unphilosophical species of probability is that deriv’d from \textit{general rules}, which we rashly form to ourselves” (T 1.3.13.7). Many commentators latch onto the word “rash” and conclude that prejudicial general rules and inferences lack defeasible justification. For example, Lyons concludes that the initial formation of a general rule is prejudicial if it is “rashly” formed on the basis of too few experiences. Lyons, “General Rules,” 260. Lyons formalizes this as “The Extensiveness Constraint: The good general rules are only those that are held on the basis of a large number of experiences.” Ibid, 259. Morris also says that we form prejudicial general rules by generalizing “from a few cases.” Morris, “Belief, Probability, Normativity,” 86.

But in the rest of Hume’s discussion of prejudice he makes no further reference to sample size. Furthermore, in his description of the formation of general rules and analogical inferences, he gives no indication that some rules are formed without an adequate basis in experience (T 1.3.13.8). The propensity to make an inference can only develop when we have had sufficient experience of a given conjunction. Even in the case of general rules formed on the basis of a single experience, the general rule is actually supported by the Principle of Uniformity, i.e., the principle “\textit{that like objects, plac’d in like circumstances, will always produce like effects};” and this Principle is in turn supported by millions of experiences (T 1.3.8.14; 1.3.12.4). Lyons himself notes this. Lyons, “General Rules,” 260. Loeb agrees that “‘Rashly’ cannot simply mean ‘based on too small a sample.’” Hume allows that generalizations based on a single experience can be justified (cf. T 104-5, 131,175).” Loeb, \textit{Stability}, 105. So the problem with prejudice is not sample size.

Hume probably means by “rash” that we see in retrospect that the general rule was “rash”: although defeasibly justified, the rule was defeated by new evidence. Any well-grounded inductive generalization or scientific theory that is later defeated falsified by new observations could thus be called “rash” with respect to its truth, without denying that it was initially defeasibly justified.
another example of the defeat of defeasibly justified inferences. “The Indian prince, who refused to believe the first relations concerning the effects of frost, reasoned justly,” because the reports “were not conformable to” his experience (EHU 10.10). However, the strength of the testimonial evidence eventually outweighed his initial inference from his experiences, and defeated his disbelief, not only psychologically but also epistemologically (ibid).\textsuperscript{106}

Note that, in the examples above, individual deliverances of a certain principle of the imagination (in this case, that principle whereby we make causal inferences) are defeated, without the principle itself falling under the ban of philosophy. Individual causal inferences may not be “permanent, irresistible, and universal,” but the propensity to make causal inferences is.\textsuperscript{107} The individual beliefs produced by a permanent, irresistible, and universal principle of the imagination are not necessarily permanent, irresistible, and universal themselves.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{106} Strictly speaking, in the case of the Indian prince, it is not a belief, but a propositional attitude (suspended judgment) or confidence-level which faces defeat from further evidence. But the example still illustrates the principle that observation (or reports of observations) can defeat or correct otherwise justified confidence-levels.

\textsuperscript{107} “Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sunshine” (T 1.4.1.7).

\textsuperscript{108} Many commentators who have drawn attention to Hume’s doctrine of natural belief have mistakenly asserted that all natural beliefs are psychologically incorrigible or epistemologically indefeasible or practically indispensable. See for example Kemp Smith, \textit{The Philosophy of David Hume}, 87, 114; R.J. Butler, “Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume,” \textit{Archiv fur die Geschichte der Philosophie} 42 (1960), 73-100; J.C.A. Gaskin, “God, Hume and Natural Belief,” \textit{Philosophy} 49 (1974), 286; Miriam McCormick, “Hume on Natural Belief and Original Principles,” \textit{Hume Studies} 19(1) (April, 1993), 103-116; Timothy M. Costelloe, “‘In every civilized community’: Hume on belief and the demise of religion,” \textit{International Journal for Philosophy of Religion} 55 (2004), 174. Such readings transfer the properties of approved belief-forming propensities—permanence, irresistibility, and universality—to individual beliefs themselves.
On the other hand, the existence of a specific belief which is permanent, irresistible, and universal implies that its source also is permanent, irresistible, and universal—otherwise, the belief would sometimes be an effect without a cause. Hume actually gives us an instance of a permanent, irresistible, and universal belief which turns out to be of great importance: belief in body (that is, continued and distinct existences). Involuntarily, everyone believes in bodies:

Nature has not left this to his [the skeptic’s] choice, and has doubtless esteem’d it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations…This is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings. (T 1.4.2.1)

He expatiates upon the naturalness, permanence, universality, and irresistibility of belief in body at the end of the section as well (T 1.4.2.50-51). It follows that whatever cognitive mechanism produces the belief in body is itself permanent, irresistible, and universal, and hence approved by the philosophers. Therefore, the deliverances of this cognitive mechanism are at least defeasibly justified, although they may face epistemic defeat.

It may appear that I have fallen into contradiction by saying that the belief in body is permanent, irresistible, and universal, and defeasibly justified, yet liable to ultimate epistemic defeat. But note that the psychological incorrigibility of an individual belief does not entail that it is epistemologically justified. We may be psychologically unable to

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109 The subject would hold a belief which she has no propensity to hold, which seems odd. Someone might suggest that belief-producing mechanisms account for the original formation of a belief, but are not necessary to account for the retention of a belief. Beliefs continue to exist by sheer force of inertia, someone might suggest. Even if this is an intelligible possibility, I do not find any evidence that Hume entertains it. I proceed on the assumption, which I cannot directly prove, that cognitive mechanisms are as necessary to account for the retention of a belief as for its initial formation.
give up an epistemologically defeated belief. I will later argue that this is exactly Hume’s view of the belief in body.

Hume gives us another example of incorrigible, epistemologically defeated beliefs: the deliverances of education (T 1.3.9.16-19). The deliverances of education are not universal; they vary from time to time and place to place (T 1.3.9.19). We can also successfully resist their formation. However, if we do not resist the influence of education, then it sometimes produces beliefs which prove to be incorrigible:

All those opinions and notions of things, to which we have been accustom’d from our infancy, take such deep root, that ’tis impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them; and this habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many occasions prevails over that which arises from the constant and inseparable union of causes and effects. (T 1.3.9.17)

Although these beliefs lack even defeasible epistemic justification and face epistemic defeat from reason (T 1.3.9.19), they are often impossible to uproot. So incorrigibility and epistemic defeat are compatible characteristics of a belief.

The mere fact that some products of education are incorrigible does not entail that education is a permanent, irresistible, and universal belief-producing mechanism. Education is resistible. In fact, in the Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, Hume’s spokesman Philo says that “at present…the influence of education is much diminished” in the world at large (DNR 1.19). He implies rather that the philosophers who form a general rule against accepting the deliverances of education acquire the ability to resist it in the future—even if they cannot divest themselves of the inculcated opinions they received in their youth. They may in fact even be able to wean themselves of the beliefs
they have already acquired from education, as he says in the first *Enquiry* that a moderate antecedent skepticism “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). So despite its universality and the permanence of some of its deliverances, education is not irresistible, and does not have any claim to the approbation of the philosophers.

To sum up the whole preceding discussion, I propose that for Hume, a belief is epistemologically/philosophically justified iff it is (a) produced by propensity which is permanent, irresistible, and universal, and (b) the belief is undefeated. This account consistently explains all of Hume’s epistemic judgments, both positive and negative. I intend this account not as an analytic truth—that is, as Hume’s definition of what epistemic/philosophical justification essentially consists in—but merely as an indicator-criterion which gives necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic/philosophical justification. In the Introduction I tentatively put forward a Humean definition of philosophical justification. There I said that philosophy sanctions those doxastic practices which are most likely to lead to truth. If my definition is correct, then the permanent, irresistible, and universal belief-producing propensities which philosophy sanctions are those which are most likely to produce true beliefs.

1.3 Contrasting this account with similar alternatives

My reading of Hume’s epistemology is similar to three other recent operation-based accounts. On Loeb’s stability-based account, a belief is epistemologically justified if and

110 Schmitt discusses the difference between a definitional criterion and an indicator-criterion, 294-297.
only if it is produced by a mechanism that tends to produce stable beliefs.\textsuperscript{111} On Tim Black’s determinacy account,

\begin{quote}
S is epistemically justified in assenting to an idea, \( o \), which is not an element of the first system of realities [sensory and memory beliefs], just in case, upon the appearance of some element, \( i \), of the first system the mind’s movement from \( i \) to \( o \) feels determined by a relation that feels unchangeable.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

On Schmitt’s reliability account, a belief is justified if it is produced by an operation which tends to produce true beliefs.\textsuperscript{113} All three of these commentators agree with me that, in view of Treatise 1.4.4.1, Hume’s approved belief-producing mechanisms are permanent, irresistible, and universal.\textsuperscript{114}

One reason why my operations-based account differs from theirs at the level of detail is that I take Treatise 1.4.4.1-2 as a controlling textual starting point. Loeb, Black, and Schmitt downplay the significance of this passage because, as Loeb puts it, Hume does not here explain “which features are fundamental to his account of justification.”\textsuperscript{115} They all assign this passage and the operational criteria of permanence, irresistibility, and universality a peripheral significance. They take texts in Part 3 of Book 1 as their starting points for expositing Hume’s theory of epistemic justification.\textsuperscript{116} Then when they come

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111} Loeb, Stability, 12-13.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 22-23.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Loeb, Stability, 154-162, especially 157; Black, “Hume’s Epistemic Naturalism,” 223; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 286.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Loeb, Stability, 157; cf. Black, “Hume’s Epistemic Naturalism,” 223; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 287.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Loeb and Black both launch from their interpretations of Treatise 1.3.9. Loeb, Stability, 60-65; Black, “Hume’s Epistemic Naturalism,” 213-216. Schmitt builds his case more broadly from Part 3 of Book 1. Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 39-243.
\end{itemize}
to *Treatise* 1.4.4.1, they do the best they can to reconcile it with the theories they have constructed on the basis of other texts.

I think that the operational criteria of *Treatise* 1.4.4.1 fully coheres with the epistemic judgments Hume makes in Part 3 of Book 1, as I argue at further length in Chapter 2. But although Part 3 obviously precedes *Treatise* 1.4.4.1-2, the latter text is the clearest, most general, and most systematic statement of what the philosophers approve of, and hence of Hume’s epistemic norms. These virtues make it a superior textual starting point for the discussion of Hume’s epistemology. It should not merely be reconciled with an epistemic concept derived from other texts. Another reason to prefer this textual starting point to others is that it explicitly invokes the “the philosophers,” which, I have argued, is the terminological key to Hume’s epistemology. These alternative accounts do not give any special attention to “philosophy” and “the philosophers.”

Furthermore, it seems anachronistic to insist, with Loeb, that we begin our exposition of Hume’s epistemology by finding a fundamental definition of epistemic justification, rather than starting with the particular philosophical norms which he explicitly states. Like Loeb, Schmitt, and Black, I have tentatively put forward my own account of Hume’s definitional concept of philosophical justification (the philosophers approve of processes most likely to lead to truth), and have suggested that it is compatible with the norms of *Treatise* 1.4.4.1. But I give the philosophical norms of *Treatise* 1.4.4.1-2 much more basic significance than the definitional concept I teased out of *Treatise* 2.3.10. In fact, the definitional concept of epistemic (philosophical) justification plays little role in my project, because it plays no role in Hume’s development of his
epistemology and skepticism in Book 1 of the *Treatise*. (It emerges at the end of Book II, “Of the Passions”). For better or worse, in Book I, Hume lays down philosophical norms without telling us what makes them the correct philosophical norms.

Loeb, Black, and Schmitt all take up the issue of whether Hume has a naturalized epistemology. Consider the definition of epistemic naturalism offered by Black:

“Epistemic naturalism…is the view that there are cases in which we are justified in holding a belief and cases in which we are not so justified, and that we can distinguish cases of one sort from cases of the other with reference to non-normative facts about the mechanisms that produce our beliefs.”

By my lights, permanence, irresistibility, and universality are non-normative facts about belief-producing mechanisms. However, the notion of “defeat” as I am using it and as Hume employs it is a normative epistemic notion. To say that belief A defeats belief B does not necessarily mean that psychologically, we will abandon belief B and adopt belief A (although we might). Defeat simply means that we ought, from the epistemic point of view, to abandon B for A. I doubt that Hume has the resources to give a naturalistic account of epistemic defeat, but for my purposes, I can afford to leave the question open.

Schmitt’s reliability reading of Hume’s epistemology raises a question for my account which is of intrinsic importance anyway: What is the relationship between

117 Loeb and Black answer that Hume does have a naturalized epistemology. Loeb, *Stability*, 21; Black, “Hume’s Epistemic Naturalism,” 211-242; Schmitt’s view is more qualified. He recognizes that epistemic defeat is “not clearly a natural property.” *Hume’s Epistemology*, 166. He agrees that (other than the no-defeater requirement) Hume does identify epistemic justification with a natural property. Ibid. However, he argues that Hume’s epistemology is different than contemporary naturalized epistemologies because Hume denies the autonomy of psychology from epistemology.

118 Black, “Hume’s Epistemic Naturalism,” 211. Black cites Loeb, who writes “Naturalism, or a naturalistic theory of justification, taken in this sense discriminates among beliefs with respect to their justifiedness, with reference to non-epistemic facts (and more generally non-normative facts) about the beliefs or the mechanisms that produce them.” Loeb, *Stability*, 21.
justification, truth, and reliability? Note in the first place that the permanence, universality, and irresistibility of cognitive mechanisms do not entail that they are truth-conducive or reliable. Hume is consistently diffident about the reliability of our faculties, even when they function according to the norms of philosophy. He opens the Treatise by saying that “if truth be at all within the reach of human capacity, ‘tis certain it must lie very deep and abstruse” (T Intro 3). He closes Book 1 by remarking that “we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination” (T 1.4.7.14). Following epistemic norms is necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) for arriving at the truth. Even if truth is out of reach, epistemic norms (“the test of the most critical examination”) are still readily available. So I take it that reliability or truth-conduciveness is not necessary for epistemic justification, for Hume. I have suggested that philosophy provides the most likely route to truth, but this does not entail the reliabilist claim that following philosophy is likely to lead to truth. Philosophy may be the best candidate available for getting at truth, but that does not mean it is a good or successful candidate.

The non-necessity of reliability for epistemic justification emerges in another way. As I will show in more detail later, Hume argues in Treatise 1.4.1 that all of the deliverances of reason face undermining defeaters; any positive degree of confidence in inferences is epistemologically unjustified. In Treatise 1.4.2, he argues that belief in body faces a rebutting defeater: we are epistemologically justified in believing that no enduring mind-independent objects exist. Ordinarily, when we see that the deliverances of a certain

119 Schmitt argues for a reliabilist Hume in his Hume’s Epistemology. The following remarks hardly constitute a thorough engagement with his whole position but indicate where and I why I part ways with a reliabilist reading.
belief-producing process usually face defeat, we form a second-order corrective general rule against that propensity. Typically, these general rules are causally efficacious: the targeted propensities “may easily be subverted” (T 1.4.4.1). But in the case of reason and belief in body, the propensities continue to function permanently, universally, and irresistibly, even after we clearly see that all of their deliverances face defeat. If we do form corrective general rules against them, the rules are ineffective. The propensities are still therefore narrowly natural and elicit the approval of the philosophers. The products of these propensities are defeasibly justified, even though belief in body faces epistemic defeat. In short, although the propensity to believe in body is unreliable, it still produces defeasibly justified (ultimately defeated) beliefs. Reliability is simply not necessary for epistemic justification.

But even if the products of these propensities are not defeasibly justified, reliabilism can provide no explanation for why not. Reliabilism says that a propositional attitude is justified if and only if it is the product of a process that produces more true beliefs than not. But banning these propensities does not maximize true beliefs. It eliminates virtually all beliefs. Rejecting the propensities that produce core beliefs is neither reliable nor unreliable. It simply leaves us as global agnostics without any beliefs. So whether Hume continues to regard our core beliefs as defeasibly justified though ultimately unjustified, or whether he regards them as not even defeasibly justified, reliabilism cannot explain their epistemic status. I conclude that Hume is no reliabilist.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{120}This is not to say of course that considerations of reliability play no role whatsoever in his epistemology. They do. For example, when we form a general rule against a propensity, we typically believe that it is unreliable.
1.4 Conclusion

Hume’s concept of philosophy as constituted by doxastic norms gives us the key to discerning his general epistemic principles as well as individual epistemic judgments. Hume, along with “the philosophers,” approves of those narrowly natural principles of the imagination which are permanent, irresistible, and universal. The deliverances of these propensities are defeasibly justified. They may or may not be psychologically corrigible. In the following chapters, I explain how Hume’s corrective general rules account for the difference between broadly and narrowly natural belief-forming mechanisms. I then apply his epistemology to his discussion of our core beliefs.
CHAPTER 2: THE CORRECTIVE FUNCTION OF GENERAL RULES

Introduction

Corrective general rules play a major role in *Treatise* 1.3.9-13. In this portion of the *Treatise*, Hume not only describes how we form and correct various beliefs, but he also makes more or less explicit normative judgments about the epistemic status of these various operations. After a brief overview of general rules in Hume (2.1), I explain the formation and epistemic significance of corrective general rules (2.2).

My account of corrective general rules supports my larger project in two ways. First, it corroborates a key component of my account of Hume’s epistemology. I claim that one important difference between philosophically approved and philosophically disapproved principles of the imagination is that the disapproved principles are “suppress’d by a little reflection” (T 1.4.3.11), and “may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition” with custom and reasoning (T 1.4.4.1). My account of corrective general rules explains how broadly natural but rejected principles are suppressed. When the credences produced by a given propensity are frequently defective in some way, we form a general rule against accepting any of the deliverances of this propensity. If this rule effectively suppresses the propensity, it is not permanent, irresistible, or universal. The philosophers reject it altogether, and its deliverances lack even defeasible
justification. Hume touches on at least six different corrective functions of general rules in *Treatise* 1.3.9-13.

Second, my account of corrective general rules fends off an objection. A critic might object that in my case for Hume’s epistemology I place far too much weight on his controlling epistemic norms. I reply that already in Part 3 of Book I it is fairly clear that “the philosophers” approve of the corrective function of general rules, and accord them normative epistemic status. *Treatise* 1.4.1-2 is simply an explicit summary of the epistemic principles which Hume’s work on corrective general rules (throughout Part 3) presupposes.

### 2.1 Overview of General Rules in Hume

Hume sees the formation of general rules as the chief business of philosophers.\(^\text{121}\) The exact expression “general rule” first appears in *Treatise* 1.3.6.12.\(^\text{122}\) But the word “rule” first occurs in the *Treatise* in 1.1.1.5 to denote a law-like description of a constant conjunction of phenomena: “that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and that every simple impression a correspondent idea” (T 1.1.1.5; cf. 1.1.1.7). Hume can variously describe this first “general proposition” of the science of man as a “general maxim,” a “rule,” and a “principle” (T 1.1.1.10-12; 1.3.8.15). Undoubtedly, we have here already a Humean general rule.


\(^{122}\) Hume says “we may establish for a general rule, that wherever the mind constantly and uniformly makes a transition without any reason, it is influenc’d by these relations” (T 1.3.6.12).
As this example shows, Hume can use “rule” or “general rule” interchangeably with “principle” or “maxim” to refer to the generalized descriptive propositions, often of causal relationships, which constitute science (especially the science of man). But with this point established, we can see the pervasiveness of Hume’s concern with general rules. For these terms appear throughout the *Treatise*. Forming these general descriptive propositions on the basis of observation is an immediate and central concern in the *Treatise*. Even when commentators have noticed the significance of general rules at certain isolated points of the *Treatise*, they have not fully understood or appreciated the extensive role that general rules play throughout the *Treatise*. Most begin their consideration of general rules with *Treatise* 1.3.13. But the preceding terminological observations show that general rules materially appear in a central role from the very beginning of the *Treatise*.

Some but not all general rules are second-order generalizations about our own mental processes. Of those general rules that are about our own mental processes, some

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but not all are corrective. But Hume displays particular interest in the corrective
general rules, probably because of the important role they play in his epistemology.

2.2 Six Corrective General Rules

2.2.1 The correction of the doxastic influence of resemblance and contiguity

We first observe the corrective function of general rules in Treatise 1.3.9, “Of the
effects of other relations and other habits.” Hume regards custom, the natural associative
principle of the imagination which produces causal inferences, as permanent, irresistible,
and universal propensity. The philosophers approve of it, and regard its deliverances as
defeasibly justified. However, the natural associative relations of resemblance and
contiguity can also raise our confidence-levels. “Contiguity and resemblance have an
effect much inferior to causation; but still have some effect, and augment the conviction
of any opinion, and the vivacity of any conception” (T 1.3.9.8).

Although the vivifying effect of resemblance plays a role in just causal inference
(T 1.3.9.10), Hume regards most of the credences produced by resemblance and
contiguity as epistemologically unjustified. He does not register his epistemic disapproval
of the effects of resemblance and contiguity in so many words. But his examples leave
little doubt about how he regards them. These natural relations frequently aid and abet the
superstition which Hume abhors. A few of Hume’s simpler examples illustrate the point.

First, when we look at a picture of a friend, the resemblance between the visual
image and our idea of our friend transfers vivacity from the former to the latter (T

124 Pace Martin who writes simply that “General rules are formed from our experience of past judgments.”
Martin, “Rational Warrant,” 250. It seems natural to make this mistake—of assuming that all general rules
are second-order rules formed from reflection on first-order belief-forming practices—if one begins one’s
treatment of general rules in T 1.3.13, where second-order corrective rules are in view. Lyons also
helpfully points out that not all general rules are about belief-formation. Lyons, “General Rules,” 254.
1.3.8.3). By the same token, the resemblance between the visual impression of an icon and the idea of a saint transfer vivacity from the former to the latter (T 1.3.8.4). But it seems obvious that the mere resemblance between a visual image and our idea of a person does not epistemologically justify any increased confidence in the existence of that person. It does not give us reason to believe that our friend is currently alive, or that the saint was ever alive.\(^\text{125}\)

Second, the presumed contiguity between the visual impression of locations near home and our idea of home itself transfers vivacity from the former to the latter (T 1.3.8.5).\(^\text{126}\) But again, our mere observation of somewhere near home does not epistemologically justify any increased confidence in the veracity of our idea of our home itself.\(^\text{127}\) Hume makes this plain in his example of religious pilgrims (T 1.3.9.9). If reading of the Bible has given someone the idea of miraculous events, then the impression or memory of the places in the Holy Land which are spatially contiguous with the location of those alleged events transfers vivacity to the idea of them (T 1.3.9.9). Merely by seeing the Holy Land, the pilgrim becomes more confident in the miraculous events alleged to have taken place there. But plainly, a mere impression or memory of the

\(^{125}\) Of course, a causal relation between the picture and its subject might epistemologically justify heightened belief in the subject. For example, a photograph might provide grounds for a causal inference to the existence of its subject. But Hume is prescinding from the causal relation between the picture and its subject; he is concerned only with the confidence-raising effects of the relation of resemblance.

\(^{126}\) Hume talks as if it is the presumption of relations between perceptions which transfers vivacity.

\(^{127}\) The observation of a place near home might of course ground a causal or analogical inference that justifies increased confidence levels. For example, a soldier returning home after defeat in a war might observe that, for example, “The invaders did not burn my neighbor’s house—it is just like I remember on the day I left,” and then infer “They probably did not burn my house either; it too will probably be like I remember it.” But the causal relation between one location and a contiguous location is what justifies the soldier’s increased confidence in his idea of his home, not the mere observation of a contiguous location.
Holy Land does not epistemologically justify any increased confidence in these alleged events.¹²⁸

Third, resemblance also accounts for the lamentable human weakness called “CREDULITY, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others” (T 1.3.9.12). Belief in testimony is a kind of causal inference which takes our impression of the report as an effect of event which is reported. However, our belief in the event which is reported often exceeds the confidence-level of a just causal inference because the report of the event resembles the event it reports. This relationship of resemblance between a present impression and an idea called to mind by causal inference produces a transfer of vivacity from the impression to the idea. In this case Hume explicitly registers his epistemic evaluation that the confidence-level produced by resemblance is unjustified—“too easy faith.”

If I am correct that Hume epistemologically disapproves of these doxastic propensities, then we should expect that they are not permanent, irresistible, and universal. And as it turns out, the first thing that Hume explains about these propensities is how we suppress them by means of general rules. By means of general rules, we can resist the epistemologically unjustified effects of resemblance and contiguity on our confidence-levels.

Hume illustrates the correction of the effects of resemblance and contiguity by using the case of “feigned” ideas (T 1.3.9.5). When we voluntarily form the ideas of objects which resemble or are contiguous with our impressions, the relations of resemblance and contiguity make the feigned idea more lively and forceful. Say for

¹²⁸ Again, as in the case above, observation of the Holy Land could ground some causal inference about the likelihood of the historical events in question. That inference might justifiably raise or decrease confidence levels. But such a causal inference goes beyond the mere relation of contiguity.
example that I am relaxing on the quad; off to my left I observe a squirrel. To my right I see a tree. I whimsically imagine another squirrel hiding behind the tree. The mere fact that the imagined squirrel resembles one I can see, and that I imagine the squirrel as spatially contiguous to the tree that I see, makes me believe more in the reality of that squirrel than I otherwise would. (Plainly, my heightened confidence-level in the existence of the imagined squirrel is epistemologically unjustified). In any case, Hume says, our confidence in the feigned idea is still too weak to count as a belief. And even that low degree of (epistemologically unjustified) confidence soon vanishes. After we repeatedly have the experience of losing what little confidence we initially have in capricious resembling or contiguous ideas, we form a general rule against it:

The mind foresees and anticipates the change; and even from the very first instant feels the looseness of its actions, and the weak hold it has of its objects. And as this imperfection is very sensible in every single instance, it still increases by experience and observation, when we compare the several instances we may remember, and form a *general rule* against the reposing any assurance in those momentary glimpses of light, which arise in the imagination from a feign’d resemblance and contiguity. (T 1.3.9.6)

The process of forming this corrective general rule has at least three components. First, we repeatedly experience defects in the deliverances of a certain kind of doxastic propensity. Second, we engage in second-order reflection on our experiences: “we compare the several instances we may remember.” Third, we “form a *general rule* against the reposing any assurance in those momentary glimpses of light, which arise in the imagination from a feign’d resemblance and contiguity” (T 1.3.9.6).
This general rule does not merely describe mental processes, but implicitly prescribes (or rather, proscribes) them. This is how I take the locution that we form a general rule “against” assenting to these ideas. We not only believe the descriptive statement that these confidence-levels quickly fade away or are otherwise defective, but we feel that we ought not to have them at all.

The general rule against capricious ideas not only has prescriptive force but causal efficacy. Hume says that the “imperfection” of these ideas is “increased” by the general rule we form against them (T 1.3.9.6). When I voluntarily form an idea which resembles or is contiguous with a belief, the idea will have a certain degree of force and vivacity that soon decreases. But if I have formed the general rule against such ideas, the general rule will decrease its confidence level yet further and more quickly—perhaps instantaneously extinguishing all confidence in the idea. The general rule effectively resists and suppresses the propensity to put some confidence in a resembling, contiguous, but feigned idea. That propensity is therefore not permanent, irresistible, and universal, and is not sanctioned by the philosophers. Its deliverances do not have even defeasible epistemic justification.

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130 Lyons draws attention to the causal efficacy of general rules in T 1.3.13.7-14. Lyons, “General Rules,” 253. Hume writes that general rules “influence their judgment” (T 1.3.13.8), speaks of “the influence of general rules” (T 1.3.13.11), describes the first and second influence of general rules (T 1.3.13.12), and says that “The vulgar are commonly guided by the first [influence of general rules], and wise men by the second” (T 1.3.13.12; 102). Cf. also Lyons, “General Rules,” 255.

131 Thus Lyons: “an agent is influenced by a general rule whenever holding the general rule causes the agent to modify some belief in order to render it more conformable to the general rule.” Lyons, “General Rules,” 255.
2.2.2: The correction of the doxastic influence of emotions

Hume thinks that corrective general rules can suppress the influence of what I call the Doxastic Influence of Emotions—the propensity of emotions to increase confidence levels.

When any affecting object is presented, it gives the alarm, and excites immediately a degree of its proper passion; especially in persons who are naturally inclin’d to that passion. This emotion passes by an easy transition to the imagination; and diffusing itself over our idea of the affecting object, makes us form that idea with greater force and vivacity, and consequently assent to it, according to the precedent system. (T 1.3.10.4)

Undoubtedly Hume regards the Doxastic Influence of Emotions as unjustified. The examples he gives of this phenomenon are obviously derogatory. But he has not yet said anything about correcting the Doxastic Influence of Emotions. Furthermore, he never does return in the Treatise to the example of belief in miracles, as he promises in Treatise 1.3.10.4 to do. Probably his projected treatment of miracles is one of those “noble Parts” which he prudentially “castrated” in the hopes of winning an endorsement

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132 “A coward, whose fears are easily awak’en’d, readily assents to every account of danger he meets with; as a person of a sorrowful and melancholy disposition is very credulous of every thing, that nourishes his prevailing passion. …Admiration and surprize have the same effect as the other passions; and accordingly we may observe, that among the vulgar, quacks and projectors meet with a more easy faith upon account of their magnificent pretensions, than if they kept themselves within the bounds of moderation. The first astonishment, which naturally attends their miraculous relations, spreads itself over the whole soul, and so vivifies and enlivens the idea, that it resembles the inferences we draw from experience. This is a mystery, with which we may be already a little acquainted, and which we shall have farther occasion to be let into in the progress of this treatise” (T 1.3.10.4)

133 “The first astonishment, which naturally attends their miraculous relations, spreads itself over the whole soul, and so vivifies and enlivens an idea, that it resembles the inferences we draw from experience. This is a mystery, with which we may be already a little acquainted, and which we shall have farther occasion to be let into in the progress of this treatise” (T 1.3.10.4).
from Bishop Butler.134 But he does return to the topic in Section 10 of the first Enquiry, “Of Miracles.”

In “Of Miracles,” Hume first expresses his epistemic endorsement of confidence-levels that are produced only by causal inference and hence proportioned to the experiential evidence: “A wise man…proportions his belief to the evidence” (EHU 10.4).135 He then notes that the Doxastic Influence of Emotions often contradicts this epistemic maxim.

But though, in proceeding by this rule, we readily reject any fact which is unusual and incredible in an ordinary degree; yet in advancing farther, the mind observes not always the same rule; but when any thing is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, it rather the more readily admits of such a fact, upon account of that very circumstance, which ought to destroy all its authority. The passion of surprize and wonder, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others. (EHU 10.16)

134 “I am at present castrating my Work, that is, cutting off its noble Parts, that is, endeavouring it shall give as little Offence as possible; before which I cou’d not pretend to put it into the Drs hands” (Hume’s December 2, 1737 letter to Henry Home, in New Letters of David Hume, edited by Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner [New York: Oxford University Press, 1954], 3).
135 Later he expands upon this thought: “The maxim, by which we commonly conduct ourselves in our reasonings, is, that the objects, of which we have no experience, resemble those, of which we have; that what we have found to be most usual is always most probable; and that where there is an opposition of arguments, we ought to give the preference to such as are founded on the greatest number of past observations” (EHU 10.16).
Hume clearly thinks that reason “ought to destroy all its authority.” The inflated confidence-levels produced by the Doxastic Influence of Emotions are epistemologically unjustified.

Finally, Hume says that by reflecting upon the products of the Doxastic Influence of Emotions and their conflict with reason, we can correct our unjustified confidence levels. He uses the language of reflective correction at several points. When he introduces the Doxastic Influence of Emotions, it is expressly so that by reflecting upon it, we may render it impotent: “We may observe in human nature a principle, which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance, which we might, from human testimony, have, in any kind of prodigy” (EHU 10.16). When we reflect upon the defects of the credences produced by the Doxastic Influence of Emotions, these instances “ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind” (EHU 10.19). It is plausible to think that Hume has in mind a corrective general rule that effectively suppresses the Doxastic Influence of Emotions.

To sum up: we experience the broadly natural Doxastic Influence of Emotions; we reflect upon the fact that this propensity has consistently produced confidence levels which are not proportioned to the evidence; we form a general rule against it, which successfully suppresses its influence. Because the Doxastic Influence of Emotions is resistible, the philosophers do not approve of it, and its deliverances lack even defeasible justification.
2.2.3: The correction of the Doxastic Influence of Eloquence

Hume thinks that general rules can correct the unjustified confidence-levels produced by what I call the Doxastic Influence of Eloquence. In *Treatise* 1.3.10 Hume explains that we derive pleasure from literary fictions only because their verisimilitude and relationships to real events gives them a heightened confidence-level which yet does not reach genuine belief (T 1.3.10.5-10). Only in the case of “madness or folly” do these fictions acquire a degree of vivacity that constitutes them as genuine beliefs (T 1.3.10.9). Madness may be rare, but the folly of letting our confidence be raised by mere rhetoric (or “eloquence”) is common, in Hume’s view.\(^{136}\)

In *Treatise* 1.3.10.11, Hume discusses how general rules cause the difference between our genuine beliefs and the poetical ideas we merely entertain.

We shall afterwards have occasion to remark both the resemblance and differences betwixt a poetical enthusiasm, and a serious conviction.\(^{137}\) In the mean time I cannot forbear observing, that the great difference in their feeling proceeds in some measure from reflection and general rules. We observe, that the vigour of conception, which fictions receive from poetry and eloquence, is a circumstance merely accidental, of which every idea is equally susceptible; and that such

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\(^{136}\) This Doxastic Influence of Eloquence is closely associated with the Doxastic Influence of Emotions, not only in T 1.3.10 but also in “Of Miracles.” In the passage in “Of Miracles” discussing the Doxastic Influence of Emotions, Hume adds a discussion of the deleterious Doxastic Influence of Eloquence: “Eloquence, when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection; but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding. Happily, this pitch it seldom attains. But what a Tully or a Demosthenes could scarcely effect over a Roman or Athenian audience, every Capuchin, every itinerant or stationary teacher can perform over the generality of mankind, and in a higher degree, by touching such gross and vulgar passions” (EHU 10.18)

\(^{137}\) The promissory note of the first sentence seems to have gone unfulfilled in *Treatise*. In their annotations, Norton and Norton remark “This may also be an allusion to the projected examination of criticism. In the *Treatise* as published, there is nothing further on the difference between ‘poetical enthusiasm’ and ‘serious conviction’” (460).
fictions are connected with nothing that is real. This observation makes us only lend ourselves, so to speak, to the fiction: But causes the idea to feel very different from the external establish’d persuasions founded on memory and custom. They are somewhat of the same kind: But the one is much inferior to the other, both in its causes and effects. (T 1.3.10.11)

General rules come into play when we reflect upon the raised confidence-levels of poetic enthusiasm. “We observe, that the vigour of conception, which fictions receive from poetry and eloquence, is a circumstance merely accidental, of which every idea is equally susceptible; and that such fictions are connected with nothing that is real” (T 1.3.10.11). Due to this reflection, we form a general rule against placing any more real confidence in a poetic idea than we would in any other capriciously formed idea.

In Treatise 1.3.10.12, Hume explains how general rules correct disproportionately high confidence-levels in our beliefs (in contrast with the merely entertained ideas he discusses in the preceding paragraph).

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138 Hume uses “fiction” not in contrast to “truth” but in contrast to “belief.” He uses “reality” not in contrast to “falsehood” but in contrast to “ideas not believed.” This is clear in the crucial passage where he defines belief in terms of their unique feeling as occurrent ideas: “I conclude, by an induction which seems to me very evident, that an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the manner of its being conceiv’d…. An idea assented to feels different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination… And in philosophy we can go no farther, than assert, that it is something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination” (T 1.3.7.7). A fiction, then, is an idea to which the mind does not assent, while a reality is an idea to which the mind does assent. So we may paraphrase Hume’s statement as follows: “We observe, that the confidence levels which ideas receive from poetry and eloquence, is a circumstance merely accidental, of which every idea is equally susceptible; and that such unbelieved ideas are connected with no believed idea.”
A like reflection on general rules keeps us from augmenting our belief upon every increase of the force and vivacity of our ideas. Where an opinion admits of no doubt, or opposite probability, we attribute to it a full conviction; tho’ the want of resemblance, or contiguity, may render its force inferior to that of other opinions. (T 1.3.10. 12)\(^{139}\)

Hume here states very tersely his account of the corrective function of general rules, presumably because he has spelled it out in more detail already in Treatise 1.3.9.6 and in 1.3.10.11. Hume’s concern in this paragraph is with the broadly natural tendency to place more confidence in one belief than another, both of which are equally supported by observation, simply because of the relations of contiguity and resemblance. We correct the broadly natural tendency through general rules. This second-order general rule corrects the first-order natural propensity towards unwise confidence levels.

2.2.4: The correction of perceptual judgments

As a bonus in a virtual throw-away sentence, Hume mentions that general rules also correct the problem of perceptual variation: “‘Tis thus the understanding corrects the

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\(^{139}\) These three paragraphs (T 1.3.10.10-12) from the “Appendix” involve a correction Hume made to his theory of belief after completing the main body of the Treatise. Hume first defines confidence-levels in terms force and vivacity (T 1.3.7.5). But in the final sentences of the “Appendix” to the Treatise, Hume revises this position: “I believe there are other differences among ideas, which cannot properly be comprehended under these terms [viz., force and vivacity]. Had I said, that two ideas of the same object can only be different by their different feeling, I shou’d have been nearer the truth” (App 22). In keeping with this correction, Hume writes of vivacity in Treatise 1.3.10.10-12 as if it is not identical with the “feeling” in which confidence consists. Poetic fictions may acquire the highest levels of vivacity, but still never have the same “feeling” as true belief (T 1.3.10.10-12). In these paragraphs from the “Appendix” alone, we must dissociate vivacity from confidence-levels. I see no reason, on the basis of these passages, to deny that in the pre-Appendix body of the Treatise, vivacity is always equivalent to belief strength, as do Hearn and Brand. Hearn, “‘General Rules,’” 411-413; Brand, Hume’s Theory, 48-49. Much less does Hume’s shift make room for Loeb’s account of belief in terms of dispositions rather than occurrent ideas. Loeb, Stability, 65-74. Like vivacity and force, “feeling” too is the quality of an occurrent idea.
appearances of the senses, and makes us imagine, that an object at twenty foot distance seems even to the eye as large as one of the same dimensions at ten” (T 1.3.10.12). In this sentence, Hume does not mention general rules. But it occurs in a paragraph explicitly devoted to the correction of broadly natural propensities by means of general rules. It seems overwhelmingly likely that Hume means that we correct for perceptual variation by way of general rules.

Hume picks up on this notion that the understanding corrects the senses in his discussion of the general point of view from which we make stable moral judgments (T 3.3.1.14-18). We correct for the effects of distance in our aesthetic judgments (T 3.3.1.15). We do the same with our perceptual judgments: “Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed ‘twere impossible we cou’d ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation” (T 3.3.1.16). In the parallel section of An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals Hume expounds on the analogy even further.

140 “‘Tis evident, a beautiful countenance cannot give so much pleasure, when seen at a distance of twenty paces, as when it is brought nearer us. We say not, however, that it appears to us less beautiful: Because we know what effect it will have in such a position, and by that reflection we correct its momentary appearance” (T 3.3.1.15).

141 “The judgment here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses. The same object, at a double distance, really throws on the eye a picture of but half the bulk; yet we imagine that it appears of the same size in both situations; because we know, that, on our approach to it, its image would expand on the eye, and that the difference consists not in the object itself, but in our position with regard to it. And, indeed, without such correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject; while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary lights and positions” (EHU 5.41).
Hume’s theory of the understanding’s correction of perceptual variation makes sense of an otherwise obscure passage in the first Enquiry, where he says that some skeptical arguments mounted from the fact of perceptual variation are “trite,” and are only sufficient to prove, that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason, and by considerations, derived from the nature of the medium, the distance of the object, and the disposition of the organ, in order to render them, within their sphere, the proper criteria of truth and falsehood. (EHU 12.6)

In all likelihood, Hume is alluding to the corrective function of general rules with respect to perceptual variation. He thinks that the introduction of general rules neutralizes the threat of these trite skeptical arguments.

Although Hume does not spell out exactly how the correction happens, presumably it goes something like this. Our perceptual experience of objects varies greatly based upon factors such as our distance from the object. But second-order reflection upon our perceptual experiences leads us to correct these initial perceptual judgments by formulating a general rule which expresses the size of the “eye-picture” in relation to our distance from it. As in the case of moral and aesthetic judgments we adopt a “general” or common point of view, so also with perceptual judgments, we (somehow) determine the distance at which our eye-picture of an object is the real or objective perception of the object. Then when we have a perception of the object from another distance, although the eye-picture is different, the general rule causes us to form a belief that the object we perceive has the magnitude of the eye-picture we have from the
common point of view. In this way, second-order general rules (or the understanding) correct the fluctuating deliverances of the senses.\textsuperscript{142}

2.2.5: The correction of probabilistic judgments

Hume also calls on corrective general rules to solve a problem facing his account of probabilistic reasoning (T 1.3.12.24). On Hume’s account, the difference between our probabilistic judgments is a difference in confidence-levels, which in turn amount to felt differences in the force and vivacity of the ideas of two different outcomes. But sometimes we cannot “feel” any difference between the ideas of two different outcomes, even though they are supported by quantitatively different observational evidence. This seems to have the awkward consequence that two events with quantifiably different observational support are equally likely. Hume puts the problem more simply (if more vaguely) than I have:

When the chances or experiments on one side amount to ten thousand, and on the other to ten thousand and one, the judgment gives the preference to the latter, upon account of that superiority; tho’ ’tis plainly impossible for the mind to run over every particular view, and distinguish the superior vivacity of the image arising from the superior number, where the difference is so inconsiderable. (T 1.3.12.24)

A parallel problem arises in cases where the minute difference lies in the objects of our desire: we have a greater desire for a thousand and one pounds sterling than for one

\textsuperscript{142} I doubt that this account can work, or that Hume has the resources to produce a viable account. Nor am I sure exactly how the “trite” skeptical argument from perceptual variation (EHU 12.6) differs from the one which he thinks is devastating (EHU 12.7-9). But my point is only to illustrate the work that Hume thinks general rules can do.
thousand, even though we cannot psychologically “feel” the difference between the idea of the two quantities (T 1.3.12.24).

Hume calls in general rules to explain why, in these sorts of cases, we nevertheless judge one outcome more likely than another, and one object more desirable. The difference, therefore, of our conduct in preferring the greater number depends not upon our passions, but upon custom, and general rules. We have found in a multitude of instances, that the augmenting the numbers of any sum augments the passion, where the numbers are precise and the difference sensible. The mind can perceive from its immediate feeling, that three guineas produce a greater passion than two; and this it transfers to larger numbers, because of the resemblance; and by a general rule assigns to a thousand guineas, a stronger passion than to nine hundred and ninety nine. These general rules we shall explain presently.\(^\text{143}\) (T 1.3.12.24)

The general rule that a proposition supported by more instances is more likely than a proposition supported by fewer instances kicks in. The general rule (rather than the immediate occurrent properties of the ideas) causes me to have slightly more confidence that the coin will come up tails than that it will come up heads. By the same token, I form a general rule that a thousand and one pounds sterling is better than a thousand, and I prefer the former quantity proportionately more than the latter. The general rule corrects my broadly natural first impulses.

\(^{143}\) According to the Norton note, “presently” refers forward to T 1.3.13.7-13.
2.2.6: The correction of prejudice

Hume’s most extended treatment of the corrective function of general rules occurs in his discussion of prejudice in the latter half of Treatise 1.3.13. This passage also highlights the epistemic significance of corrective general rules; the section “Of Unphilosophical Probability” deals with beliefs that do not receive the sanction of philosophers (T 1.3.13.1).

The fourth kind of unphilosophical probability “is that deriv’d from general rules, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call prejudice” (T 1.3.13.7). At first blush, it is surprising to hear that philosophers do not sanction a form of probability derived from general rules. The formation and function of general rules, prejudicial or otherwise, occurs the same way as the formation and function of any propensity to make a particular causal inference (T 1.3.13.8). General rules are, it seems, identical with propensities to make particular causal inferences. Like all such propensities, general rules produce inferences of analogical probability, which is a form

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144 Of the four kinds of unphilosophical probability that Hume discusses, he gives by far the most attention to the fourth kind, prejudice (T 1.3.13.7-18). He covers the first three kinds of unphilosophical probability in six paragraphs, but takes eleven more to cover the fourth kind. Here I focus on the core of Hume’s exposition in T 1.3.13.7-12, rather than the corroborating examples Hume gives in T 1.3.13.13-18.

145 Note that Fogelin’s statement that general rules are “derived from unphilosophical probabilities” inverts Hume’s statement that unphilosophical probabilities are derived from general rules. Fogelin, Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 37. Garrett also says that “rashly formed ‘general rules’…result from applying the probability of analogy even to circumstances of resemblance that have already been determined to be causally irrelevant (THN I.iii.13).” Garrett, Cognition, 144. But Hume’s concern is with analogical inferences that result from general rules, not with analogical judgments that result in general rules (if there even are such things).

146 Cf. Hearn, “‘General Rules,’” 408. Although general rules such as “An Irishman cannot have wit” and “a Frenchman cannot have solidity” (T 1.3.13.7) do not directly express causal relationships, they do express constant relationships between objects or qualities. Hume explains that effects which constantly occur together have a common cause, and thus are indirectly causally related (T 1.3.2.2). When we observe one such property, we make an indirect causal inference to the occurrence of the other.
of probabilistic inference sanctioned by the philosophers (T 1.3.13.8; cf. 1.3.12.25).

Analogical inferences are defeasibly justified.

Analogical inferences are inductive inferences whose confidence-levels fall short of proof because the observation from which the inference is made only imperfectly resembles a member of an observed constant conjunction. For example, say I observe a thousand times that pears are delicious. I form a propensity to infer of each new pear I see that it is delicious. But the general rule that pears are delicious also produces the analogical inference that melons are too, even if I have never tasted a melon. The propensity to analogically infer deliciousness from the visual appearance of a melon is not as strong as the propensity to infer deliciousness from the appearance of a pear. The melon, which I have never tasted, only imperfectly resembles the pear, which I have tasted a thousand times. The appropriate confidence level of analogical inferences varies with the degree of resemblance to those cases to which the general rule specifically applies.

Analogical inferences become prejudicial when they are made from observably accidental circumstances (T 1.3.13.9). Analogical inferences are produced by mere degrees of resemblance between past observations and present impressions, without respect to the specific ways in which the present impressions resemble past observations. We can make analogical inferences from causally accidental qualities just as well as from causally essential qualities. Hume explains:

In almost all kinds of causes there is a complication of circumstances, of which some are essential, and others superfluous; some are absolutely requisite to the production of the effect, and others are only conjoin’d by accident. Now we may
observe, that when these superfluous circumstances are numerous, and remarkable, and frequently conjoin’d with the essential, they have such an influence on the imagination, that even in the absence of the latter they carry us on to the conception of the usual effect, and give to that conception a force and vivacity, which make it superior to the mere fictions of the fancy. (T 1.3.13.9)

So the failure to distinguish causal accident from causal essence leads to erroneous causal inferences. Analogical inferences are by their nature liable to this error.

Even erroneous analogical inferences are defeasibly justified unless and until we have observational evidence that they were produced by causally accidental circumstances. For example, say that we observe a thousand Irishmen who are dull (not witty). 147 In point of fact, Irishness is a not essentially causally related to dullness; we just happen to have only observed dull Irishmen. Although we may not have paid special attention to it, these Irishmen also shared another feature which was essentially causally related to their dullness—say, their lack of good education. Our observations lead us to form a general rule: “All uneducated Irishmen are dull,” or to put it in explicitly causal terms, “Uneducated Irishness causes dullness.” But this general rule also produces analogical inferences that even educated Irishmen are dull. This analogical inference is produced by another general rule, “All Irishmen (even the educated) are dull,” or to put it in causal terms, “Mere Irishness causes dullness.” This second general rule is not as strong as the first one, since educated and uneducated Irishmen do not exactly resemble each other. Nevertheless, when we encounter an educated Irishman for the first time, our analogical inference that he is dull is defeasibly justified. When we listen to him talk and

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147 The example is Hume’s, not mine (T 1.3.13.7). Some of my best friends are Irish.
observe that he is in fact witty, our analogical inference meets with a rebutting defeater. We now ought to relinquish that particular belief as well as the general rule that “Mere Irishness causes dullness.”

Consider the consequences of retaining the belief that that “Mere Irishness causes dullness” in conjunction with the observational belief that “This Irishman is witty.” Taken together, these two beliefs imply that causal relations are not constant conjunctions, but inconstant conjunctions, since in at least this one instance, the cause (mere Irishness) fails to bring about the effect. To the extent that we retain a belief in the constancy of the causal relation as well our prejudicial general rule that “Mere Irishness causes dullness,” we find ourselves overriding our own observational beliefs and prejudicially concluding that our interlocutors “must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason” (T 1.3.13.7).

The discovery of causal accidents depends upon observation and the application of the “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects” (T 1.3.15).

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148 Brand rightly notes that prejudicial analogical inferences are made from causal circumstances which have already been identified as accidental. Brand, Hume’s Theory, 42. Garrett also diagnoses prejudice as “the tendency to attach continuing weight to circumstances already shown to be causally irrelevant.” Garrett, Cognition, 154.

149 Prejudice need not even take the form of full-fledged belief. It can take the form of an unjustified confidence-level. To use another of Hume’s examples, a man suspended from a precipice in an iron cage “knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling,” but lurking prejudicial doubts cause him to tremble with fear (T 1.3.13.10).

150 Thus also Garrett, Cognition, 145. Loeb denies that the rules of T 1.3.15 are the sort of corrective second-order general rules that Hume has in view in T 1.3.13. Loeb, Stability, 110 n. 14. Loeb says that the conflict is between e.g. “The first-order generalization ‘all Irishmen lack wit’” and “the second-order generalization ‘universal generalizations relating resemblances in national origin to resemblances in intellectual characteristics are falsified.’” Ibid., 108-109. Hearn and Brand think of the rules of T 1.3.15 as merely one example of a broader category of general rules that correct prejudice. Hearn, “‘General Rules,’” 410-411; Brand, Hume’s Theory, 55-56. While there are other corrective general rules, only the general rules of T 1.3.15 correct prejudice.
We shall afterwards [footnote: Sect. 15] take notice of some general rules, by which we ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects; and these rules are form’d on the nature of our understanding, and on our experience of its operations in the judgments we form concerning objects. By them we learn to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes; and when we find that an effect can be produce’d without the concurrence of any particular circumstance, we conclude that that circumstance makes not a part of the efficacious cause, however frequently conjoin’d with it. (T 1.3.13.11)

Rules 4-8 merely draw out the implications of Rule 3: “There must be a constant union betwixt the cause and effect. ‘Tis chiefly this quality, that constitutes the relation” (T 1.3.15.6). In order therefore to discover whether a given circumstance is causally essential or accidental to producing a given effect, we need only observe whether it is constantly conjoined to it. So the discovery of an accidental circumstance depends upon observation as well as on the rules. Hume has already indicated this by saying that general rules produce prejudice only when they overrule “sense and reason” (T 1.3.13.7) and influence judgment “contrary to present observation and experience” (T 1.3.13.8). So in the case of prejudice, general rules (namely, the “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects”) work together with observation to defeat erroneous analogical inferences and the general rules that produce them.

There is another way in which the correction of prejudice highlights the importance of general rules to “philosophy,” that is, to Hume’s epistemology. The correction of prejudice requires the rules of causal reasoning, which themselves follow from the Principle of Uniformity—a principle which the philosophers, but not the vulgar,
accept. The distinction between causally accidental and essential circumstances presupposes that constant conjunction constitutes the essence of causation. To say that causes are constantly conjoined with their effects is just to state the Principle of Uniformity. So the accident/essence distinction presupposes the Principle of Uniformity.

The fact that the philosophers endorse the Principle of Uniformity already gives an answer to one of the central questions about Hume: does he regard inductive inferences as defeasibly epistemologically justified or not? I take up this question in greater detail in Chapter 3, but already it is clear that if the sanction of “philosophy” is a guide to Hume’s epistemology, he clearly regards inductive inference as defeasibly justified. In Treatise 1.3.6 Hume shows that there is no non-circular argument for the Principle of Uniformity. But he makes it clear that the Principle of Uniformity is a narrowly natural belief which makes it possible for us to generalize from single experiments. Hume says “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” (T 1.3.8.14). The rules of causal reasoning which Hume adumbrates in 1.3.15 are merely the implications of this Principle of Uniformity.

Hume can express the Principle of Uniformity either in non-causal or causal terms. In non-causal terms the Principle says that “instances of which we have had no experience, must necessarily resemble those, of which we have” (T 1.3.8.13; cf. 1.3.6.4). But one paragraph later he states the Principle in causal terms: “like objects, plac’d in like circumstances, will always produce like effects” (T 1.3.8.14). In T 1.3.12.3 he states the Principle in apparently non-causal terms: “What we have found once to follow from any object, we conclude will for ever follow from it.” But two paragraphs later he states the Principle in causal terms as “the connexion betwixt all causes and effects is equally necessary” (T 1.3.12.5). Hume treats these two formulations of the Principle interchangeably. He does so because the belief that two events are constantly conjoined also constitutes a propensity to infer one of those events from the other. To have the propensity to infer one event from another is to regard the first event as a cause, and the second as an effect.

Even commentators who acknowledge that the rules of causal reasoning of T 1.3.15 are among the corrective general rules that Hume has in mind do not point out that these rules of causal reasoning all
However, the vulgar and the philosophers disagree about whether causes are constantly conjoined with their effects, and hence they disagree over the Principle of Uniformity. 153 “The vulgar…attribute the uncertainty of events to such an uncertainty in the causes, as makes them often fail of their usual influence, tho’ they meet with no obstacle or impediment in their operation” (T 1.3.12.5). The philosophers, on the other hand, “form a maxim, that the connexion betwixt all causes and effects is equally necessary” (T 1.3.12.5). The philosophers think that causal relations are constant conjunctions, whereas the vulgar think that causal relations are usual-but-not-constant conjunctions. So when the philosophers make analogical inferences from resembling circumstances, and the inference is contradicted by observation, they conclude that the resembling features from which they made the analogical inference are causally accidental. But when the vulgar make analogical inferences that are contradicted by observation, they either override their observations (“This Irishman must be dull, despite his seeming wit”) or chalk up the instance to the inconstancy of causes (“Mere Irishness causes dullness, even if this fellow is an exception”). 154

This connection between the rules of causal reasoning and the Principle of Uniformity explains why Hume says that “our general rules are in a manner set in opposition to each other” (T 1.3.13.12). On my account, the first influence of general
depend upon the Principle of Uniformity developed in 1.3.12.5. See for example Morris, “Belief, Probability, Normativity,” 87; Brand, Hume’s Theory, 53-4. Martin writes that the Principle of Uniformity actually generates prejudicial rules and judgments; prejudice is corrected by the rules of 1.3.15, which are the highest-order general rules. Martin, “Rational Warrant,” 250. Martin apparently misses the fact that the Principle of Uniformity is one of the rules of 1.3.15 and that the others are its entailments; they are not higher-order principles than the Principle of Uniformity.
153 Thus also Garrett, Cognition, 126-130.
154 Lyons misses the significance of the philosophers’ commitment to the Principle of Uniformity when he says that we do not have to give up a general rule in the face of merely one contrary observation. Lyons, “General Rules,” 260-261.
rules is an analogical inference from one object to another with which it is observably inconstantly conjoined. The second influence of general rules is the influence from the “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects” (T 1.3.15) which themselves are merely the entailments of the Principle of Uniformity. Hume has just been describing, in the immediately preceding paragraph, how these general rules correct prejudicial analogical inferences by identifying the causally accidental features which produce them (T 1.3.13.11). Our beliefs in the Principle of Uniformity and its entailments are “the more general and authentic operations of the understanding” and “the most establish’d principles of reasoning” (T 1.3.13.12). They are supported by millions of observations, and are incompatible with our prejudicial beliefs.

My account also explains why Hume writes that “The vulgar are commonly guided by the first,” prejudicial influence of general rules, while “wise men” are guided by the second influence of general rules, that is, by the influence of the Principle of Uniformity (T 1.3.13.12). Prejudicial beliefs are incompatible with the Principle of Uniformity (taken in conjunction with perceptual beliefs). As I pointed out already, the philosophers affirm and the vulgar deny the Principle of Uniformity (T 1.3.12.5). The treatment of prejudice is a coherent development of that point.

2.3 Conclusion

Hume’s generalized account of philosophically approved doxastic propensities does not emerge out of nowhere in Treatise 1.4.4.1-2. That passage merely summarizes the distinctions that shape the descriptive and normative constructive work in Part 3. Reflection on the products of our doxastic propensities leads us to form corrective
general rules which repress some of those propensities. These corrective general rules also effectively suppress the function of proscribed propensities, showing that the propensities are neither permanent, nor irresistible, nor universal. The philosophers do not approve of such propensities, and they lack even defeasible justification. The reflective formation and following of general rules distinguishes the wise and the philosophers from the vulgar.
CHAPTER 3: THE DEFEASIBLE EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION OF CORE BELIEFS

Introduction

In light of the preceding sketch of Hume’s epistemology, I now proceed to examine the epistemic status of two core beliefs: inductive inferences and belief in mind-independent external objects. I argue in this chapter that by Hume’s lights, these core beliefs are, epistemologically, defeasibly justified. In the next chapter, I argue that they face epistemic defeaters from reason. Epistemic defeat generates Hume’s skepticism about core beliefs.

Although Hume has long been read as the original inductive skeptic who shows in Treatise 1.3.6 that inductive inferences are not even defeasibly justified, the majority of Hume scholars no longer read him this way. There is wide recognition that Hume’s real worry about inferences (demonstrative as well as inductive) is an undermining defeater argument that he mounts in Treatise 1.4.1.155 However, seemingly all Hume scholars take his argument in Treatise 1.4.2 to show that the vulgar belief in body lacks even defeasible epistemic justification. I argue against this standard view. Just as with inductive

155 De Pierris notes that the dominant view of recent interpreters is that Hume mounts no skeptical arguments prior to Part 4 of Book 1 of the Treatise. De Pierris, Ideas, Evidence, and Method, 277. De Pierris herself swims against this current, arguing that Hume does mount an inductive skeptical argument in T 1.3.6 which he continues to develop and throughout Parts 3 and 4. Ibid., 259-306.
inferences, Hume views the vulgar belief in body as defeasibly justified but as subject to a rebutting defeater from reason.

3.1 Inductive inference

Hume’s main argument in *Treatise* 1.3.6 is that any good argument from observational premises to conclusions about unobserved matters of fact must 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” (T 1.3.6.4). But this presupposition—the Principle of Uniformity—itself cannot be supported by any non-circular argument, whether demonstrative or probabilistic, from merely observational premises (T 1.3.6.5-7). So there is no good argument from merely observational premises to conclusions about unobserved matters of fact.

Although the main substance of Hume’s famous argument in this section is fairly clear, two puzzles attend it. The first puzzle is about the role and meaning of “reason.” Hume states his conclusion in terms of “reason” and the “understanding.” He says that we are not “determin’d by reason” to form beliefs about the unobserved (T 1.3.6.4; 1.3.6.12); that experience does not produce these beliefs “by means of the understanding” (T 1.3.6.4); that “there can be no reason to determine us” to form beliefs in the unobserved; and that “Reason can never shew us the connexion of one object with another, tho’ aided by experience, and the observation of their constant conjunction in all past instances” (T 1.3.6.12). The point seems clear enough: causal inferences (and Hume continues to call them “inferences,” despite their lack of argumentative support) are not produced by the faculty of reason.
But then, just a few paragraphs later, Hume begins to speak as if causal inferences are in fact produced by the faculty of reason.\textsuperscript{156} He speaks of “our reasonings from that relation [the causal relation]” (T 1.3.6.15) and says that “we are able to reason upon” the natural relation of causation (T 1.3.6.16). He consistently speaks of causal and probabilistic inferences as pieces of reasoning produced by the faculty of reason.\textsuperscript{157} First Hume posits an exclusive disjunction: causal inferences are produced either “by means of the understanding or imagination,” by “reason…or by a certain association and relation of perceptions” (T 1.3.6.12). He goes on to conclude that causal inferences are produced by the latter disjuncts, not the former. But then later he blurs this bright line and says that causal inference belongs to both imagination and reason (T 1.3.9.19 n. 22). Imagination, taken in the broad sense, is the faculty by which we form our fainter ideas. It includes probable reasoning, and excludes only the memory. When Hume uses “imagination” in a narrower sense, he uses it in opposition to “reason” and therefore excludes “our demonstrative and probable reasonings.” The point here is that although probabilistic inference is a function of the imagination in the broad sense, Hume still thinks of it as “reasoning” and as a product of the faculty of “reason.”

The question is, are causal and probabilistic inferences products of the faculty of reason, or not? In \textit{Treatise} 1.3.6 Hume first seems to say that they are not, and then immediately he goes back to talking as if they are. Commentators are divided on the point. Louis E. Loeb, among others, argues that Hume changes the meaning with which he uses the term “reason.”\textsuperscript{158} Whereas previously to the main argument of \textit{Treatise} 1.3.6, Hume uses “reason” to refer only to a non-associative faculty, afterwards he uses

\textsuperscript{156} Loeb, \textit{Stability}, 53-57.
\textsuperscript{157} See Loeb for many more examples. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Loeb, \textit{Stability}, 53-59.
“reason” to include the associative mechanism whereby we make causal inferences. Garrett, on the other hand, thinks that “Hume uses the term ‘reason’ quite univocally to refer to the inferential faculty—a faculty that produces two kinds of arguments, demonstrative and probable.”

When Hume says we are not “determin’d by reason” to make causal inferences, he simply means that we have no argument to the conclusion that causal inference is reliable. Nevertheless, causal inferences are still inferences, produced by the faculty of reason.

Fortunately, I can afford to remain neutral on this debate. All parties can agree that in 1.3.6, Hume intends to show that there is no good argument from merely observational premises to conclusions about unobserved matters of fact. All parties agree that, at least after he makes this argument in 1.3.6, Hume refers to causal inferences as “reasoning” and as products of the faculty of “reason”—even though these inferences are produced by the imagination, in the broad sense (see T 1.3.9.19 n. 20), and even though they are unsupported by good arguments from observational premises. As long as we keep these points in mind, we can steer clear of trouble.

The second puzzle about Treatise 1.3.6 is epistemic: in light of what he argues in this section, does Hume regard causal inferences as epistemologically justified? Many interpreters answer “no.”

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159 Garrett, Cognition, 94.
principles of the imagination, unsupported by good arguments from observation or memory, is not epistemologically justified.

On the other hand, a large number of recent interpreters deny that Hume intends a skeptical conclusion at Treatise 1.3.6. Interestingly, Hume’s early Scottish critics also seem to not have construed T 1.3.6 as a skeptical argument. Even Fogelin notes that the classic inductive skepticism which he himself attributes to Hume is a form of the “antecedent skepticism” that Hume elsewhere rejects (EHU 12.3; cf. my discussion of this passage at 1.2.1).

There are important differences among nonskeptical interpreters. Some argue that even in T 1.3.6, and throughout Part 3 of Book I, Hume endorses causal inferences as justified. By calling such inferences “just” and ascribing them to the “judgment” or

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161 Loeb cites many commentators who “note Hume’s favorable attitude toward causal inference” at least in Part 3 of Book 1 of the Treatise. Loeb, Stability, 38 n. 1. Loeb correctly writes: “The evidence of Hume’s approval of causal inference at these stages of Book 1 is overwhelming…There is no doubt that Hume discovered the materials used to formulate the problem of induction familiar to twentieth-century philosophy. Hume did not, however, intend the argument of I.iii.6, as deployed in the Treatise, to have any skeptical weight or force.” Ibid., 38.

162 In his chapter “Of Probable Reasoning,” Thomas Reid gives basically same account of probable reasoning as Hume himself does, arguing that our instinctual trust in the uniformity of nature is epistemologically justified even though unsupported by argument. Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man, in The Works of Thomas Reid, vol. 1, Essay VI, Chapter VII, 481-484. “General rules may have exceptions or limitations which no man ever had occasion to observe….But we are led by our constitution to rely upon their continuance with as little doubt as if it was demonstrable.” Ibid. 484b. In the very next chapter, “Of Mr. Hume’s Scepticism with Regard to Reason,” Reid subjects to criticism only Hume’s argument from Treatise 1.4.1. Ibid., 484-490. Reid never passes up an opportunity to counter Humean skepticism, perceived or real. If he had read Treatise 1.3.6 as a skeptical argument, he almost certainly would taken up the cudgels against it. Loeb points out that even James Beattie, author of An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, one of Hume’s most uncharitable Scottish common sense critics, never construes the argument of Treatise 1.3.6 as a skeptical threat. Loeb, Stability, 50-51.

163 “Interestingly, and probably contrary to Hume’s own intentions, it is best classified as an instance of an antecedent skepticism rather than a consequent skepticism. The argument is a priori in form and does not rest upon scientific enquiry that reveals the fallaciousness of our mental faculties.” Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 46.

“reason,” Hume signals their positive epistemic status. Moreover, Hume surely endorses the “Rules by which to judge of cause and effects” (T 1.3.15) as well as the rules of probabilistic inference he expounds in 1.3.11-13.

Garrett and Owen, on the other hand, deny that Hume registers any epistemic evaluations at all, including of causal inference, until he utters the Title Principle at Treatise 1.4.7.11. Hume neither affirms nor denies the epistemic status of causal inference at 1.3.6 or in the rest of Part 3. As Garrett explains, “reason,” for Hume, is not a normative epistemic term, but “simply the name that Hume, as cognitive psychologist, consistently employs for the general faculty of making inferences or producing arguments.” In Treatise 1.3.6 Hume simply observes one role that reason does not play: it does not determine the mind to draw causal inferences. Owen adds that Humean reason is a faculty with norms of proper and improper use which are spelled out in places like Treatise 1.3.15. The norms of the proper use of reason qua faculty should not be identified with epistemic norms per se. We must “distinguish reason or the understanding from the broader philosophy in which it is embedded,” which tells us when and how the faculty should be used at all. For both Garrett and Owen, the broader epistemology in which reason is embedded is expressed in the Title Principle. On their reading, the Title Principle gives a qualified endorsement to the deliverances of the faculty of reason: they are epistemologically justified if and only if we have a propensity to assent to them.

166 Garrett, Cognition, Chapter 4, especially 94-5; Owen, Hume’s Reason, Chapter 6.
167 Garrett, Cognition, 92.
168 Owen, Hume’s Reason, 206.
169 Ibid 221
Using Hume’s concept of “philosophy” as a guide to his epistemology sheds new light on this debate. In the first place, if “philosophy” rather than “reason” is Hume’s essential term of epistemic approbation, then Garrett and Owen are right that reason is a faculty whose deliverances may or may not be justified. We cannot assume without argument that the philosophers approve of reason.

But second, without any doubt, the philosophers do endorse reason, and regard its products as defeasibly justified. “The customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes” is Hume’s preeminent example of the principles of the imagination “which are permanent, irresistible, and universal,” and of which the philosophers approve (T 1.4.4.1-2). Just probabilistic belief-forming processes are described as those which “are receiv’d by philosophers, and allow’d to be reasonable foundations of belief and opinion,” and are explicitly contrasted with “unphilosophical probability” (1.3.13.1). The rules for causal judgment, which norm both natural and moral philosophy (T 1.3.15.11), are constitutive of philosophy in the general sense. There is no question at any point whether the deliverances of reason are epistemologically defeasibly justified. This conclusion counts against not only those interpretations which make Hume a classic inductive skeptic, but also against the view of Garrett and Owen that Hume defers epistemic questions until *Treatise* 1.4.7. Humean epistemic justification simply does not require a good argument from merely observational premises to conclusions about unobserved matters of fact.

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170 Hume mentions that the fourth rule, that “The same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause,” is “the source of most of our philosophical reasonings” (T 1.3.15.6).
Not only do the philosophers (and Hume) endorse inductive inference long before the Title Principle is stated, but in fact the norms of philosophy contradict the norm expressed in the Title Principle. Philosophy valorizes reason and requires, for all that can be seen, assent to all of reason’s undefeated deliverances. But the Title Principle permits us to sometimes ignore reason. The Title Principle says that production by reason is not sufficient for defeasible epistemic justification. A “propensity” to follow reason is also necessary:

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. (T 1.4.7.11)

So one of the following three claims are false: (1) The Title Principle is an epistemic norm; (2) Hume endorses all the epistemic norms of philosophy; (3) philosophy always requires assent to the undefeated deliverances of reason. In Chapter 6 I argue in more detail that the Title Principle is not an epistemic norm. For the moment I simply note this point in order to clarify the issue.

The deliverances of reason (including inductive inferences) are defeasibly justified but, as I pointed out in the preceding chapter, they sometimes face rebutting defeaters from further observation. In Treatise 1.4.1, “Of scepticism with regard to reason,” Hume shows that actually inductive inference faces more than just observational defeaters. As it turns out, all the deliverances of reason (demonstrative or inductive) succumb to undermining defeaters from reason itself. As I explained in Chapter 2, when the deliverances of a propensity regularly turn out to be defective in some way, we form general rules against accepting any of them. The deliverances of reason regularly turn out
to be defective, since they all succumb to undermining defeaters. So it might seem then that we would form a corrective general rule against accepting any of the deliverances of reason, temporarily. If we did form such a corrective general rule against reason, and the rule effectively suppressed our propensity to make inferences, then reason would prove to be not among the permanent, irresistible, and universal propensities of which the philosophers approve (T 1.4.4.1). Not only would its deliverances face undermining defeaters, but they would lack even defeasible epistemic justification.

But as a matter of fact, the deliverances of reason are defeasibly justified, despite the fact that none of them are overall justified. Even if we did form a general rule against reason, the general rule would have no psychological efficacy. Willy-nilly, we still form inductive (and demonstrative) inferences. The custom and habit are still permanent, irresistible, and universal, and therefore the philosophers approve of it and accord its products defeasible justification. In short, only those corrective general rules that successfully suppress propensities are epistemologically normative. So, even after the skeptical argument of Treatise 1.4.1, Hume maintains that inductive inferences are defeasibly justified (even if they are all ultimately defeated).

3.2 The Vulgar Belief in Body

3.2.1 Overview of Hume on Belief in Body

Hume’s treatment of belief in body differs in certain respects from his treatment of inductive inference. Hume explores the processes that produce inductive inferences in Part 3 of Book 1, where he clearly regards them as defeasibly justified. He does not mount a defeating skeptical argument against inductive inference until Treatise 1.4.1, “Of
scepticism with regard to reason.” But Hume does not explore belief in body or the processes that produce such belief at all until Treatise 1.4.2, “Of scepticism with regard to the senses.” In this section (and in T 1.4.4, “Of the modern philosophy”) he concludes that belief in body is epistemologically unjustified. Because Hume concludes that belief in body is unjustified immediately after discussing the mechanisms that produce it, readers easily get the impression that he does not regard belief in body as even defeasibly justified.

I argue though that in fact Hume does regard belief in body (specifically, the vulgar belief in body) as defeasibly justified. As in the case of inductive inference, this belief is defeasibly justified despite the fact that it is unsupportable by any good argument from justified premises. As with inductive inference, however, this belief faces insuperable epistemic defeaters. I proceed first by outlining in this section (3.2.1) Hume’s complex account of various beliefs in body. Next I make a positive textual case for the defeasible justification of the vulgar belief in body (3.2.2). Then I respond to objections, and show why all of the seeming textual arguments against the defeasible justification of belief in body rest on misinterpretations (3.2.3).

Hume’s reflections on the origin and epistemic status of beliefs in objects are, in the Treatise, long and arguably more tortuous than any other portion of his writings.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Treatise 1.4.2-4 spans 27 pages in the Norton edition.

¹⁷² Treatise 1.4.2 often elicits expressions of dismay from commentators. Stroud says “His attempt to explain [belief in bodies] in the Treatise is very complicated and difficult, and, I think, unsuccessful.” Stroud, Hume, 97. Fogelin calls T 1.4.2 “one of the most perplexing portions of the Treatise.” Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 64. Kenneth P. Winkler writes “What I have to contribute in the present essay is a reading of T 1.4.2 that is both tentative and partial.” Winkler, “Hume on Scepticism and the Senses,” in The Cambridge Companion to Hume’s Treatise, 135. My favorite is Jonathan Bennett’s: “It is extremely difficult, full of mistakes, and—taken as a whole—a total failure; yet its depth and scope and disciplined complexity make it one of the most instructive arguments in modern philosophy.” Bennett, Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 313, quoted in George Dicker,
Some initial reconnaissance of the whole terrain will help us navigate through the details more easily. The title of section *Treatise* 1.4.2 (“Of scepticism with regard to the senses”) indicates that Hume’s interest is in the (negative) epistemic status of belief in body. However, as usual, he determines the epistemic status of the belief by way of investigating its source, the cognitive mechanisms that produce it: “The subject, then, of our present enquiry is concerning the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body” (T 1.4.2.2). Although Hume extends his discussion of different forms of belief in body through *Treatise* 1.4.3 and 1.4.4, section 1.4.3 (“Of the antient philosophy”), which discusses substance metaphysics, stands apart somewhat in the dialectic. I do not discuss it in this chapter. *Treatise* 1.4.2 and 1.4.4, however, form a continuous line of thought. Hume reprises only these sections in the parallel portion of the first *Enquiry* (EHU 12.7-15).

This continuous line of thought unfolds in five steps. Step 1 covers the psychological explanation and defeasible epistemic justification of the vulgar belief in body. This step is my central concern in the present chapter. Steps 2-5 cover the epistemic defeat of the vulgar belief, the production and negative epistemic status of the “system of double existences,” and the production and negative epistemic status of the “modern philosophy.” I unpack these steps in Chapter 4. In order to put the current discussion in context, I provide here an outline of all five steps, with enough explanation to make the steps intelligible.

Step 1: The vulgar belief in the continued and distinct existence of our perceptions is a narrowly natural though non-ratiocinative belief, and so far forth justified (T 1.4.2.1-44; cf. EHU 12.7-8).

Step 2: The vulgar belief faces a rebutting defeater from inductive reasoning which renders it epistemologically unjustified overall (T 1.4.2.45; cf. EHU 12.9).

Step 3: The philosophical belief in the system of double existences emerges from reflection on the defeat of the vulgar belief, although it lacks even defeasible justification (T 1.4.4.46-55; cf. EHU 12.10-14).

Step 4: Inductive inference leads from the system of double existences to the belief that bodies have only primary qualities (the “modern philosophy”) (T 1.4.4.3-5).

Step 5: But primary qualities without secondary qualities are inconceivable, so belief in bodies with only primary qualities is necessarily false (T 1.4.4.6-15; cf. EHU 12.15).

Steps 1-5 discuss three different forms of belief in body (continued and distinct existences): the belief of the vulgar (naïve realism), of “the philosophers” (“the system of double existences,” a form of representative realism), and “the modern philosophy” (a form of representative realism employing the distinction between primary and secondary qualities).
qualities). Hume describes the belief in body as belief in “continued and distinct existences” (T 1.4.2.2). The “continued” existence of a thing is its existence when it is not present to the senses. The “distinct” existence of a thing has two aspects. First, a thing has a distinct existence if it exists outside of the mind, or external to the mind. Second, a thing has a distinct existence if its existence and operation is not causally dependent upon the mind.

The “existences” Hume has in mind are perceptions themselves. “For as to the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shown its absurdity,” (T 1.4.2.2, referring back to his earlier argument for this point at T 1.2.6). Hume’s notion is that some perceptions stand in different relations to the mind than other perceptions. “Generally speaking,” Hume says, “we do not suppose them [external existences] specifically different [from perceptions]; but only attribute to them different relations, connexions, and durations. But of this more fully thereafter” (T 1.2.6.9, footnoting T 1.4.2). More specifically, bodies (objects, external existences) are those perceptions that continue to exist outside the mind even when they are not present to the mind. Perceptions which do not continue to exist outside the mind are not bodies.

The vulgar form the belief that some of those perceptions which appear to their minds continue to exist outside of their minds—that is, these perceptions continue to exist while they are unperceived. The vulgar are naïve realists: they believe that some (though not all) of their perceptions are identical with objects. As I discuss in more detail below, the vulgar belief is narrowly natural, but not based on argument or mere sensation.
“The philosophers” in view in Treatise 1.4.2 hold that none of the perceptions which are present to our minds are objects. They still affirm, however, that objects exist. Those perceptions which have a continued and distinct existence are simply never perceived by any mind. The philosophers further hold that objects resemble the perceptions that appear to our minds (T 1.4.2.54), and that each perception that appears to our minds is caused by an object that resembles it (T 1.4.2.55).

We should note the difference between the “system of double existences” and the “modern philosophy” to which it leads in Step 4. The modern philosophy holds that object-perceptions only have primary qualities, and secondary qualities are merely perishing, mind-dependent perceptions. According to the “system of double existences,” both objects and mere perishing perceptions have both primary and secondary qualities.

Later I discuss the (non-justifying) mechanisms that produce the “system of double existences,” as well as the rebutting argument that it faces in Steps 4-5. For now, we should note that in this context, Hume is not discussing “the philosophers” in an epistemologically normative sense. Like the views of the “antient” philosophers (T 1.4.3) or the “modern” philosophers (T 1.4.4) regarding objects, the system of double existences is epistemologically unjustified.

My focus in this chapter is on Hume’s positive account of the origin of the vulgar belief in body, summarized in Step 1 above. This positive account is in turn complex, but we need a basic grasp of its contours. After giving a skeletal outline, I unpack each step as concisely as possible.

[1.a] The vulgar belief is not produced by sensation or reason, but by the imagination (T 1.4.2.2-14)
[1.b] Those perceptions to which we ascribe a continued and distinct existence are distinguished by their constancy and their coherence (T 1.4.2.15-19)

[1.c] The Galley Mechanism causes us to conclude from the coherence of our perceptions to their continued existence (T 1.4.2.20-22).

[1.d] Several mental mechanisms work together to cause us to conclude from the constancy of our perceptions (that is, interrupted appearances of exactly resembling perceptions) to their continued existence (that is, that it is one and the same perception which reappears to us intermittently) (T 1.4.2.23-43).

[1.d.i] The resemblance between the perceptions triggers the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions, despite their intermittent appearance (T 1.4.2.32-35).

[1.d.ii] But the intermittence of the appearance of the perceptions triggers the Propensity to Distinguish Intermittently-Appearing Perceptions, despite their exact resemblance.

[1.d.iii] We therefore experience a conflict between propensities regarding exactly resembling but intermittently appearing perceptions. The conflict activates the Dissonance Relief Principle, which produces a supposition: “that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible” (T 1.4.2.24).

[1.d.iv] The supposition acquires the force and vivacity sufficient for belief from its relation of resemblance to our memory-impressions of the interrupted perceptions (cf. T 1.4.2.41-2).

I now provide some brief explanatory remarks about each step.
[1.a] The vulgar belief is not produced by sensation or reason, but by the imagination (T 1.4.2.2-14)

In his investigation of the causes of “the opinion of a continu’d or of a distinct existence,” Hume divides the field into three possible explanations: the senses, reason, or the imagination (T 1.4.2.2). He argues first that the senses do not produce our belief in body, since they cannot even give us the idea of body (T 1.4.2.3-13). It may seem odd that Hume immediately rules out sensation as a source of our sense-beliefs in body. But when Hume uses “the senses” in the section title “of scepticism with regard to the senses,” he really means “belief in body (continued and distinct existences),” whatever its source. The questions at issue in the section is, “What produces our belief in continued and distinct existences, and what is the epistemic status of that belief?”

When he argues that “the senses” do not produce belief in body, he uses “the senses” in a narrower sense to refer to our capacity to experience sensations, sensory impressions. Sensations cannot give us the idea of a perception’s continuing to exist while unperceived, or of a perception’s existing outside of the perceiving mind.

Second he argues briefly that reason cannot produce belief in body (T 1.4.2.14). To begin with, even if some philosophers “fancy” they can produce arguments to support the belief in body, few people know these arguments. So reason is not the source of most people’s belief in body. Moreover, there is no good argument from our impressions of sensation to the continued and distinct existence of any perception. If we assume that

173 Hume makes this most explicit when he concludes at the end of the section “I… 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” (T 1.4.2.56, italics mine). He has shown that the beliefs of “the senses” (that is, beliefs in body) are really produced by the imagination, and he has discovered that they are not epistemologically justified.
objects are themselves identical with some of our perceptions, then we cannot causally infer the existence of the object from its perception, because no causal relation can exist between a thing and itself. “...[A]s long as we take our perceptions and objects to be the same, we can never infer the existence of the one from that of the other, nor form any argument from the relation of cause and effect; which is the only one that can assure us of matter of fact” (T 1.4.2.14). But if we assume that objects are not identical with any of our perceptions, then we cannot infer objects from our perceptions. “Even after we distinguish our perceptions from our objects, ‘twill appear presently, that we are still incapable of reasoning from the existence of one to that of the other” (T 1.4.2.14, referring forward to T 1.4.2.47). It follows then that the imagination (in the narrow sense that excludes demonstrative and probable reasoning, cf. T 1.3.9.19 n. 22) produces the belief in continued and distinct existences.

[1.b] Those perceptions to which we ascribe a continued and distinct existence are distinguished by their constancy and their coherence (T 1.4.2.15-19)

Hume’s task is to identify which properties distinguish those perceptions to which we ascribe continued and distinct existence from those to which we ascribe a merely mind-dependent existence (T 1.4.2.15). These properties must activate whatever principles of the imagination cause us to ascribe a continued distinct existence to just those perceptions. Hume observes first that constancy distinguishes those perceptions to which we ascribe continued distinct existence (T 1.4.2.18). Constant perceptions are those which always appear in the same order or arrangement. The second distinguishing feature of real objects is coherence (T 1.4.2.19). Bodies are coherent insofar as the
changes which they undergo either in position or in their qualities are regular and therefore predictable. Having identified the distinguishing features of those perceptions which take to be objects, Hume goes on to ask how the constancy and coherence of perceptions leads us to ascribe to them continued and distinct existence.

[1.c] The Galley Mechanism causes us to conclude from the coherence of our perceptions to their continued existence (T 1.4.2.20-22).

Sufficient past experience of the coherency of a set of perceptions triggers the operation of a principle of the imagination which I call the Galley Mechanism. The Galley Mechanism leads us to ascribe continued existence to perceptions characterized by coherency. Hume gives the example of having always had an auditory perception of a creaking sound in conjunction with a visual perception of a door swinging open. If, facing away from the door, one has the auditory perception without the wonted visual perception, then either the causal inference from the creaking sound to the swinging door is false, or the visual perception of the door continues to exist whilst not present to the mind, and hence independently of the mind. The imagination vivifies the latter supposition rather than disbelieve the causal inference.  

I refer to the responsible cognitive tendency as the Galley Mechanism because of Hume’s picturesque explanation of it:

174 It is interesting to compare the relationship of the general causal rule with observation in this instance versus in cases of prejudice (T 1.3.13.7-18). In the latter case, the general rule illegitimately trumps an observation; in the former case, the general rule legitimately trumps a non-observation. I doubt that Hume can sustain this distinction between the observation of absence and the absence of observation. In any case, Hume also endorses the positing of unobserved secret causes in T 1.3.12.5. In T 1.3.12.5, the secret causes are posited generally in a way that is equivalent to belief in a Principle of Uniformity. Here in T 1.4.2.20, the secret causes are posited locally, in a way that is equivalent to belief in a particular causal uniformity.
The imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse. (T 1.4.2.22)

Once the mind has observed the coherence of a set of perceptions (auditory perception of creaking is regularly accompanied by visual perception of opening door), it continues to ascribe coherence to the perceptions even when they do not appear in their wonted order. The imagination, like a galley, continues in its coherence-ascribing course, and produces the supposition of the missing perception.

It may seem as though the Galley Mechanism cannot be among those principles of which the philosophers approve. After all, it causes the unintelligible fictitious belief in an absolute standard of equality (T 1.2.4.24). But although the Galley Mechanism does produce an unintelligible belief in this particular case, Hume also emphasizes its naturalness:

But tho’ this standard be only imaginary, the fiction however is very natural; nor is anything more usual, than for the mind to proceed after this manner with any action, even after the reason has ceas’d, which first determin’d it to begin. (T 1.2.4.24)

Unlike the belief in a standard of absolute equality, the belief in the constancy of perceptions is fully intelligible. The mere fact that some of the Galley Mechanism’s products (like the belief in a standard of absolute equality) are epistemologically unjustified does not entail that we form an effective general rule against them, or that the Mechanism is not “permanent, irresistible, and universal.” Since the Mechanism is “very
natural,” we have every reason to assume that its intelligible deliverances (including the belief in the constancy of coherent perceptions) are defeasibly justified.

[1.d] Several mental mechanisms work together to cause us to conclude from the constancy of our perceptions (that is, interrupted appearances of exactly resembling perceptions) to their continued existence (that is, that it is one and the same perception which reappears to us intermittently) (T 1.4.2.23-43).

[1.d.i] The exact resemblance between the perceptions triggers the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions, despite their intermittent appearance (T 1.4.2.32-35).

To illustrate this propensity, say that I am observing a tree, and I blink. Before and after the blink, the tree-content of my two acts of perceiving is qualitatively identical; nothing about the content of my two visual experiences changes. The constancy of the content of two perceptual experiences triggers what I call the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions.\(^\text{175}\) The mind has a propensity to form the belief that, rather than perceiving two numerically different but qualitatively identical perceptions, I perceived one and the same perception twice, with a blink in between.

The Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions is one of three sub-propensities of the more general Propensity to Identify Related Perceptions.\(^\text{176}\) Hume introduces the general propensity early in the *Treatise*: “For we may establish it as a

\(^{175}\) The name is slightly misleading because it speaks of “Perceptions” plural, where the “perceptions” in view are presumably one and the same item—namely, one perception, where perception is understood as the content of two perceptual experiences. The confusion arises from Hume’s use of “perception” sometimes to refer to the act of perceiving and sometimes to refer to perceptual content, which on his account can of course continue to exist while unperceived.

\(^{176}\) Loeb, *Stability*, 144.
general maxim in this science of human nature, that wherever there is a close relation betwixt two ideas, the mind is very apt to mistake them, and in all its discourses and reasonings to use the one for the other” (T 1.2.5.19).\textsuperscript{177} The other two sub-propensities (corresponding to the other two natural associative relations) are the Propensity to Identify Causally-Related Perceptions and the Propensity to Identify Contiguous Perceptions. The Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions is the strongest of the three (T 1.2.5.21).

Hume uses pejorative language about the general Propensity to Identify Related Perceptions and specifically about the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions. It is a propensity “to mistake one idea for another” (T 1.4.2.32), “the most fertile source of error,” and responsible for most mistakes in reasoning (T 1.2.5.21). The reason why is clear. Perceptions which are causally related or contiguous with one another, or which resemble each other only imperfectly, are distinct. To identify them with one another violates the Indiscernibility of Identicals.

But in the present case, the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions is triggered by the appearance of exactly resembling perceptions. The identification of exactly resembling perceptions may be false, but is not necessarily so; it does not violate the Indiscernibility of Identicals.

\textsuperscript{177} He gives an explanation for this phenomena in terms of brain anatomy in T 1.2.5.20. In the context of T 1.2.5 Hume introduces the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions to explain why we mistake the idea of darkness (the absence of visual sensation) for the idea of a vacuum (the sensation of an absence) (T 1.2.5.19).
But the intermittence of the appearance of the perceptions triggers the Propensity to Distinguish Intermittently-Appearing Perceptions, despite their exact resemblance.

Just as the qualitative identity of the tree-content of two interrupted perceptual experiences leads me to believe that I perceived one perception two times, the interruption between the two perceptual experiences—the blink—triggers a contrary propensity. This propensity (which I call the Propensity to Distinguish Intermittently-Appearing Perceptions) leads me to believe that I perceived two perceptions that were merely qualitatively identical. As Hume puts it, “the interruption of the appearance seems contrary to the identity, and naturally leads us to regard these resembling perceptions as different from each other” (T 1.4.2.36).

We therefore experience a conflict between propensities regarding exactly resembling but intermittently appearing perceptions. The conflict activates the Dissonance Relief Principle, which produces a supposition: “that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible” (T 1.4.2.24).

The Propensity to Distinguish Intermittently-Appearing Perceptions and the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions are simultaneously triggered and conflict with one another [1.d.ii-iii]. Neither propensity overrules the other outright. Rather, the conflict activates another natural propensity (call it the Dissonance Relief Principle) to alleviate the psychological pain of the cognitive dissonance: “The perplexity arising from this contradiction produces a propension to unite these broken appearances by the fiction
of a continu’d existence” (1.4.2.36). Only the supposition “that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible” (T 1.4.2.24) can eliminate the seeming contradiction. The supposition is that resembling perceptions whose appearance to the senses is interrupted actually continue to exist while they are not apparent to the senses. This supposition harmonizes the intermittent appearance of the perceptions with our propensity to identify them.

[1.d.iv] The supposition acquires the force and vivacity sufficient for belief from its relation of resemblance to our memory-impressions of the interrupted perceptions (cf. T 1.4.2.41-2).

The Dissonance Relief Principle produces the supposition of the continued and distinct existence of constant but intermittently-appearing perceptions. But Hume must still give an explanation of how the mind goes from entertaining the mere supposition of the continued existence to really believing it. Ideas pass into beliefs when they borrow force and vivacity from present impressions to which they are somehow related (T 1.4.2.41). Hume says that the supposition (the faint idea of the continued existence) passes into belief (a vivid and forceful idea of the continued existence) in virtue of the

178 “Fiction” is a more pejorative term in this context than the more neutral “supposition.” The former implies falsehood, while the latter does not. The use of “fiction” is an example of Hume anticipating the negative results of T 1.4.2.45. T 1.4.2.14-44 is rife with these anticipatory rejections of the vulgar belief, which sows confusion as to the grounds of Hume’s rejection.

179 Hume gives a generalized description of cognitive dissonance and the mind’s response to it: “Nothing is more certain from experience, than that any contradiction either to the sentiments or passions gives a sensible uneasiness, whether it proceeds from without or from within; from the opposition of external objects, or from the combat of internal principles. On the contrary, whatever strikes in with the natural propensities, and either externally forwards their satisfaction, or internally concurs with their movements, is sure to give a sensible pleasure. Now there being here an opposition betwixt the notion of the identity of resembling perceptions, and the interruption of their appearance, the mind must be uneasy in that situation, and will naturally seek relief from the uneasiness” (T 1.4.2.37).
fact that it resembles memory impressions of the interrupted but resembling perceptions. These memories transfer their vivacity to the supposition and it becomes belief (T 1.4.2.42).

3.2.2 The positive textual case for the defeasible epistemic justification of the vulgar belief

My central contention is that the principles producing the vulgar belief are permanent, irresistible, and universal, that they are sanctioned by philosophy, and that therefore their deliverances (including the belief in body) are defeasibly justified. The vulgar belief is not overall epistemologically justified only because it faces a rebutting defeater argument from reason at Treatise 1.4.2.45 (see Step 2, discussed in 4.2.2). Three positive lines of argument support my claim that the vulgar belief is defeasibly justified.

First, Hume makes it clear that our belief in continued and distinct existences is permanent, universal, and irresistible. “Nature,” he says, “has not left this to his [the skeptic’s] choice, and has doubtless esteem’d it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations…This is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings” (T 1.4.2.1). He expatiates upon the naturalness, universality, and irresistibility of belief in body at the end of the section as well (T 1.4.2.50-51). As I argued earlier, the existence of a specific belief which is permanent, irresistible, and universal implies that its source also is permanent, irresistible, and universal. Hume explicitly asserts this conclusion in the final section of Book 1 he writes

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180 As Hume explains at T 1.3.9, resemblance alone cannot confer upon an idea sufficient vivacity to make it a belief. It can however make produce a belief when it works in conjunction with other vivifying influences—in this case, the Dissonance Relief Principle. Unlike the influences of resemblance which Hume deplores in T 1.3.8 and 1.3.9 (see 2.2.1), the influence of resemblance in the production of belief in body cannot be suppressed by a corrective general rule. It is permanent, irresistible, and universal.
that the same principle of the imagination which produces causal inferences “convinces us of the continu’d existence of external objects, when absent from the senses” (T 1.4.7.4). In fact, “these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind” (T 1.4.7.4). The principles of the imagination which produce belief in body are as permanent, irresistible, and universal as that which produces causal inference. The cognitive source of the vulgar belief in body therefore meets the criteria of the philosophers (T 1.4.4.1-2) and its deliverances are defeasibly justified.

Second, Hume implies that the vulgar belief is defeasibly justified because it has a “primary recommendation…to…the imagination” (T 1.4.2.46). The implication comes through in Hume’s criticism of the philosophical system of double existences (T 1.4.2.46-48). Hume’s skeptical worries about the philosophical system do not stem merely from the fact that it “has no primary recommendation…to reason,” but also that it has “no primary recommendation to the imagination” (T 1.4.2.46-48). Clearly, production by “reason” would afford the philosophical belief a defeasible justification. By the same token, so too would “a primary recommendation to the imagination.” The implication here is that if the philosophical system did have a “primary recommendation to the imagination,” like the vulgar belief has, then, like the vulgar belief, it would have at least defeasible justification. Hume says of the vulgar belief “Tho’ this opinion be false, ‘tis the most natural of any, and has alone any primary recommendation to the fancy” (T 1.4.2.48). But the philosophical system has no such primary recommendation to the imagination. It is even worse off than the vulgar belief. The vulgar belief may have met with epistemic defeat, but at least it was defeasibly justified. The philosophical belief neither has any defeasible justification, nor does it fully answer the arguments that defeat
the vulgar belief. On top of that, as Hume will explain in *Treatise* 1.4.4, it meets another crushing defeater argument of its own.

Third, a comparison with Hume’s streamlined version of the argument in Part I of Section 12 of the *Enquiry* confirms the defeasible justification of the vulgar belief in body. There, Hume omits all discussion of the particular mechanisms which produce the vulgar belief in body; he simply notes that the belief is profoundly natural (EHU 12.7-8). “Men are carried, by a natural instinct or prepossession,” to believe in mind-independent objects (EHU 12.7). He adds that “when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other” (EHU 12.7). The most essential point about the vulgar belief in body is that it is natural, in the narrow sense. Although Hume is willing to omit from the first *Enquiry* his particular account of the origins of this belief, he needs to emphasize the epistemologically significant point: this belief is natural in the sense that renders it defeasibly justified. Then he brings forward the defeater argument from reason (EHU 12.9). Hume gives no indication that the vulgar belief is unjustified on any other grounds than its defeat by reason. Recall that Hume’s discussion of belief in body is immediately preceded by his rejection of antecedent skepticism and openness to consequent skepticism. Hume prepares us to expect an argument that takes the natural deliverances of the mind as defeasibly justified, and then shows that they meet defeat. This is exactly the kind of argument provides.
3.2.3 Objections and replies

All the commentators I know of reject the claim that Hume regards the vulgar belief as defeasibly justified.181 There are many versions of this opposing view, too many to comprehensively canvas. But I now take up five of the most prominent objections to my view.

3.2.3.1 “Hume makes no epistemic evaluation of the vulgar belief in body.”

As previously noted, Garrett and Owen deny that Hume makes any epistemic evaluations prior to the enunciation of the Title Principle (at T 1.4.7.11). It follows that Hume neither condemns nor approves of the epistemic status of the vulgar belief in body in 1.4.2.182 The difference between my view and theirs is not a matter of the details of 1.4.2 but our overall interpretation of Hume’s epistemology. If I am correct that Hume already has a robust epistemology in place long before Part 4 of Book 1, then it is implausible to think that he makes no epistemic evaluation of the vulgar belief in body.

Moreover, the epistemic reading of the Title Principle encounters a unique difficulty with respect to belief in body.183 Construed as an epistemic norm, the Title Principle says only that production by reason, plus a certain propensity, is sufficient for epistemic justification. But reason does not produce the belief in body (whether vulgar or

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181 Ainsle comes close to being an exception. He rightly remarks that Hume’s skeptical challenge to the vulgar belief in body does not come until T 1.4.2.44-45. Ainsle, 42-43, 106-108. He correctly notes that nothing Hume says prior to T 1.4.2.44 implies that the vulgar belief is really in error. However, it is not clear to me whether Ainsle thinks that the vulgar belief is defeasibly justified. Ainsle’s view seems to be that Hume does not address the epistemic justification of the vulgar belief at all until he brings forward the skeptical challenge of T 1.4.2.44-45.


183 Recall that the Title Principle says “Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any title to operate upon us” (T 1.4.7.11).
philosophical); it only contradicts it. So the Title Principle gives us no way to evaluate the epistemic status of belief in body. It seems to be silent on the crucial question of whether other propensities of the imagination, other than reason, produce defeasibly justified beliefs. On the other hand, if we construe the Title Principle as giving necessary conditions for justification (a belief is justified only if it is produced by reason and we have the right propensity to assent), then belief in body is epistemologically unjustified. In this case, Hume is still a radical skeptic even after he articulates the Title Principle. For on this reading, belief in body, which is not produced by reason, is not epistemologically justified. This problem militates not just against Garrett and Owen, but against all interpreters who take the Title Principle as expressing Hume’s final epistemic position.

3.2.3.2 “The vulgar belief in body presupposes the unintelligible notion of identity through time.”

Several commentators allege that, according to Hume’s argument in Treatise 1.4.2.26-30, the identity of objects through time is inconceivable. The vulgar belief in body involves belief in the identity of objects through time. So either Hume countenances

184 Garrett says that the Title Principle “allows us to accept those principles of the imagination that are ‘permanent, irresistible, and universal’—such as inductive inference and the belief in continued and distinct existences—because even lively reason that mixes with our propensities cannot ultimately destroy their force.” Garrett, Cognition, 234. But the Title Principle tells us nothing about the status of permanent, irresistible, and universal principles of the imagination in general; it mentions only reason, and qualifies the conditions in which it “ought to be assented to.”

unintelligible beliefs, or else the identity ascriptions involved in the vulgar belief are sufficient to render it not even defeasibly justified.

Consider the first suggestion, that Hume endorses the vulgar belief in body even though it involves an unintelligible belief in identity through time. Hume expresses his criterion of intelligibility in what commentators have dubbed the Copy Principle. The Copy Principle says “That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent” (T 1.1.1.7). Hume uses this principle as a criterion for identifying nonsense notions, pseudo-ideas, words without real meanings. For example, he famously points out that objective necessary connections (T 1.3.14) and external objects which are specifically different from our perceptions (T 1.2.6.7-9) fall afoul of the Copy Principle. We have no impressions of these items, and therefore no ideas of them.

Some interpreters restrict the scope and force of the Copy Principle. Norman Kemp Smith says that Hume believes in objective necessary connections of which we have no adequate idea. Kemp Smith assumes that Hume endorses the natural Propensity to Project and its deliverances. The so-called “New Humeans” follow the same line of thought. They recognize that Hume endorses the ideas of cause and of object but they think that these ideas violate the Copy Principle. They therefore posit some notion of “suppositions” or “relative ideas” which lack robust content and violate the Copy Principle, but which nevertheless make the belief in causes and objects

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186 See for example Garrett, Cognition, 41-57.
possible. As Kenneth P. Winkler says, “Defenders of the New Hume all agree that the theory of ideas [viz., the Copy Principle] is either narrower in scope or more circumscribed in force than Hume’s readers typically suppose.” Kemp Smith applies this approach to Hume’s account of identity through time. He argues that although these identity ascriptions are unintelligible “fictions,” belief in these fictions is nevertheless natural, irresistible, and justified.

Without wishing to enter into the details of the “New Hume” debate, I must simply register my judgment that Hume never countenances exceptions to the Copy Principle. For he also holds to a Conceivability Criterion of Possibility, according to which a state of affairs is possible if and only if we can form a genuine (clear and distinct) idea of it. It follows that nothing of which we can have no idea can exist. So if Hume really does hold that identity through time is unintelligible (violates the Copy Principle), then belief in identity through time cannot possibly be true; it is not even defeasibly justified.

But Hume draws no attention whatsoever to his alleged skepticism about identity through time. Even those commentators who take Hume to be a skeptic about temporal

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192 Garrett coins the term “Conceivability Criterion of Possibility.” Garrett, *Cognition*, 24. I take it that Hume endorses the biconditional relationship between possibility and conceivability in the following sentence: “If this therefore be absurd in fact and reality, it must also be absurd in idea; since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible” (T 1.1.7.6).
193 It may seem too quick to conclude from the impossibility of a belief’s being true to its lack of even defeasible justification. We probably need a more nuanced modal epistemology than this. For example, the average elementary student is probably defeasibly justified in believing anything that a mathematics says about numbers, even if, through a careless error or practical joke, the professor utters a mathematical impossibility which is necessarily false. But as far as I can tell, Hume does not explore cases like these. He seems to assume that necessary falsehoods lack even defeasible justification, across the board.
identity point this out. This is a key piece of evidence that Hume is not actually arguing that identity through time is unintelligible. If he were arguing this, it would be a more powerful and sweeping skeptical argument than any other he puts forward. But it seems to me wildly implausible to think that Hume would present an argument against the entire concept of identity through time and fail to draw attention to it, let alone exploit its skeptical potential.

Moreover, an argument against the intelligibility of identity through time would not only amount to a radical skeptical argument, but it would also overturn Hume’s previous account of identity, as Kemp Smith points out: “This is Hume’s virtual recantation of his first, casual treatment of identity in I, I, 5 and I, iii, 1, where it is regarded as a genuine, non-fictitious special type of relation.” But in fact Hume gives no indication that he is now recanting his first account of a fundamental concept. The best explanation of this textual fact is that Hume is not arguing against the intelligibility of identity through time. He simply means to clear up a common mistaken way of thinking about it.

Turning now to the details of the text, at first glance, it can indeed appear that Hume denies that any object is identical with itself. He claims that the two necessary conditions of identity are (1) unchanging existence and (2) duration (T 1.1.5.4). But then

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194 “It seems that here, at least, Hume has developed a profound conceptual scepticism but has not thought through its consequences.” Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 73. “The radical scepticism to which this line of thought would lead is not addressed by Hume.” Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge*, 179.


196 Identity through change Hume really does regard as a contradiction into which we naturally fall (T 1.4.3.2-3; 1.4.6.4-7). But Hume does not discuss identity through change in T 1.4.2. At one point Kemp Smith reads Hume’s discussion of identity through change into T 1.4.2, where the issue is identity through time. Kemp Smith, “The Naturalism of Hume (I),” 159-160.
in his discussion of time, Hume argues that the idea of duration cannot apply to unchanging objects “in a proper sense” because

the idea of duration is always deriv’d from a succession of changeable objects, and can never be convey’d to the mind by any thing stedfast and unchangeable. For it inevitably follows from thence, that since the idea of duration cannot be deriv’d from such an object, it can never in any propriety or exactness be apply’d to it, nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration. (T 1.2.3.11)

It is only by means of a “fiction” that we apply the idea of time to unchangeable objects (T 1.2.3.11; 1.2.5.29; 1.4.2.29). The riddle then is how anything can simultaneously meet both conditions for identity, since unchanging objects do not properly belong to a temporal succession and in this way endure through time.

The solution to the riddle is that Hume is engaging in a bit of conceptual clarification. Robert Fogelin’s general remark applies here perfectly: “Hume will often argue that the plain man is deeply mistaken concerning the true nature of the ideas that correspond to the terms that he uses, but he does not argue that the plain man uses terms that lack a corresponding idea.”¹⁹⁷ The plain man’s idea is that an unchanging object can endure through time, properly speaking. This is a broadly natural though fictitious idea that can be easily corrected upon reflection. Hume suggests as much when he says that the “This fiction of the imagination almost universally takes place” (1.4.2.29, italics mine). Obviously it does not take place in Hume’s own case; he does not assent to the fiction.

We should note that Hume denies that “the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects, which are perfectly unchangeable,” and affirms that “as the idea

¹⁹⁷ Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 7.
of duration cannot be deriv’d from such an object, it can never *in any propriety or exactness* be apply’d to it, nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration” (1.2.3.11, italics mine). This suggests that although the idea of duration does not apply to unchanging objects in a proper or exact sense, it does apply to them in a perfectly acceptable and intelligible sense.

In what acceptable sense then does Hume think the idea of temporal duration applies to unchanging objects? In the following sense. Consider the following two series:

First series: AAAAAA
Second series: BCDEFGH

The second sequence, by Hume’s lights, gives us the idea of time, and the idea of time properly applies to it. The idea of time does not properly apply to the first series, since it is of an unchanging object. However, the idea of time does apply to the first series in an improper sense. We can intelligibly think of A coexisting with B, A coexisting with C, A coexisting with D, and so forth. As long as we keep in mind that A is not a member of the second (properly temporal) series, we can intelligibly speak of A’s duration through time in an improper sense. In the improper sense, we mean simply that A coexists with each of the members of the temporal series. Hume’s account of the duration of unchanging objects may in fact be a failure. But the text indicates that he himself finds it completely unproblematic.

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198 I get these series from Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 72, 74.
3.2.3.3 “Production by reason is necessary for epistemic justification”

Some commentators argue that since production by reason is necessary for epistemic justification, belief in body (which is produced by the imagination and not by reason or the senses) cannot be justified for Hume. For example, Louis E. Loeb argues that, of the principles of the imagination, only reason (the faculty of inductive inference) receives Hume’s epistemic approval. He argues primarily from the following footnote:

In general we may observe, that as our assent to all probable reasonings is founded on the vivacity of ideas, it resembles many of those whimsies and prejudices, which are rejected under the opprobrious character of being the offspring of the imagination. By this expression it appears that the word, imagination, is commonly us’d in two different senses; and tho’ nothing be more contrary to true philosophy, than this inaccuracy, yet in the following reasonings I have often been oblig’d to fall into it. When I oppose the imagination to the memory, I mean the faculty, by which we form our fainter ideas. When I oppose it to reason, I mean the same faculty, excluding only our demonstrative and probable reasonings. When I oppose it to neither, ’tis indifferent whether it be taken in the larger or more limited sense, or at least the context will sufficiently explain the meaning. (T 1.3.9.19 n. 20)

The footnote does appear, at first sight, to support Loeb’s contention that all principles of the imagination, other than reason, produce only rejected “whimsies and

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199 The first and most important commentator to construe Hume’s external world skepticism in this way is Thomas Reid in his Inquiry into the Human Mind. Reid answers what he takes to be Hume’s skeptical argument by rejecting the epistemic requirement that belief in body be produced by an argument from immediate sense data. As I see it, Reid answers a pseudo-Humean skeptical problem by way of an authentically Humean epistemic point. More recent commentators think that Hume is a body skeptic simply because the belief is not produced by reason. See Stroud, Hume, 109-110; Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 66, 78; Winkler, “Hume on Scepticism,” 150.

200 Loeb, Stability, 55-56.
prejudices.” Hume then goes on to distinguish between two senses of “imagination.” We might easily assume that imagination in the narrow sense (exclusive only of demonstrative and probable reasonings) is coextensive with the imagination insofar as it produces “whimsies and prejudices.” On this interpretation, we need not even discover what propensities of the imagination cause the belief in body in order to determine its epistemic status. As soon as we find that the belief is not produced by reason, we can dismiss it as unjustified.

But in fact, in Treatise 1.3.9.19 n. 20, Hume does not explicitly align the descriptive faculty distinction (narrow imagination vs. reason) with the epistemic distinction (whimsy vs. not whimsy, or defeasibly justified vs. not defeasibly justified). His main point is that some but not all principles of the imagination are rejected as opprobrious. He then explains that reason, which he obviously accepts, belongs to the imagination in the broad sense. He simply does not say that he rejects all the products of the imagination taken in the narrow sense which excludes reason. He does not say that, of all the principles of the imagination in the broad sense, he accepts only reason. Furthermore, when Hume later discusses those principles of the imagination of which the philosophers approve, he mentions causal inference only as an example, not as exhaustive of the class (“such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes,” T 1.4.4.1—emphasis mine).

Hume’s polemic against natural belief in God also shows that he thinks non-ratiocinative principles of the imagination might produce a defeasibly justified belief.201 In Part III of the Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, the philosophical theist

201 I explore this point in greater detail in “Hume and the Implanted Knowledge of God,” in Journal of Scottish Philosophy, 13(1), March 2015, 17-35.
Cleanthes claims that even if the inference to a Designer is, strictly speaking, improbable, it is natural, universal, and irresistible for anyone who reflects on the causes of the world’s order. Therefore, even by Philo’s own skeptical lights, the inference is defeasibly justified. Hume marks the strength of this argument with this interjection by the narrator: ‘Here I could observe, Hermippus, that Philo was a little embarrassed and confounded’ and ‘hesitated in delivering an answer. (Hume 2007b: 33 {3.10}). Philo (Hume’s spokesman) takes Cleanthes’ argument seriously just because he agrees that a narrowly natural non-ratiocinative belief is at least defeasibly justified.

Hume identifies the crucial issue on which Cleanthes’ argument hangs in an important letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto in which he discusses an early draft of the Dialogues.

I cou’d wish that Cleanthes’ Argument coud be so analys’d, as to be render’d quite formal & regular. The Propensity of the Mind towards it, unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Senses & Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem’d a suspicious Foundation. Tis here I wish for your Assistance. We must endeavour to prove that this Propensity is somewhat different from our Inclination to find our own Figures in the Clouds, our Face in the Moon, our Passions & Sentiments even in inanimate Matter. Such an Inclination may, & ought to be controul’d, & can never be a legitimate Ground of Assent. (Hume 1932: 155).

Hume clearly implies that If “The Propensity of the Mind towards” the design inference “were sufficiently “strong & universal,” it would have a non-suspicious foundation—that is, it would be at least defeasibly justified. Note furthermore that the
benchmark for a sufficiently “strong & universal” propensity is precisely our propensity “to believe in our Senses & Experience.” The propensity to believe in body is paradigmatic of those propensities which adequately ground (defeasibly justify) their deliverances.

Hume argues both in the Dialogues and in The Natural History of Religion that theistic belief does not originate in narrowly natural propensities. It originates rather in the Propensity to Project, which the philosophers reject (cf. T 1.4.4.1). But Hume needs to prove that religious belief has this untoward origin precisely because he takes seriously the claim that, quite apart from reason or argument, religious belief might be narrowly natural and therefore defeasibly justified. All this shows that for Hume, production by reason is not necessary for the defeasibly justification of any belief, including belief in body.

3.2.3.4 “The specific propensities of the imagination which produce the vulgar belief do not defeasibly justify it”

Some commentators go farther than simply asserting that “No faculty other than reason can produce defeasibly justified beliefs.” They look at the specific principles of the imagination which produce the vulgar belief in body and find these principles epistemologically defective. For example, Winkler criticizes the Galley Mechanism, Loeb criticizes (what I have called) the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions,
and Schmitt criticizes both the Galley Mechanism and what he calls “the propensity to complete a uniformity.”

Attacks on the justifying power of the specific propensities which produce the vulgar belief suffer from one general weakness: none of them apply to Hume’s presentation of this argument in *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* 12.7-9. When Hume repeats the argument against the vulgar belief in body in the first *Enquiry*, he omits entirely any account of these propensities that produce it. The essential point about the vulgar belief in body is that it is produced by a powerful instinct of nature. Hume does however reproduce the defeater argument from reason against this natural belief. If, in the *Treatise*, the problem with the vulgar belief lies in the specific propensities which produce it, this is not Hume’s view in the *Enquiry*. In the latter work he relies entirely on the defeater argument to support his skepticism with regard to body. Perhaps Hume did change his position between the two works, or perhaps he omitted the analysis and critique of the source propensities simply in the interest of abbreviating the chapter. But it counts in favor of my reading that it ascribes to Hume a consistent, unified view across both works. In both works, he regards the source-propensities of the vulgar belief as narrowly natural and so far forth, defeasibly justified; his only epistemic objection to the vulgar belief is that it faces rational defeat.

Attacks on the specific propensities do not, I argue, succeed at the level of detail either. To give just one example, Loeb argues that all deliverances of the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions are unjustified, and therefore that “the belief in body is

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unreasonable, at least insofar as it arises from constancy.”

Loeb rightly points out that the same Principle functions in conjunction with the Dissonance Relief Principle in a similar way to produce belief in material substrata (T 1.4.3) and belief in a simple and identical self (T 1.4.6)—beliefs which are unintelligible. These two principles also work to produce belief in the philosophical system of double existences.

But Loeb does not give enough weight to the differences between the vulgar belief in body and the other beliefs which the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions produces. The belief in material substrata and an identical self are unintelligible beliefs from the outset because they are beliefs in identity through change, not simply identity through time. Identity through time entails unchanging existence, on Hume’s account, so the self-identity of a changing object is a contradictory notion—the unchanging existence of a changing object. With material substrata, it is impossible that qualitatively different perceptions are identical with one another. This violates the Indiscernibility of Identicals. But the vulgar belief in body is not a belief in identity through change, but in identity through time, and through interrupted appearance. The belief is wholly intelligible and so far forth acceptable.

As I have pointed out before, just because a principle sometimes produces false beliefs which face defeat does not entail that it is rejected in toto or that its deliverances lack defeasible justification. Even causal inferences frequently face defeat from further observation. So the fact that the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions produces

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203 Loeb, *Stability*, 147. This coheres with Loeb’s theory that in the constructive stage of Hume’s project, “only beliefs based on perception, memory, and reason or the understanding—causal inference and demonstration—are justified” because only those mechanisms tend to produce stable doxastic states. Ibid., 146-147.

204 Ibid., 140-141.

205 Ibid., 141

206 Although he is aware of differences. Ibid., 150-152.
many false beliefs does not entail that reflective people form a corrective general rule against it or that philosophers disapprove of it. Hume does say that “there are few mistakes in reasoning, which do not borrow largely from that origin [i.e., the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions]” (1.2.5.21). But the fact that most mistakes result from the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions does not imply that most products of the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions are mistakes, or that we can successfully resist its deliverances by way of a corrective general rule. The propensity remains permanent, universal, and irresistible, despite the fact that many of its products are defeated and corrigible. So Loeb’s argument against the defeasibly justifying power of the Propensity to Identify Resembling Perceptions fails.

Schmitt argues that the belief-forming mechanisms triggered by the constancy and coherence of perceptions do not defeasibly justify belief in body. He argues this on the basis of Treatise 1.4.2.56, where Hume writes

I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. They are the coherence and constancy of our perceptions, which produce the opinion of their continu’d existence… (T 1.4.2.56)

Hume does seem to completely reject the reliability of inferences from coherence and constancy. They can never lead to a solid and rational system. They are trivial qualities of the fancy. Inferences from coherence and constancy are not, he seems to be saying, even defeasibly justified.

But, as I argued previously, belief-producing propensities need not be reliable in order to be approved by the philosophers. They need only be permanent, irresistible, and

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207 Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 259-263.
universal. Even if, in light of the defeater arguments Hume has broached in Treatise 1.4.2.45, the reflective person is inclined to form a corrective general rule against the propensities that lead them to believe in body, they cannot successfully resist or suppress those propensities. The propensities therefore retain the approval of the philosophers. Their deliverances are defeasibly justified, although these deliverances face epistemic defeat. 208

3.3 Conclusion

Both before and after he mounts his skeptical arguments against inferences (T 1.4.1) and against the vulgar belief in body (T 1.4.2), Hume depicts the propensities which produce these beliefs as permanent, irresistible, and universal. The philosophers therefore approve of these propensities (T 1.4.4.1-2) and accord at least defeasible justification to the beliefs they produce. It is true, as I will discuss in the next chapter, that inferences face undermining defeaters from reason (T 1.4.1), and the vulgar belief in body faces a rebutting defeater from reason (T 1.4.2.45). So neither core belief is epistemologically justified overall. This reading attributes a pleasing symmetry to Hume’s two main skeptical arguments, and it makes Hume’s arguments about body consistent across the Treatise and the first Enquiry.

208 Schmitt’s other arguments against the defeasible justification of the vulgar belief in body all also presuppose his view that for Hume, reliability is a necessary condition for defeasible justification. Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 259-263, 268-71, 274. He also assumes that when a subspecies of a propensity proves unreliable, the more general propensity is also proven unreliable and therefore unjustified. But I doubt this assumption. We might very well make a corrective general rule against one subspecies of a propensity without making a general rule against every subspecies of it.
CHAPTER 4: THE EPISTEMIC DEFEAT OF CORE BELIEFS

Introduction

Although our perceptual and inferential beliefs are defeasibly justified, insofar as they are produced by permanent, irresistible, and universal propensities of the imagination, they nonetheless face epistemic defeat from reason. Hume’s defeater argument against inferential beliefs occurs in Treatise 1.4.1, “Of scepticism with regard to reason.” His main defeater argument against our perceptual beliefs in mind-independent objects occurs in Treatise 1.4.2, “Of scepticism with regard to the senses,” but he makes related follow-up arguments in Treatise 1.4.4. The most important parts of this line of argument against belief in body reappear in Part 1 of Section 12 of Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy.” My first objective in this chapter is to show first that, contrary to non-skeptical interpreters, Hume views these arguments as successful skeptical challenges to the epistemic justification of core beliefs. My second main objective is to show that Hume’s sceptical arguments in Treatise 1.4.1 and 1.4.2.45 are defeater arguments from reason; they presuppose the defeasible justification of their targeted beliefs.
4.1 Treatise 1.4.1: “Of scepticism with regard to reason”

4.1.1 Hume’s skeptical argument

The skeptical argument in this section provides an undermining defeater for the epistemic justification of any demonstrative inference. However, along the way, the argument also provides an undermining defeater for any inductive inference. So all told, the argument undermines the epistemic justification of all the products of the faculty of reason—that is, for of inferences, demonstrative or probabilistic. Recall that an undermining defeater for some belief $P$ is not a reason to believe not-$P$, but rather a reason not to believe that $P$. In his skeptical argument against reason, Hume shows that we epistemologically ought to iteratively decrease our confidence in any of our inferential conclusions until we no longer believe them.

The skeptical argument against demonstrative inferences proceeds in two stages. First, Hume argues that although the rules of “demonstrative sciences” are infallible, humans only fallibly follow them in specific acts of reasoning (T 1.4.1.1-3). Our past record of errors obliges us to admit that, for any given demonstrative inference we make, at best we are only very likely to have drawn a correct conclusion. In light of the fallibility of our demonstrative reasoning, Hume pronounces the following epistemic norm: “We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or control on our first judgment or belief” (T 1.4.1.1). Proportionate to our past track record as fallible reasoners (“a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv’d us, compar’d with those, wherein its testimony was true,” ibid.), we should adjust our confidence-level in a demonstrative conclusion downward from certainty to a probability of less than one. Thus Hume says that all “knowledge” degenerates or
resolves itself probability (T 1.4.1.3). By this he means that even those beliefs, arising from intuition or demonstration (T 1.3.1.2), of which we are initially certain, become merely probabilistic beliefs when we duly reflect.

In the second stage of the argument, Hume says that our probabilistic reasoning is also fallible. He therefore pronounces another epistemic norm (or rather, makes a fresh application of the one he already stated): “In every judgment, which we can form concerning probability, as well as concerning knowledge [that is, demonstrative inference] we ought always to correct the first judgment, deriv’d from the nature of the object, by another judgment, deriv’d from the nature of the understanding” (T 1.4.1.5). Hume indicates that, proportionate to our past successes and failures in probabilistic reasoning, upon reflection we ought to adjust our confidence in our probabilistic inferences downwards to some degree. If we are only 99% confident that we should be 99% confident of some proposition P, then by Hume’s lights we actually ought only to be (say) 98% confident of P. Our higher-order doubts about our ability to make good first-order probabilistic judgments should decrease our first-order credences.

Hume does not make it entirely clear why he thinks that higher-order judgments about our reasoning abilities should lower the probability of our first-order judgments. Perhaps the most common criticism of Hume’s argument in Treatise 1.4.1 is that at precisely this point, he confuses the contents of probability beliefs with the strength of those beliefs; that is to say, he conflates objective and subjective probability. As Fogelin puts it, “However certain or uncertain we are about our ability to calculate

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probabilities, if a proposition has a certain probability, that (tautologically) is the probability it has.”

Several authors suggest that Hume is not thinking in terms of objective probability at all, but only in terms of subjective confidence levels. On this reading, the second-order realization that there is some slight chance that our first-order confidence-level is wrong, should lead us to lower our first-order confidence level somewhat. But again the question may be asked, “Why should the realization of our fallibility lead us to lower our first-order confidence levels rather than raising them? If we have erred, our confidence may just as well be too low as too high.”

Michael P. Lynch proposes that a second-order realization of first-order fallibility could reasonably lead us to widen our confidence interval on both sides. For example, if my original first-order confidence in \( P \) was 0.8, when I recall my past errors, I should widen my confidence interval to somewhere between 0.7 and 0.9. Admittedly, Lynch’s reconstruction differs from Hume’s text. Hume says only that we should lower our confidence levels, not that we should widen our confidence intervals. But Lynch might be stating precisely what Hume states inchoately. For my purposes, it does not matter whether Lynch’s interpretation is the best one or not. For whatever reason or for none at all, Hume thinks that second-order assessments of the correctness of our first-order

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probabilistic reasoning abilities should decrease the confidence with which we hold our first-order probabilistic beliefs.

Granting Hume this key claim—that I ought to lower my confidence in \( P \) in proportion to how likely I think it is that I wrongly assessed the probability that \( P \)—clears the way for his destructive iterative skeptical argument. For any first-order probabilistic belief \( P \), second-order reflection on my fallibility should lead me to lower my confidence in \( P \). Third-order reflection on the fallibility of my second-order judgment \( Q \) should lead me to lower my confidence in \( Q \) and thus also in \( P \). This iterative process of evaluating the reliability of our successive corrective judgments, and decreasing our confidence in our original judgment, goes on indefinitely (T 1.4.1.4-5). If we continue this iterative process of corrective judgments, our confidence in the original demonstrative judgment at last diminishes below the threshold of belief (T 1.4.1.6). An infinite number of higher-order reflections of this sort should diminish confidence in \( P \) until I have no confidence in \( P \).

The bottom line is that if we follow our epistemic norms, requiring us to decrease our confidence in our inferences based on our fallibility as thinkers, then we will eventually suspend all of our ratiocinative judgments. The first part of the argument shows that all “knowledge” (demonstrative inferences) degenerates into probabilistic beliefs. Iterative higher-order judgments about the reliability of our demonstrative inferences should lead us to suspend those as well. The second part of the argument shows that if we reflect as we ought to on our probabilistic beliefs, we suspend them all.

My aim in examining this argument is to determine Hume’s view of it, not to assess its soundness. Although the argument does have its defenders, it is widely
regarded as fallacious.\textsuperscript{214} Sound or not, it tells us the sources and nature of Hume’s skepticism.

To begin with, Hume’s argument presupposes that our inferences, probabilistic and demonstrative, are defeasibly justified. The corrective judgments which eventually undermine our confidence in all of our inferences are themselves a sort of inductive inference about the reliability of our faculties. This inductive inference is based upon “a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv’d us, compar’d with those, wherein its testimony was just and true” (T 1.4.1.1). Based on past experience, Hume demands that we form a judgment about the likelihood that our faculty of reason has produced an accurate result in the present case. Hume takes it for granted that inferences from past experience are perfectly justified. It is just because such inferences are justified that iterated corrective judgments defeat all inferential beliefs.

It might seem as though reflective people would, on Hume’s account, form a corrective general rule against reason when all of its deliverances are exposed as unjustified. If a corrective rule could suppress the faculty of reason, then it would not belong to the class of permanent, irresistible, and universal principles of which the philosophers approve (T 1.4.4.1). Rational inferences would lack even defeasible justification.

But Hume is at pains to point out that even in the face of his skeptical argument, reason cannot be suppressed.

Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sun-shine. (T 1.4.1.7)

Reason is “a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render’d unavoidable” (T 1.4.1.17). Regardless of the defeat of its deliverances, and regardless of any corrective general rule we might attempt to form against it, reason (demonstrative and probabilistic) is a permanent, irresistible, and universal principle of the mind. It therefore receives the sanction of the philosophers in Treatise 1.4.4.1 (a passage, we should note, that follows the destructive skeptical argument of T 1.4.1). Its deliverances are defeasibly justified, even though they are all ultimately unjustified.

4.1.2 Objections to the skeptical interpretation of the argument

Although it might seem natural to treat “Of scepticism with regard to reason” as a section in which Hume argues for epistemic skepticism, many commentators read it in a nonskeptical fashion. They make at least four important points in favor of their reading.

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4.1.2.1 “The Title Principle neutralizes the skeptical threat.”

First, nonskeptical interpreters contend that Hume himself rejects the epistemic norm which requires us to successively correct our inferential confidence-levels. Hume expresses this norm (which I will call the Corrective Norm) in statements I quoted already above:

We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or control on our first judgment or belief. (T 1.4.1.1)

In every judgment, which we can form concerning probability, as well as concerning knowledge [i.e., demonstrative inference] we ought always to correct the first judgment, deriv’d from the nature of the object, by another judgment, deriv’d from the nature of the understanding. (T 1.4.1.5)

Nonskeptical readers argue that this norm should not lead to skepticism because Hume does not endorse it, at least not without qualification. For example, Garrett asserts that Hume’s own epistemic norm, the Title Principle, limits the extent to which we ought to follow the Corrective Norm. Once our self-corrective reasoning ceases to be lively or mix with a propensity, the Title Principle permits us to ignore it. Self-corrective reasoning ceases to be lively long before it diminishes our inferential confidence-levels below the belief threshold (as Hume explains in T 1.4.1.10-11). The Corrective Norm

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216 Morris says that Hume rejects this model of “rationally reflective epistemic agents.” Morris, “Hume’s Scepticism about Reason,” 56-58, and “Hume’s Conclusion,” 102-106. Baier’s view is very close to Morris’ (it treats the argument as a reductio ad absurdum) but is less carefully worked out. Baier, Progress, 287; cf. 184. Mounce holds that the skeptical argument against reason in Treatise 1.4.1 arises only for an “autonomous” use of reason which Hume himself rejects. Mounce, Hume’s Naturalism, 49-52. Schmitt says that Hume does not endorse this “Norm of Reduction.” Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 323-324.

217 Garrett, Cognition, 235. Just as a reminder, the Title Principle says “Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any title to operate upon us” (T 1.4.7.11).
requires us to adjust our confidence levels in “every” new inferential judgment we form. The Title Principle permits us to retain our confidence. The two norms are at odds, and Hume himself subscribes only to the Title Principle.

I agree that if the Title Principle is Hume’s final epistemic norm, overriding the Corrective Norm, then it would save us from epistemic skepticism about inferences. However, the Title Principle appears only much later (T 1.4.7.11). The non-skeptical reading of Treatise 1.4.1 which hinges upon an epistemic construal of the Title Principle can only be fully addressed in the context of a full interpretation of Treatise 1.4.7. In Treatise 1.4.1 Hume endorses only the Corrective Norm without any hint of restriction. Furthermore, I argue later (in Chapter 6) that the Title Principle is not an epistemic norm (a norm of philosophy), but a merely practical norm. The Title Principle practically permits us to ignore the Corrective Norm under certain conditions, but it does not epistemologically permit us to do so. So it eliminates the threat of practical skepticism, but not of epistemic skepticism.

4.1.2.2 “Hume does not suspend his inferential beliefs.”

Second, non-skeptical readers point out that Hume specifically denies that either he or anyone else can suspend their inferential beliefs.

Shou’d it here be ask’d me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument, which I seem to take such pains to inculcate, and whether I be really one of those sceptics, who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in any thing possest of any measures of truth and falsehood; I shou’d reply, that this question is entirely
superfluous, and that neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion. (T 1.4.1.7)

But if Hume does not suspend his inferential beliefs, he must not think that his beliefs are epistemically unjustified. That is, the fact that Hume does not suspend his inferential beliefs shows that in general he does not think the argument is sound. More specifically, he does not regard himself as obliged to follow the Corrective Norm and reduce his confidence levels below the belief threshold.\(^{218}\)

Hume certainly does insist that no one is psychologically capable of suspending their inferential beliefs. But it does not follow that he does not think we ought to suspend our inferential beliefs. We may simply be psychologically incapable of doing our epistemic duty.\(^{219}\)

As I have pointed out in my exposition of Hume’s epistemology, he distinguishes psychological strength from epistemic justification. Beliefs produced by “education” are frequently incorrigible, but they are nevertheless condemned by philosophers, since they often contradict reason and themselves (T 1.3.9.17-19; cf. Chapter 1.2.1). The vulgar frequently form prejudicial beliefs of which, whatever their psychological strength, the philosophers disapprove (T 1.3.13.7-18; cf. Chapter 2.2.6). With respect to Treatise 1.4.1, we must distinguish between the two questions. The first question is, “Psychologically, does the iterative application of the Corrective Norm cause us to suspend our inferential

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\(^{218}\) Morris, “Hume’s Scepticism about Reason,” 55; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 323-324

\(^{219}\) Schmitt thinks that, because Hume does suspend judgment in inferential beliefs, he does not endorse the Norm of Reduction (which I have called the Corrective Norm). Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 323-324. But Schmitt himself points out a major textual problem with his view. Hume says that the reason he does not suspend his beliefs is not because he disbelieves the Norm of Reduction, but because he is psychologically unable to sustain his confidence in a long chain of reasoning. Ibid. 334-335. Schmitt himself says “I see no way to defuse the apparent inconsistency here”—that is, the inconsistency between Hume’s explanation of the issue, and Schmitt’s own. Ibid. 335.
beliefs?” Hume answers this question in the negative. But this does not entail any particular answer to the second question, which is, “Epistemologically, should the iterative application of the Corrective Norm cause us to suspend our inferential beliefs?” And in point of fact, Hume answers this second question affirmatively: “all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence” (T 1.4.1.6).

4.1.2.3 “Hume is primarily making a point about descriptive psychology.”

Third, non-skeptical readers claim that Hume’s primary aim is to make a point in descriptive psychology; whatever evaluative epistemic implications his conclusions may have (if any) are secondary. Hume himself seems to say as much:

My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, that all our reasonings concerning cause 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…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 suspense of judgment. (T 1.4.1.8)

In the preceding quotation Hume announces that he intends “only” to prove two psychological theses. First, he intends to prove that causal inferences are only derived

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220Garrett, Cognition, 227-228; Owen, “Scepticism with Regard to Reason,” especially 118-121; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 317-318. Morris says that Hume’s goal is to reject a certain “intellectualist” model of the mind. Morris, “Hume’s Scepticism about Reason,” 55-58. This sounds like a project in descriptive psychology. But Morris’ Hume really rejects a certain model of “rationally reflective epistemic agents,” which is not merely descriptive of how reason does work, but how it ought to work. This is especially clear in Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 102-106. Morris’ Hume does not merely reject a set of descriptive claims, but rejects the Corrective Norm.
from nothing but custom. Second, he intends to prove that that the difference between entertaining and believing a proposition lies only in the degree of force and vivacity. If these theses were not true, then we would recursively self-correct our judgments until we had no inferential beliefs. If causal inference were derived from something more or other than associative principles, and if assent amounted to something other than the transference of force and vivacity in accordance with those associative principles, then the length and abstruseness of a chain of reasoning would constitute no barrier to assent. But in fact, the length and abstruseness of a chain of reasoning do constitute a barrier to assent, and we do retain our inferential beliefs. So Hume’s two psychological theses about causal reasoning and belief are confirmed.

I gladly agree that Hume does intend to defend these two theses of descriptive psychology. But this concession does not entail that Hume does not also make a skeptical epistemic point. Hume’s argument shows that we psychologically cannot follow a skeptical chain of reasoning that we epistemologically ought to follow. Our inability to follow the Corrective Norm (which Hume endorses) proves that belief is actually a peculiar manner of conceiving ideas, with sufficient force and vivacity. Force and vivacity cannot transfer through long chains of argument (howsoever sound these arguments may be) (T 1.4.1.9-10). So we cannot hold all of the beliefs that we ought to. Hume says:

But as experience will sufficiently convince any one, who thinks it worth while to try, that tho’ he can find no error in the foregoing arguments, yet he still continues to believe, and think, and reason as usual, he may safely conclude, that his
reasoning and belief is some sensation or peculiar manner of conception, which
‘tis impossible for mere ideas and reflections to destroy. (T 1.4.1.8)

There is “no error in the foregoing arguments”: they are sound, and epistemologically we
ought to accept them. But we are psychologically unable to submit to their conclusion,
and this confirms Hume’s theory of causal reasoning and belief. 221

4.1.2.4 “Hume is using ‘evidence’ to denote belief strength, not epistemic
grounds.”

Fourth, non-skeptical readers insist that in Treatise 1.4.1, Hume uses the word
“evidence” as a synonym for “evidentness,” not as a normative epistemic term. 222 Put
another way, these readers take “evidence” to denote the psychological strength of a
belief, not its epistemologically justifying grounds. This crucially determines what Hume
means when he says that the recursive self-corrections of reason diminish the “original
evidence” of the first inference (T 1.4.1.8, 1.4.1.9). He says that

When I reflect on the natural fallibility of my judgment, I have less confidence in
my opinions, than when I only consider the objects concerning which I reason; and when
I proceed still farther, to turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation I make of
my faculties, all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total
extinction of belief and evidence. (T 1.4.1.6, italics mine)

221 This is basically Meeker’s reading. Meeker, “Hume’s Iterative Probability Argument,” 233-238. Meeker
states the point in terms of “evidence,” which, as I discuss below, I take in a somewhat different sense than
he does.
222 Garrett, Cognition, 228; Owen, Hume’s Reason, 185-188; Owen, “Scepticism with Regard to Reason,”
102, 116, 131-2 n. 33. Meeker argues for an epistemic meaning of “evidence.” Meeker, “Hume’s Iterative
Probability Argument,” 224-227.
Hume uses “evidence” here interchangeably with “confidence in my opinions,” and with the diminution of “belief.” The argument proves therefore that the recursive self-corrections of reason extinguish the strength of our inferential beliefs, but not their justification.

The debate over the meaning of “evidence” is not as important as it may seem. I think that Kevin Meeker rightly points out that Hume uses “evidence” as a term of epistemic evaluation at least sometimes, as in his famous assertion that “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence” (EHU 10.4). But it does not follow that Hume always uses “evidence” in this way. In Treatise 1.4.1, I incline towards the view of Garrett and Owen that “evidence” means only belief-strength or confidence.

However, as with preceding two objections, the mere fact that Hume is making a psychological point does not preclude his also making a distinct epistemic point. In the passage quote above, the epistemological point stands, even granting that “evidence” means only “belief-strength.” In the statement “all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence,” the normative epistemic force lies in the expression “all the rules of logic require,” not in the word “evidence.” The statement means “Epistemic norms require a total extinction of confidence.”

4.2 Hume’s Skeptical Arguments against Belief in Body

4.2.1 Overview of the arguments

Hume targets at least four different versions of belief in continued and distinct existences (or, for short, “body”) in Treatise 1.4.2-4. Three of the versions (the vulgar belief, the philosophical system of double existences, and the modern philosophy) stand
in a genetic relationship to one another. We first naturally adopt the vulgar view. When we see that the vulgar view meets with epistemic defeat, we then naturally adopt the philosophical system of double existences. When we see that the philosophical system of double existences meets with epistemic defeat, we then adopt the modern philosophy. The modern philosophy, as it turns out, is unintelligible. The outline from the previous chapter shows the genetic relationship of the successive views.

*Step 1:* The “vulgar” belief is that the very perceptions which are present to our senses, continue to existence when they are not present to our senses. The vulgar belief is narrowly natural (it arises from permanent, irresistible, and universal principles of the imagination), and is defeasibly justified (T 1.4.2.1-44; cf. EHU 12.7-8).

*Step 2:* The vulgar belief faces a rebutting defeater from causal reasoning which renders it overall unjustified (T 1.4.2.45; cf. EHU 12.9).

*Step 3:* The belief in the philosophical system of double existences emerges naturally from reflection on the defeat of the vulgar belief (T 1.4.4.46-55; cf. EHU 12.10-14). The double existence theory holds that the perceptions which are present to our senses are not themselves continued and distinct existences, but are caused by continued and distinct existences which exactly resemble them in every respect. The system of double existences is not even defeasibly justified.
**Step 4:** A strong inductive argument leads from the system of double existences to “the modern philosophy,” the belief that continued and distinct existences have only primary qualities, and that secondary qualities are mind-dependent (T 1.4.4.3-5).

**Step 5:** But primary qualities without secondary qualities are inconceivable, so “the modern philosophy” is necessarily false (T 1.4.4.6-15; cf. EHU 12.15).

By Step 5, belief in an external world does not even have the semblance of a defense. Every avenue of rehabilitation or refinement has run into a skeptical impasse.

A fourth version of belief in body, “the antient philosophy,” stands somewhat alone (T 1.4.3). It does not fit into the genetic account of the natural succession of beliefs I have outlined above. The “Peripatetic” philosophers account for the changing qualities of allegedly identical objects by positing an unintelligible substratum in which those qualities inhere. Hume bluntly asserts that what we think of as bodies are bundles of sensible qualities (T 1.4.3.2). The claims that these bundles are simple (that the qualities are identical with one another) at a time, and that changing bundles are identical over time, are evident contradictions. “The antient philosophy” is not even defeasibly justified. Hume does not even allude to the Peripatetic theory in the first *Enquiry*. I do not think that the Peripatetic philosophy is ever really a live option for Hume, and I will not discuss it further.

In what follows, I explain Hume’s skeptical arguments against the three genetically related versions of belief in body, covering Steps 2-5 in the outline above. I
covered Step 1 (the natural origin and defeasible justification of the vulgar belief in body) in the preceding chapter.

4.2.2 Against the vulgar belief (Step 2)

After completing his description of the origin of the vulgar belief in body, Hume gives a rebutting defeater against it (T 1.4.2.45). Hume precedes the argument itself with general description of the dialectical situation. The vulgar belief is produced by “the natural propensity of the imagination” (T 1.4.2.44). This statement indicates that the vulgar belief is defeasibly justified. However, “A very little reflection and philosophy” exposes its falsity (T 1.4.2.44). We reject the vulgar belief “When we compare experiments, and reason a little upon them” (1.4.2.44). These statements indicate that Hume has on hand a rebutting defeater from reason. (Recall that a rebutting defeater for some belief $P$ is a reason to believe not-$P$).

It is worth quoting in full Hume’s crucial paragraph refuting the vulgar view:

’Twill first be proper to observe a few of those experiments, which convince us, that our perceptions are not possest of any independent existence. When we press one eye with a finger, we immediately perceive all the objects to become double, and one half of them to be remov’d from their common and natural position. But as we do not attribute a continu’d existence to both these perceptions, and as they are both of the same nature, we clearly perceive, that all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits. This opinion is confirm’d by the seeming encrease and diminution of objects, according to their distance; by the apparent alterations in their figure; by the
changes in their colour and other qualities from our sickness and distempers; and
by an infinite number of other experiments of the same kind; from all which we
learn, that our sensible perceptions are not possesst of any distinct or independent
existence. (T 1.4.2.45)

Hume’s argument seems to run like this (filling in some implicit premises):

[1] At least some perceptions do not continue to exist when they are not present to
our senses. (“we do not attribute a continu’d existence to both these perceptions,”
T 1.4.2.45).

[2] But the existence of perceptions is causally independent of our sensing them
only if they continue to exist when not present to our senses (T 1.4.2.2).224

[3] Therefore, these perceptions causally depend for their existence upon being
present to our senses. (From [1] and [2])

[4] But those perceptions that do not continue to exist, are of the same nature as
other sensory perceptions. (“they are both of the same nature,” T 1.4.2.45).

[5] Like effects have like causes (fourth rule of causal reasoning, T 1.3.15.6).

[6] Therefore, all sense perceptions depend for their existence on being present to
our senses. (From [4] and [5])

Whether or not this argument is actually sound is not important for present
purposes.225 The important point is that Hume thinks it is sound: “The natural
consequence of this reasoning shou’d be, that our perceptions have no more a continu’d

224 Hume asserts a biconditional relationship between continued existence and causal independence: “For if
the objects of our senses continue to exist, even when they are not perceiv’d, their existence is of course
independent of and distinct from the perception; and vice versa, if their existence be independent of the
perception and distinct from it, they must continue to exist, even tho’ they be not perceiv’d” (T 1.4.2.2).
225 For critiques, see Stroud, Hume, 111; Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 272-3. Fogelin simply says “this
is little more than a gesture in the direction of an argument.” Fogelin, Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 59.
than an independent existence” (T 1.4.2.46). He draws the conclusion that none of our perceptions endure when they vanish from our senses.

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume presents a modified version of the argument against the vulgar belief in body. He compresses it into a single sentence:

The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: But the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: It was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. (EHU 12.9)

I take it that Hume’s argument runs as follows:

[7] Our perceptions change when we move. ("The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it")

[8] If perceptions are identical with objects, then objects also change when we move. (This suppressed premise follows from the Indiscernibility of Identicals and [7]).

[9] But objects do not change when we move. ("But the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration.")

[10] Therefore, our perceptions are not identical with objects. ("It was, therefore, nothing but its image, which as present to the mind.")

Premise [9] makes no appearance in *Treatise* 1.4.2.45. Premise [9] takes for granted that there are continued and distinct existences. In the *Treatise*, Hume does not make this assumption. But both versions of the argument conclude that none of those perceptions which are present to our senses are enduring, mind-independent objects. So the vulgar belief faces a rebutting defeater.
It is worth pointing out that Step 2 is the most important in Hume’s entire discussion of external world skepticism. Only the vulgar belief in body is even defeasibly justified. As I noted earlier, seemingly all commentators deny the defeasible justification of the vulgar belief. Consequently, they often either fail to even recognize a distinct and independent skeptical argument in Treatise 1.4.2.45, or else treat it in somewhat cursory fashion—as if it were simply the finishing coup de grace on a mortally wounded theory. On my reading, Treatise 1.4.2.45 is not only Hume’s last objection to the vulgar belief, but it is his first and only objection to it.

Furthermore, Hume’s critique of the philosophical system of double existences depends upon the defeat of the vulgar belief. The system of double existences lacks even defeasible justification just because it is an attempt to partially retain the defeated belief of the vulgar. The argument of Treatise 1.4.2.45 rebuts the vulgar view at the same time as it psychologically prompts and epistemologically undermines the philosophical system of double existences. When Hume reviews the skeptical objection to belief in body in the last section of Book 1, he highlights the conflict between causal reasoning and belief in body:

226 Mounce does not even note the defeater argument. Mounce, Hume’s Naturalism, 53-58. Fogelin does not mention it in his earlier work. See Fogelin, Hume’s Skepticism, 64-92 (chapters 6-7). Garrett briefly notes the argument, but does not regard it as skeptical in the epistemological sense. Garrett, Cognition, 211. Several commentators take very brief note of it after extended discussions of what they regard as more serious defects in the vulgar belief. See Stroud, Hume, 110-111; Loeb, Stability, 152; Noonan, Hume on Knowledge, 182; Winkler, “Hume on Scepticism and the Senses,” 154-155.

Fogelin does note the significance of Treatise 1.4.2.45 in his later work. Fogelin, “Hume’s Skepticism,” 227; Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 58-9, 79. Broughton seems to recognize that T 1.4.2.45 contains Hume’s crucial skeptical argument against belief in body. Broughton, “Hume’s Naturalism and His Skepticism,” 430. Schmitt recognizes that Hume gives no basis for denying the vulgar belief other than the argument of T 1.4.2.45. Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 266. Schmitt goes on to argue that the falsity of the vulgar belief leads Hume to reject the reliability of the propensity that produces this belief, which in turn leads him to conclude that the belief is not even defeasibly justified. Ibid. 268-9. Here Schmitt’s reliabilist interpretation leads him to assess the epistemic significance of the argument differently than I do.
But tho’ these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind, yet in some circumstances they are [footnote: Sect. 4] directly contrary, nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu’d existence of matter. (T 1.4.7.4)

So the text indicates that reason’s defeat of the vulgar belief lies at the heart of Hume’s skepticism about continued and distinct existences.

4.2.3 Against the system of double existences (Step 3).

Reflection upon the causal argument against the continued, distinct existence of perceptions naturally leads “philosophers” to posit a system of double existences (T 1.4.2.46). As I discussed in Chapter 3, the philosophers “distinguish betwixt perceptions and objects, of which the former are suppos’d to be interrupted, and perishing, and different at every different return; the latter to be uninterrupted, and to preserve a continu’d existence and identity” (T 1.4.2.46). Natural principles also produce two

227 For the conflict between causal inference and belief in body, Hume footnotes T 1.4.4 rather than T 1.4.2, which might seem to militate against my contention that his crucial skeptical argument against reason occurs in T 1.4.2.45. But I think Hume has another good rhetorical reason for citing T 1.4.4. While he himself may hold that the argument of T 1.4.2.45 already vitiates the epistemic status of the philosophical system, he realizes that his interlocutors may not. They may think that the system of double existences does not originate in the bankrupt attempt to salvage the vulgar belief. Perhaps (in spite of Hume’s arguments) they think that it does have a primary recommendation either to reason or to the imagination, and thus has at least defeasible justification. In this case, Hume’s defeater arguments against the philosophical system, presented in T 1.4.4 (Steps 4-5 of my outline), more effectively highlight the inescapable conflict between reason and belief in body. Just because he only footnotes T 1.4.4 (the defeat of the philosophical system) does not mean that he exempts the vulgar belief from the conflict with reason. Aside from the footnote, the sentence itself makes an unqualified, universal assertion that all forms of belief in body contradict reason.

228 Loeb mistakenly asserts that the philosophical system of double existences posits objects which are “specifically different” from perceptions, so that the philosophical system is unintelligible. Loeb, Stability, 163-164. Hume clearly asserts just the opposite. Already Hume has affirmed that “tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions” (T 1.2.6.8). So Hume says that the adherents of the system of double existences “arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions, to which they attribute these qualities. I say, a new set of perceptions: For we may well
other subsidiary features of the philosophical system. First, the philosophers assume that objects resemble mere perceptions (T 1.4.2.54). (By “mere perceptions” I mean those perceptions which are present to our senses, in contrast to that supposed class of perceptions which are objects). Second, the philosophers assume that each perception is caused by an object that resembles it (T 1.4.2.55). In the first Enquiry, Hume repeats that reflection on the defeat of the vulgar belief naturally produces a belief in the system of double existences:

no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, this house and that tree, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. (EHU 12.9)

Here Hume reiterates the first subsidiary principle (that objects resemble mere perceptions), though not the second (that each mere perception is caused by an exactly resembling object). But it is safe to assume that this is what he has in mind.

Hume clearly indicates the negative epistemic status of the philosophical system of double existences. He emphasizes that it “has no primary recommendation either to reason or the imagination” (T 1.4.2.46). On the contrary, it “acquires all its influence on the imagination” from the vulgar system (T 1.4.2.46). The philosophical system is “liable to the same difficulties” as the vulgar system, “and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition” (T 1.4.2.56). The

suppose in general, but “tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions” (T 1.4.2.56). Hume does not say that the system of double existences involves an inconceivable supposition, but an arbitrary and unsupportable supposition. He insists that we construe the system of double existences as an intelligible position, and the only way to do this is to take its “objects” as a postulated set of perceptions, rather than as items “specifically different” from perceptions. Winkler proves this point decisively. Winkler, “Hume on Scepticism and the Senses,” 136-9.
philosophers, however, “arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions,” never present to any mind, which they construe as objects (T 1.4.2.56). The arbitrariness of positing of a new set of perceptions to serve as objects further vitiates credibility of the philosophical system of double existences.

In the *Enquiry* he draws the same negative conclusion about the epistemic status of the system of double existences as he did in the *Treatise*. In the *Enquiry*, as I noted above, Hume grants the assumption that there are mind-independent objects (see Premise [9]). So he cannot criticize the double existence theory on the grounds that it arbitrarily invents this new set of perceptions/objects. However, he can and does criticize the double existence theory for the gratuitous assumption that mind-independent objects cause exactly-resembling perceptions which appear to our senses. The theory originates neither from reason nor from narrowly natural non-ratiocinative principles of the imagination.

So far, then, are we necessitated by reasoning to contradict or depart from the primary instincts of nature, and to embrace a new system with regard to the evidence of our senses. But here philosophy finds herself extremely embarrassed, when she would justify this new system, and obviate the cavils and objections of the sceptics. She can no longer plead the infallible and irresistible instinct of nature: For that led us to a quite different system, which is acknowledged fallible and even erroneous. And to justify this pretended philosophical system, by a chain of clear and convincing argument, or even any appearance of argument, exceeds the power of all human capacity. (EHU 12.10)

The vulgar belief originates in “the primary instincts of nature,” although it turns out to be false. But the double existence theory does not. Moreover, as Hume explains in the next four paragraphs, the system of double existences has nothing to recommend it to
reason (EHU 12.11-14). The source of the theory is not a defeasibly justifying principle of the imagination.

At the close of Treatise 1.4.2, Hume concludes that the vulgar and philosophical beliefs in body comprise a “confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions” (1.4.2.56). Hume intends 1.4.2 (concerning the senses) to have the same negative epistemic result as 1.4.1 (concerning the understanding): “‘Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavor to justify them in that manner” (1.4.2.57). Although epistemologically defeated, these beliefs are nonetheless psychologically incorrigible:

Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them; and take it for granted, whatever, may be the reader’s opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world. (T 1.4.2.57)

4.2.4 Against the modern philosophy (Steps 4-5)

In Treatise 1.4.4, Hume takes the philosophical system of the double existence of perceptions as his starting point. He shows that even if we grant for the sake of argument that this system is defeasibly justified, belief in body still crumbles before skeptical defeaters. The skeptical challenge unfolds in two stages. First, Hume argues that a good causal inference leads from the system of double existences to the belief that continued and distinct existences have only primary qualities, not the secondary qualities that
appear to our senses (T 1.4.3-5). Hume calls this belief “the modern philosophy,” referring of course to Descartes and especially Locke.²²⁹

The fundamental principle of that philosophy is the opinion concerning colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv’d from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects. (T 1.4.3)

The argument from the system of double existences to the modern philosophy is “that deriv’d from the variations of those impressions, even while the external object, to all appearance, continues the same” (1.4.3). We might formalize the argument of Treatise 1.4.4 as follows:

[11] “The same object cannot, at the same time, be endow’d with different qualities of the same sense.” (For example, a cloud cannot simultaneously be white and orange in the same place).

[12] “[T]he same quality cannot resemble impressions entirely different.” (For example, no quality can resemble both a white and an orange color-impression).

[13] Successive impressions from the same sense modality, which we suppose are caused by one unchanging object, are entirely different.²³⁰ (For example, in the course of a sunset, we successively experience white and orange color-

²²⁹ Norton and Norton 480
²³⁰ Hume gives many examples to justify premise [13]. We have incompatible impressions supposedly caused by a single unchanging object under the following circumstances: “Upon the different situations of our health: A man in a malady feels a disagreeable taste in meats, which before pleas’d him the most. Upon the different complexions and constitutions of men: That seems bitter to one, which is sweet to another. Upon the difference of their external situation and position: Colours reflected from the clouds change according to the distance of the clouds, and according to the angle they make with the eye and luminous body. Fire also communicates the sensation of pleasure at one distance, and that of pain at another. Instances of this kind are very numerous and frequent” (T 1.4.4.3).
impressions which we presume are caused by an unchanging cloud. The white
and orange color-impressions are entirely different from each other).

[14] The qualities of one unchanging object cannot resemble all of the entirely
different impressions which it supposedly causes. (From 12, 13). (For example,
the cloud cannot possess a quality which resembles both the white and orange
color-impressions which we presume it causes).

[15] Either objects change their qualities whenever our sense perceptions of them
change, or else they cause sense perceptions which they do not resemble.

[16] But objects do not change whenever our sense perceptions of them change.
(This virtually denies the existence of enduring mind-independent objects).

[17] So objects cause sense perceptions which they do not resemble. (From 15,
16)

[18] “Now from like effects we presume like causes.”

[19] The impressions which are not caused by a resembling object “are in
appearance nothing different from the other impressions of colour, sound, &c.”

[20] “We conclude, therefore, that they are, all of them, deriv’d from a like
origin”—that is, we conclude that all (secondary) impressions have non-
resembling causes. (From 18, 19).

Hume goes on to explain how the claims of the “modern philosophy” then follow: “For
upon the removal of sounds, colours, heat, cold, and other sensible qualities, from the
rank of continu’d independent existences, we are reduc’d merely to what are call’d
primary qualities, as the only real ones, of which we have any adequate notion” (T
1.4.4.5).
For my purposes, the actual soundness of this argument is irrelevant. Hume treats it as valid. On my reading Hume himself accepts all of the premises except [16], which assumes the existence of enduring mind-independent objects. The adherent of the double existence theory, however, accepts [16], and presumably would accept the other premises as well. Hume regards this as a successful skeptical *ad hominem* argument against the adherent of the double existence theory.

The important point about the above argument is what it shows about the epistemic status both of the system of double existences and of the modern philosophy. On the one hand, Hume has given a causal argument against the system of double existences. He has provided a rebutting defeater for the claim that our mere perceptions are caused by resembling objects. On the other hand, Hume has exposed the psychological origin of the belief in the modern philosophy in a way that shows it has no defeasible justification. Like the system of double existences, the modern philosophy arises only as a refinement on another unjustified theory—a refinement that does not rehabilitate its epistemic status. The modern theory has no primary recommendation either to reason or to the imagination.

In the second stage of the argument, Hume delivers the death blow to the modern philosophy. He argues (a la Berkeley) that primary qualities without secondary qualities are inconceivable, so belief in bodies with only primary qualities is necessarily false (T 1.4.4.6-15; cf. EHU 12.15).

I assert, that instead of explaining the operations of external objects by its means, we utterly annihilate all these objects, and reduce ourselves to the opinions of the most extravagant skepticism concerning them. If colours, sounds, tastes, and
smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive of is posset of a real, 
continu’d, and independent existence; not even motion, extension, and solidity, 
which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on. (T 1.4.4.6)

Hume’s argument from the primary/secondary quality distinction to the unintelligibility 
of matter runs as follows. He argues that apart from the secondary qualities, we have no 
concept of the primary qualities of motion, extension, and solidity, and without either the 
secondary or primary qualities, we have no concept of objects. Our idea of motion 
depends upon our idea of an object that moves; an object in turn must be defined 
exclusively in terms of extension and solidity (T 1.4.4.7). But our concept of extension 
depends upon our concepts of color or solidity (T 1.4.4.8). So the idea of motion, which 
depends upon the idea of objects, must derive from the concept of solidity. But the idea 
of solidity itself also depends upon the idea of objects, so it cannot provide materials for 
defining objects (T 1.4.4.9). Without relying upon the secondary qualities, or the primary 
qualities of motion, extension, or solidity, we have no more materials with which to 
define objects. “Our modern philosophy, therefore, leaves us no just or satisfactory idea 
of solidity; nor consequently of matter” (T 1.4.4.9).

In the first Enquiry, Hume does not present the causal argument from the system 
of double existences to the modern philosophy (the first stage of Treatise 1.4.4, and Step 
4 in my outline above). He simply moves directly to the second stage, saying that “It is 
universally allowed by modern enquirers, that all the sensible qualities of objects, such as 
hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, &c. are merely secondary, and exist not in the objects 
themselves, but are perceptions of the mind, without any external archetype or model, 
which they represent” (EHU 12.15). He then gives the Berkeleian argument against the
modern philosophy: “If this be allowed, with regard to secondary qualities, it must also follow, with regard to the supposed primary qualities of extension and solidity; nor can the latter be any more entitled to that denomination than the former” (EHU 12.15). In a footnote Hume explicitly credits Berkeley with the argument.

Hume closes the discussion in the *Enquiry* with a summary of the two “philosophical objection[s]” to “the evidence of sense” (or, more accurately, “the opinion of external existence”) (EHU 12.16).

[T]he first philosophical objection [is]… that such an opinion, if rested on natural instinct, is contrary to reason, and if referred to reason, is contrary to natural instinct, and at the same time carries no rational evidence with it, to convince an impartial enquirer. (EHU 12.16)

The natural, instinctive belief in body faces defeat from reason. However, the theory of double existence which results from the defeat of the instinctive belief is not natural or instinctive, and cannot be supported by rational argument. It has no primary recommendation either to the philosophically sanctioned principles of the imagination or to the faculty of reason. The second objection is the Berkeleian argument against the modern philosophy:

The second objection goes farther, and represents this opinion as contrary to reason: at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object. Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so
imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it. (EHU 12.16)

4.2.5 Non-skeptical readings

I pointed out in the previous chapter that Garrett and Owen deny that Hume makes any epistemic evaluations prior to the enunciation of the Title Principle (at T 1.4.7.11). It follows on their reading that Hume neither condemns nor approves of the epistemic status of the vulgar belief in body in 1.4.2. I pointed out that the Title Principle gives us no resources for determining whether belief in body is defeasibly justified, since belief in body is not produced by reason.

The Title Principle does however appear to provide us with resources for dealing with the rebutting defeater from reason against the vulgar belief in body. The Title Principle says

Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any title to operate upon us. (T 1.4.7.11)

The just conclusion of the argument from reason (that there are no mind-independent objects) in Treatise 1.4.2.45 runs so completely against the grain of our propensities that we are constrained to invent a philosophical system of double existences in order to avoid it (T 1.4.2.46-52). So reason, in this case, does not mix with a propensity and therefore has no title to operate upon us. If the Title Principle is an epistemic principle, then it defuses the defeater of the vulgar belief in body, and rehabilitates its positive epistemic status.

In Chapter 6, I argue that the Title Principle is not, for Hume, a philosophically acceptable norm. But in the meantime, it is worth pointing out that Hume does not introduce it here in *Treatise* 1.4.2. On the contrary, there is every reason to think that for Hume, the deliverances of reason defeat the deliverances of non-ratiocinative belief-producing propensities. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the authority of reason lies at the heart of philosophy as a normative method, for Hume. Besides, if reason did not constitute an epistemic defeater for the vulgar belief in body, then we would have no impetus to invent the philosophical system of double existences as palliative remedy for our cognitive dissonance. The philosophers would simply ignore reason and hold onto the naïve realism of the vulgar. So at least in *Treatise* 1.4.2, Hume does not hold to the Title Principle as an epistemic norm.

Garrett himself makes a brief and puzzling application of the Title Principle to the vulgar belief in body. He writes that the Title Principle

allows us to accept those principles of the imagination that are “permanent, irresistible, and universal”—such as inductive inference and the belief in continued and distinct existences—because even lively reason that mixes with our propensities cannot ultimately destroy their force.\(^\text{232}\)

It is not clear to me why Garrett thinks that the Title Principle allows us to retain beliefs which run *counter* to lively reason that mixes with a propensity. The Title Principle says that in such a circumstance reason “ought to be assented to.” Garrett’s statement above seems to imply that lively reason that mixes with a propensity does run counter to inductive inference and belief in body. In that case, the Title Principle says we ought to assent to reason, not those core beliefs. Furthermore, since (according to Garrett) the Title

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Principle sanctions both inductive inference and belief in body, it is not clear how it handles with Hume’s inductive argument against belief in body (T 1.4.2.45). At least in this case, you have to choose between inductive inference and belief in body.

4.3 Conclusion

According to Hume, our core beliefs in mind-independent objects and inferences face insuperable defeaters from reason. These beliefs, so indispensably central both to common life and to the science of man, are epistemologically unjustified overall. Hume therefore faces the acute question of how anyone can move on from this skeptical situation.

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233 For a critique of Garrett’s application of the Title Principle to belief in body from a different perspective than mine, but with similar conclusions, see Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 369-370 n. 40.
CHAPTER 5: HUME’S MERELY RHETORICAL SKEPTICAL CHALLENGES

Introduction

Hume is not always clear about which of his arguments pose a skeptical threat to our core beliefs. The ambiguity takes two forms. First, Hume sometimes appears to draw a skeptical conclusion from his arguments that at other places he does not draw or specifically denies. That is, Hume sometimes appears to conclude from a given argument that a targeted belief is epistemologically unjustified, while elsewhere he appears to conclude otherwise, from the same argument. Second, Hume at times seems to register different assessments about whether or not a discredited belief is a core belief—that is, whether or not an unjustified target belief is indispensably important to ordinary life and science.

These ambiguities about his real skeptical threats create correlative ambiguities about other areas of his philosophy. Does Hume’s epistemology require support from reason for every justified belief? Usually Hume says “no,” but sometimes he seems to imply “yes.” Does Hume regard the unintelligible belief in objective necessary connections as a core belief? Usually Hume says “no,” but occasionally he seems to imply “yes.” Does Hume regard the arguments for infinite divisibility as sound? Usually Hume says “no,” but at one point he implies “yes.”
Commentators rarely take up these problems, for various reasons. For one thing, as I noted in the Introduction, interpretations of Hume’s epistemology and skepticism often to confine themselves either to the *Treatise* or the first *Enquiry*, without attempting to integrate the two. This makes it easier to overlook some of the ambiguities. But even within those restricted parameters, commentators often focus on certain skeptical threats to the total neglect of other seeming skeptical threats.234 Finally, a whole class of interpreters denies that any of Hume’s arguments successfully show that his core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified by his own lights.235 This leveling strategy eliminates the appearance of contradictory epistemic evaluations.

In this chapter I show that Hume sometimes suggests that arguments pose a skeptical threat to core beliefs, even though he himself does not take them to by his own lights. In other words, he sometimes makes what I call *merely rhetorical skeptical challenges*. In the case of merely rhetorical skeptical challenges, either the argument does not successfully show that a targeted belief is epistemologically unjustified, or else it successfully shows that a dispensable, unimportant belief is unjustified. But Hume

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234 For example, Fogelin omits all discussion of *Treatise* 1.4.7.5. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*. Owen focuses mainly on the argument in *Treatise* 1.4.1 and the dangerous dilemma to which it gives rise (T1.4.7.7), but omits discussion of *Treatise* 1.4.7.3 or 1.4.7.5. Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, especially Chapter 9. Meeker focuses exclusively on *Treatise* 1.4.1 and its implications in *Hume’s Radical Scepticism*, neglecting 1.4.7.3 and 1.4.7.5. Many more examples could be given.

235 For example, Garrett finds five skeptical (that is, doubt-inducing) considerations in *Treatise* 1.4.7 and treats them all as equally real contributors to Hume’s sceptical crisis. Garrett, *Cognition*, 204-232; *Hume*, 218-227. Note however that for Garrett, Hume’s sceptical crisis is not epistemic, but psychological. The skeptical considerations induce doubt, but Hume never asserts that, epistemologically, they ought to induce us to suspend our beliefs. Morris, like other *reductio* readers, distances Hume from all of the apparent skeptical threats in *Treatise* 1.4.7.3-7. Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 89-110. These arise only for a “conscientious traditional metaphysician,” not for Hume himself. Ibid 107. Morris also therefore gives all of Hume’s sceptical considerations the same epistemic weight—nil. My reading actually resembles Morris and other *reductio* readings insofar as I think that some of Hume’s sceptical threats only arise for projected interlocutors, not for himself. Against Morris however I have argued (Chapter 4) that some of Hume’s sceptical arguments against core beliefs do succeed by his own lights.
intentionally gives a contrary impression. We can contrast merely rhetorical skeptical challenges with Hume’s real or authentic skeptical challenges, which successfully challenge the epistemic justification of his core beliefs. I have explained Hume’s real skeptical challenges in Chapter 4.

This chapter serves my project in two ways. First, it answers an objection which could be raised to my reading of Hume’s epistemology. I argue that Hume does not demand rational support—that is, either demonstrative or probabilistic arguments—for epistemologically (philosophically) justified beliefs. Reason is not the only permanent, irresistible, and universal belief-producing principle that receives the sanction of the philosophers. But in some of the texts discussed below (see 5.1.1), Hume appears to countenance skeptical arguments that presuppose that all epistemologically justified beliefs must be supported by argument. So I need to reconcile these cases with my account of Hume’s natural belief epistemology. I argue that these arguments (and others, cf. 5.1.2-3) are merely rhetorical: Hume himself does not think that they successfully threaten any core beliefs, although he expects that many of his readers will.

Second, this chapter lays groundwork for Chapter 6 by raising a question which I answer there. Hume’s use of merely rhetorical arguments indicates that he does not stumble into epistemic skepticism by accident or in spite of his best efforts to avoid it. On the contrary, he drives his readers into a skeptical dilemma by any means available, even using arguments that he himself does not regard as compelling. This raises the question, “Why is Hume so intent on convincing us that some of our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified?” In Chapter 6 I answer that Hume uses epistemic
skepticism to motivate readers to adopt a moderate practical attitude toward the epistemic demands of philosophy.\textsuperscript{236}

First I list and explain the puzzling skeptical challenges that appear to stand in tension with Hume’s position as he develops it elsewhere (5.1). Then I argue that these skeptical challenges are merely rhetorical (5.2). Hume himself, by his own lights, does not think that the arguments which occasion these challenges actually pose a skeptical threat to our core beliefs.

5.1 The Puzzling Skeptical Challenges

5.1.1 Texts implying that production by reason is necessary for epistemic justification

In the preceding chapters I have argued that Hume does not regard production by the faculty of reason as a necessary condition for the epistemic justification of a belief. As long as a belief is produced by a permanent, irresistible, and universal principle of the imagination, it is at least defeasibly justified. In an important sense, inductive inferences are not produced in the first place by reason, but they are nonetheless defeasibly justified. Also defeasibly justified is the vulgar belief in “the senses”—more precisely, the belief that at least some of the perceptions present to our senses continued to exist when they are not present to our senses. These beliefs are produced by narrowly natural processes of which the philosophers approve.

\textsuperscript{236}Although I call these arguments “merely rhetorical,” I do not mean that they perform no philosophical work. They do the important work of motivating those readers who find them compelling to subordinate their philosophical pursuits to their practical interests. The arguments show such readers that they can adhere absolutely to their own philosophical standards only at the cost of giving up core beliefs which make life possible.
But in some texts, Hume seems to imply that production by reason is necessary for the epistemic justification of a belief, and that skeptical worries arise for any belief which is not so produced. The first such text occurs at the head of Hume’s catalogue of explanations for his frightened and confounded “forlorn solitude” and for his lack of confidence in further research in the final section of Book 1 of the Treatise (T 1.4.7.2-3).

After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou’d assent to it; and feel nothing but a strong propensity to consider objects strongly in that view, under which they appear to me. Experience is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. Habit is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future; and both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, make me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than others, which are not attended with the same advantages. Without this quality, by which the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others (which seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason) we cou’d never assent to any argument, nor carry our view beyond those few objects, which are present to our senses. Nay, even to these objects we cou’d never attribute any existence, but what was dependent on the senses; and must comprehend them entirely in that succession of perceptions, which constitutes our self or person. Nay farther, even with relation to that succession, we cou’d only admit of those perceptions, which are immediately present to our consciousness, nor cou’d those lively images, with which the memory presents us, be ever receiv’d as true pictures of past perceptions. The memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of ideas. (T 1.4.7.3)
In this passage, Hume points out that the vivifying propensity of the imagination which produces inferences is “trivial” and not “founded on reason.” The passage certainly seems to imply that in the absence of supporting argument, causal inferences lack epistemic justification. Moreover, it implies that belief in continuing and distinct existences is unjustified since it is produced only by the imagination, not by argument. Even memory beliefs succumb to this criticism. Hume has previously argued that inductive inferences and belief in body are produced by narrowly natural principles of the imagination, and are therefore defeasibly justified (see Chapter 3). He has everywhere taken the same for granted about memory, never hinting at any possible epistemic defect in it. The passage appears to represent an epistemic volte-face.

Hume makes the same move in the “Abstract” of the Treatise.

By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contained in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit.

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Garrett insists about all five of the skeptical considerations he finds in Treatise 1.4.7 that although they induce doubt, Hume does not conclude from them that their targets are epistemologically unjustified (or justified). Garrett, Cognition, Chapter 10; cf. also Garrett, Hume, Chapter 7. With respect to T 1.4.7.3 in particular, he points out that Hume does not “argue or assert that (i) inductive conclusions, (ii) claims of continued and distinct existence, or (iii) memories are unworthy of belief.” Garrett, Cognition, 214. I can agree with Garrett about T 1.4.7.3 (and related texts I cite below). Hume tries to refrain from out-and-out asserting something that he does not believe about the epistemic status of the target beliefs. However, I argue that Hume does conversationally imply or suggest that these target beliefs are unjustified. Garrett has a different explanation of this conversational implicature. He says that Hume is simply expressing, in “strictly reportorial language,” “a temporary feeling of diminished confidence in the three idea-enlivening mechanisms.” Garrett, Cognition, 215. Note however that after the Treatise, Hume still manages to convey the suggestion of skepticism, even though he is not reporting his emotions in these texts.

Singer notes how surprising it is that Hume should denigrate the epistemic status of the imagination, prior to citing any arguments that show its unreliability or weakness. Singer, “Hume’s Extreme Skepticism,” 599.
Nor is this all. When we believe any thing of external existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind. Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it. (A 27)

Hume is plainly referring back to his analysis of causal inference as the example par excellence of the “very skeptical” nature of the philosophy of the *Treatise*. These inferential beliefs are simply feelings produced by habit. Belief in body is also a feeling not produced by argument. The implication is that, because these beliefs are not produced by reason in the requisite way, they lack epistemic justification, leaving us in a skeptical predicament.

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume pitches his discussion of causal inference in terms of skepticism. He titles the relevant sections “Sceptical Doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding” (Section 4) and “Sceptical Solution of these Doubts” (Section 5). Hume’s “solution” to his doubts is a “sceptical solution” just because it does not rescue the epistemic justificatory status of inductive inference. Hume simply points out the psychological irresistibility and practical utility of causal inference, whatever its epistemic status (EHU 5.1-2).

Moreover, he gives these “sceptical doubts” about causal inference a prominent place in his catalogue of skeptical arguments in Section 12. “The sceptic,” he says, can make “philosophical objections” to causal inferences “which arise from…profound research” (EHU 12.22). Summarizing Sections 4 and 5, Hume says that the skeptic
justly insists…that we have no argument to convince us, that objects, which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise, in other instances, be conjoined in the same manner; and that nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful. (EHU 12.22)

The implication seems to be that since inductive inferential beliefs cannot be supported by argument, and are caused only by irresistible but fallible instinct, they are not epistemologically justified. Just as Hume already indicated in EHU 5.1-2, there is no epistemic or philosophical answer to this skeptical problem, no way to confer a positive epistemic status on inductive inference. There is only the practical response of Academic philosophy, which does not require us to adhere exclusively to justified propositional attitudes.

When Hume first puts forward his arguments that inductive inferences and belief in body are produced not by reason but by principles of the imagination (T 1.3.6 and T 1.4.2.14), he does not conclude that those beliefs are ipso facto epistemologically unjustified. But in the above texts, he does seem to draw a negative epistemic conclusion from the arguments. He implies that because our inductive, perceptual, and memorial beliefs are not produced by reason but by vivifying principles of the imagination, they are therefore epistemologically unjustified.239

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239 Schmitt takes Hume’s argument in T 1.4.7.3 as genuinely skeptical, but construes the skeptical threat differently than I have. He takes T 1.4.7.3 (together with the first sentence of T 1.4.7.4) to indicate that “the Manifest Contradiction [in T 1.4.7.4] demonstrates the unreliability of imaginative operations and thereby raises a doubt about the reliability, hence about the defeasibly justifying power, of causal inference.” Schmitt, Hume’s Epistemology, 346. He says nothing in particular about the new worries about perceptual belief and memory.
5.1.2 Objective necessary connections

Hume famously argues in *Treatise* 1.3.14 that causal necessity “is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects” (T 1.3.14.22). In fact, it is not “possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider’d as a quality in bodies” (ibid). Hume recognizes that his position is shocking.

I am sensible, that of all the paradoxes, which I have had, or shall hereafter have occasion to advance in the course of this treatise, the present one is the most violent…I am much afraid, that…with the generality of readers the bias of the mind will prevail, and give them a prejudice against the present doctrine. (T 1.3.14.24)

His position is shocking just because we have a broadly natural propensity to believe in (unintelligible) objective necessary connections. He explains that our false belief that “necessity and power lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them,” is due to our Propensity to Project (T 1.3.14.25).240 As I have pointed out elsewhere, the philosophers disapprove of this propensity; its deliverances lack even defeasible justification (T 1.4.3.11-1.4.4.2). The propensity itself is easily suppressed, and careful reflection dislodges its deliverances from among our beliefs.

In *Treatise* 1.3.14, Hume acknowledges that his argument refutes (exposes as false and as epistemologically unjustified) a widely held and broadly natural belief. In this sense, his argument does present a skeptical threat to a common belief. But Hume

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240 Hume signals that this Propensity to Project also leads us to think that sounds and smells have spatial location. In a footnote (T 1.3.14.25n32) he points forward to his discussion of this issue in T 1.4.5. But in T 1.4.5, Hume attributes the mistaken ascription of spatial location to what seems to be a distinct propensity—the Propensity to Add a Relation (T 1.4.5.12). As Hume notes in T 1.4.5.12, the Propensity to Add a Relation accounts for the representationalist belief that objects resemble the perceptions that they cause (cf. T 1.4.2.54-55).
does not use the language of “skepticism” in *Treatise* 1.3.14, because he does not regard the idea of objective necessary connection as entering into any core belief. In fact, from the very beginning of the *Treatise* he has signaled his contempt for the search for ultimate principles (T Intro 8-10). As for the unsatisfied desire to find these ultimate principles, it vanishes as soon as we see that the desired satisfaction is impossible (T Intro 8-10). He never indicates that that anything of importance is lost when we reject the idea of objective necessary connection. He presents his own alternative definitions of causation as fully adequate to the theoretical demands of common life and science (T 1.3.14.31).

But then in *Treatise* 1.4.7.5, Hume does seem to suggest that his argument against the very idea of necessary connections between objects poses a skeptical challenge to a belief of some importance. The despairing tone of *Treatise* 1.4.7.5 is unmistakable. Hume’s argument against objective necessary connections is presented as an example of the lack of “any degree of solidity and satisfaction in…our reasoning” (T 1.4.7.5). The argument “seems to turn into ridicule all our past pains and industry, and to discourage us from future enquiries” (ibid). It frustrates the most basic aims of scientific inquiry. Hume refers back to the argument of *Treatise* 1.3.14 in the course of cataloging examples of “The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, I must employ in my enquiries” (T 1.4.7.1). This catalogue also includes references to skepticism about body (T 1.4.7.4, referring back to T 1.4.2 and 1.4.4) and skepticism about reason (T 1.4.7.7, referring back to T 1.4.1), which, as I have argued, are genuine skeptical threats to core beliefs.

Hume makes some skeptical suggestions about the impossibility of objective necessary connections in Section 7 of the first *Enquiry*. “No conclusions can be more
agreeable to skepticism,” he writes, “than such as make discoveries concerning the
weakness and narrow limits of human reason and capacity” (EHU 7.28). “And what
stronger instance can be produced,” he continues, “of the surprizing ignorance and
weakness of the understanding, than the present?”—that is, the discovery that objective
necessary connections are unintelligible (EHU 7.29). The causal relation figures centrally
into our beliefs in common life and science. And yet the unintelligibility of objective
necessary connections seems to block the way to an adequate concept of causation.

Yet so imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning it [the causal relation],
that it is impossible to give any just definition of cause, except what is drawn
from something extraneous and foreign to it…we cannot…attain any more perfect
definition, which may point out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a
connexion with its effect. We have no idea of this connexion; nor even a distinct
notion of what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it.

(EHU 7.30)

Here Hume seems to imply here that in losing an intelligible belief in objective necessary
connections, we have lost something of importance, for which there is no fully satisfying
replacement, even in his own two definitions of “cause.”
5.1.3 Infinite divisibility

Hume argues that our ideas and impressions are not infinitely divisible (T 1.2.1.2-4). The imagination bottoms its divisions on “perfectly simple and indivisible” minimum ideas and impressions (T 1.2.1.2). Hume assumes that our ideas are adequate representations of their objects (T 1.2.1.5, 1.2.2.1). He further stipulates that “Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects” (T 1.2.2.1). It follows from this principle, plus the merely finite divisibility of ideas, that no finite part of space (“extension”) or time is infinitely divisible (T 1.2.2).

Hume acknowledges that “‘Tis true, mathematicians are wont to say, that there are here equally strong arguments on the other side of the question, and that the doctrine of indivisible points is also liable to unanswerable objections” (T 1.2.2.7). Hume first rejects these in principle because indivisible simples are conceivable, and therefore there can be no demonstration of their impossibility (T 1.2.2.8-10). He then proceeds to argue against the supposed demonstrations in detail—detail which we can, thankfully, afford to pass over here (T 1.2.4-5).

When Hume first mounts his conceptual argument against objective necessary connections in Treatise 1.3.14, he says that he knows his conclusion will be shocking and paradoxical to his readers. But here in Treatise 1.2.2, his tone is quite different. He finds the doctrine of infinite divisibility a shocking, paradoxical, counterintuitive doctrine, the product of corrupt philosophers enabled by their perverse students in the propagation of “strange and unaccountable opinions” (T 1.2.1.1). Hume stands with the vulgar over against these sophists. He gives a doughty defense of his doctrine of finite divisibility,
and gives no indication that it is in any way an inadequate substitute for its rival (T 1.2.3-5). Hume does not reluctantly relinquish infinite divisibility; he casts it away with disgust. There is no textual evidence therefore in the *Treatise* that infinite divisibility is a core belief, although clearly Hume regards that doctrine as epistemologically unjustified and false.

But in Part II of Section 12 of the first *Enquiry*, Hume seems to make a startling reversal. Hume continues to assert that the doctrine of infinite divisibility is a shock not only to common sense but also to “the clearest and most natural principles of human reason” (EHU 12.18). The doctrine is “big with contradiction and absurdity” (EHU 12.19). But now, instead of disproving the doctrine of infinite divisibility, he emphasizes the force of the arguments which support it. “[T]hese seemingly absurd opinions,” he writes, “are supported by a chain of reasoning, the clearest and most natural; nor is it possible for us to allow the premises without admitting the consequences” (EHU 12.18). For it seems that once we admit “all the conclusions concerning the properties of circles and triangles,” the infinite divisibility of extension logically follows:

Nothing can be more convincing and satisfactory than all the conclusions concerning the properties of circles and triangles; and yet, when these are once received, how can we deny, that the angle of contact between a circle and its tangent is infinitely less than any rectilineal angle, that as you may increase the diameter of the circle *in infinitum*, this angle of contact becomes still less, even *in infinitum*, and that the angle of contact between other curves and their tangents may be infinitely less than those between any circle and its tangent, and so on, *in infinitum*? (EHU 12.18)
And “The absurdity of these bold determinations of the abstract sciences seems to become, if possible, still more palpable with regard to time than extension” (EHU 12.19). Hume appears to regard the arguments for infinite divisibility as sound, even though he continues to regard the doctrine as contradictory and absurd.

Hume regards his own doctrine of finite divisibility as a core belief. Arguments in support of its negation constitute a skeptical threat to this core belief. If they succeed, they show that a core belief is epistemologically unjustified. In the *Treatise*, he clearly indicates that the arguments against finite divisibility fail. In the first *Enquiry*, he seems to imply that the arguments against finite divisibility succeed.

5.2 Making Sense of the Puzzling Skeptical Challenges

5.2.1 Treatise 1.4.7

In order to understand these puzzling skeptical challenges, the best place to start is with their first occurrence, in *Treatise* 1.4.7. If we can understand what’s going on in *Treatise* 1.4.7 then we can at least tentatively extend this explanation to the other occurrences to see if it fits them too. I argue that if Hume sincerely endorses the puzzling skeptical challenges in *Treatise* 1.4.7, then they introduce obvious and systemic problems into this immediate section and more generally in Book 1 of the *Treatise*. It is more plausible to think that Hume is not sincerely endorsing the puzzling skeptical challenges, but putting them forward for another, merely rhetorical, purpose. In fact he has very good rhetorical reasons for putting these arguments forward: they will drive more of his readers to follow his example and practically moderate their commitment to their epistemic norms.
I begin by explaining the deep tensions which the puzzling skeptical arguments create in the immediate context of Treatise 1.4.7 and in the broader context of Book 1 of Treatise. First, the presupposition that production by reason is necessary for epistemic justification actually vitiates the skeptical argument against reason from Treatise 1.4.1. The skeptical argument against reason, we noted earlier, presupposes the defeasible justification of inductive inferences. But if inductive inferences have no defeasible justification (as Hume seems to suggest in T 1.4.7.3), then the skeptical argument against reason cannot get off the ground at all. And yet Hume invokes the argument of 1.4.1 again in Treatise 1.4.7.7 as that which generates a climactic and insoluble dangerous dilemma. The skeptical challenge of Treatise 1.4.7.3 stands in deep tension therefore not only with preceding parts of the Treatise, but with its own immediate context.

Second, the presupposition that beliefs not produced by reason are unjustified also makes all of Hume’s skeptical arguments about body (in T 1.4.2-1.4.4) supererogatory. He could have stopped at Treatise 1.4.2.14, where he notes that belief in body is not produced by reason, and concluded to external world skepticism. A defeater argument is unnecessary for a belief that lacks even defeasible justification. But as a matter of fact Hume does not draw a skeptical conclusion at 1.4.2.14, even though, as the title of the section indicates, he is interested precisely in external world skepticism in this section. So just as the presupposition of Treatise 1.4.7.3 stands in tension with the skeptical argument against reason from 1.4.1, so also it stands in tension with the skepticism concerning the senses from 1.4.2.

Third, the presupposition of Treatise 1.4.7.3 entails the incredible conclusion that memorial beliefs are not defeasibly justified, since they are not produced by reason.
Hume nowhere else in his corpus calls into question the defeasible justification of memory beliefs. To do so would raise a skeptical challenge as profound as any other Hume develops. If he seriously doubted the defeasible justification of memory beliefs we would have every reason to expect him to exploit this issue further and discuss it elsewhere. But he does not.

Fourth, the puzzling skeptical challenges of *Treatise* also stand in tension with Hume’s way of moving past skepticism in 1.4.7. As I have mentioned before and will discuss in more detail later, Hume responds to his skeptical dilemma by adopting the Title Principle, which says

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. (T 1.4.7.11)

The Title Principle gives Hume a way of moving past the skeptical challenges of *Treatise* 1.4.1-2. These skeptical challenges consist in rational arguments that epistemically defeat our natural core beliefs in inferences and in mind-independent objects respectively. Since these rational arguments are typically not lively and we have no propensity to assent to them (and thereby lose our natural core beliefs), the Title Principle permits us to ignore them. But the Title Principle will not solve the puzzling skeptical problems of *Treatise* 1.4.7.3 because these skeptical arguments do not involve defeater arguments from reason. In 1.4.7.3, Hume simply points out that many of our core beliefs lack support from reason, and are (he implies) therefore epistemologically unjustified. The Title Principle does not say whether we may or may not hold beliefs that are unsupported by reason. It does not say whether reason is necessary for justification. It simply specifies when reason
is and is not sufficient for justification. So the Title Principle has nothing to say to 1.4.7.3.

The Title Principle does not answer the skeptical threat to belief in objective necessary connections from Treatise 1.4.7.5 either, although the situation here is a bit more complicated. Belief in objective necessary connections arises not from reason, but from the Propensity to Project, as Hume shows in 1.3.14. (He alludes back to this dubious belief-source in 1.4.7.6 when he calls the belief an “illusion of the imagination” and a “trivial suggestion of the fancy”). Furthermore, the idea of objective necessary connections runs afoul of the Copy Principle. Perhaps we could construe the application of the Copy Principle as an operation of the faculty of reason. In that case, the Title Principle permits us to ignore the Copy Principle insofar as it demands that we suspend our (ex hypothesi) natural core belief in objective necessary connections. Even granting all this, the belief in objective necessary connections is still epistemologically unjustified—at least, if we presuppose that production by reason is necessary for epistemic justification. For the belief in objective necessary connections is produced by the Propensity to Project, not by reason. In other words, if the presupposition driving the skeptical threat of 1.4.7.3 is granted, then not even the Title Principle saves us from the skeptical threat in 1.4.7.5.

But there is a bigger problem with deploying the Title Principle to save belief in objective necessary connections. The problem is that Hume should not try to save it. The belief is completely dispensable; it is not a core belief. He has provided two definitions of the causal connection, of which he is very proud, and which do not invoke objective necessary connection. Some commentators do indeed find a skeptical threat in the
prospect of losing the concept of objective necessity. But others agree that Hume has no need of this concept.

The skeptical challenges in *Treatise* 1.4.7.3 and 1.4.7.5 do not cohere with Hume’s overall epistemology, with his other skeptical challenges, with the Title Principle, or with even with each other. They appear out of nowhere, for the first time and without forewarning, in the last section of Book 1. Under these circumstances we can legitimately consider the possibility that Hume does not actually endorse them with their presuppositions, but is using them for merely rhetorical purposes. What then might those rhetorical purposes be?

Hume’s ultimate aim in the “Conclusion of this book” is to motivate his readers to adopt a moderate practical ethic of belief. He first lists the considerations that precipitate skeptical despair (T 1.4.7.1-8), and then explains how he emerges from despair to continue on with common life and the science of man (T 1.4.7.9-15). On my account, the skeptical problems which actually precipitate Hume’s own skeptical despair are the defeater arguments from reason (T 1.4.1-2). The Title Principle is a practical principle

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241 De Pierris thinks that “Hume has provided arguments for the conclusion that…we are not justified at all in believing that there is a necessary connection among causally related events,” and that this is one of “our most fundamental natural beliefs.” De Pierris, “Hume’s Pyrrhonian Skepticism,” 363. Fogelin barely acknowledges T 1.4.7.5, but implies that it expresses Hume’s serious concern “that enquiring into the operations of this faculty [imagination] has brought to light its arbitrary, weak, and capricious character.” Fogelin, *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, 128. Schmitt treats the problem as a real skeptical threat without ever questioning whether its target is a core belief. Schmitt, *Hume’s Epistemology*, 348-354.

Garrett construes *Treatise* 1.4.7.5 not so much as a direct epistemic skeptical threat to a core belief, but as a doubt-inducing consideration about reason in general: “This discovery presumably weighs against the probability that beliefs produced by reason are true by showing that the mind is subject to at least one pervasive illusion in the course of much or all of its most common and most important probable reasoning.” Garrett, *Hume*, 222. Cf. Garrett, *Cognition*, 221-222. But if Hume is gesturing towards this presumed argument, it does not cohere with what he says elsewhere—that the Propensity to Project, which produces the belief in objective necessary connections, is easily suppressed by a little reflection (T 1.4.3.11-1.4.4.2).

which permits us to sometimes ignore the deliverances of reason, and therefore practically permits our retention of the epistemologically defeated core beliefs. However, we can express Hume’s response to skeptical challenges in a broader fashion. He advises us to practically moderate our commitment to our epistemic norms, so that we retain our core beliefs even when they fall short of our epistemic standards. Stated at this level of generality, his response applies to any sort of skeptical dilemma generated by any sort of epistemology.

Take for example the skeptical challenges Hume broaches at Treatise 1.4.7.3. Here he suggests that because core beliefs in inductive inferences, external objects, and memory are unsupportable by rational argument, they are epistemologically unjustified. Hume responds to this (alleged) epistemic skeptical dilemma by arguing that practically we ought to retain those core beliefs, whatever their epistemic status. Is our (allegedly) core belief in objective necessary connections epistemologically unjustified because it is not produced by reason and violates the Copy Principle (T 1.4.7.5)? We should hold it anyway, on practical grounds. Are our beliefs in inferences and external objects epistemologically defeated by rational arguments (as Hume sincerely holds, T 1.4.1-2)? We should hold them anyway, on practical grounds. We may disagree on which beliefs are core beliefs, or which epistemic standards they ought to meet, or whether they do meet those standards. But Hume’s general point remains that for any given core belief, whatever the source of its negative epistemic status, we practically ought to retain the belief in spite of its epistemic status; giving up core beliefs is always disagreeable and disutile for ourselves and others. In fact, as I argue in Chapter 6, Hume applies this
practical response to all of the skeptical arguments he raises, most specifically to the real ones (to which the Title Principle is adapted) but also to the merely rhetorical ones.

Hume’s choice of merely rhetorical arguments is strategically calculated. He is aware that his analyses of the causal connection and causal inference are the most radical and surprising contributions of Book 1 of the *Treatise*. For Hume himself, they do not create skeptical problems. On the other hand, his true skeptical problems (in T 1.4.1-2) are quite abstruse. He anticipates that his readers will sense a skeptical threat in his analysis of causation and inference in Part 3, but fail to appreciate the force of the defeater arguments he puts forward in Part 4 of Book 1. So in “Conclusion of this book” he recasts the material from Part 3 as if it really poses the skeptical threats that his readers sense, without discarding the skeptical problems that he himself faces. By one route or the other, he aims to drive his readers into skeptical dilemmas that will force them to moderate their practical commitment to their epistemic norms.

5.2.2 After the *Treatise*

If Hume has good reason to make merely rhetorical use of certain skeptical challenges in the *Treatise*, he has even more reason to do so in his succeeding works. I conjectured above that he adds to his real but abstruse skeptical challenges others which are intrinsically defective but more broadly accessible and persuasive. The reception of the *Treatise* however seems to have convinced Hume of the difficulty and importance of making his skeptical challenges less abstruse and more widely accessible. For he writes in the Preface to the “Abstract” of the *Treatise* that “The work, of which I here present the Reader with an abstract, has been complained of as obscure and difficult to be

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243 Hume makes this material the focal point of the “Abstract” of the *Treatise*. 

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comprehended” (Preface 2). The apparent inability of his readers to understand the Treatise clearly motivates his attempt to explain it in the Abstract. The first Enquiry opens by considering whether it is even worthwhile to engage in abstruse philosophy at all (Section 1, “Of the Different Species of Philosophy”). The first Enquiry itself is, among other things, a simplified abridgment of Book 1 of the Treatise written in the hopes that it would make more sense to more people than the “dead-born” Treatise.244

We should expect that Hume’s heightened concern with accessibility will incline him to make further use of more accessible (though, by his lights, unsuccessful) skeptical challenges, which I am calling “merely rhetorical.” This is exactly what we find.

As I pointed out above, in paragraph 27 of the “Abstract” Hume epitomizes the skeptical challenge of the Treatise by reprising the merely rhetorical argument of 1.4.7.3: inductive inferences and belief in body are unsupported by rational argument. This skeptical challenge is easy enough to state in a short summary meant to garner interest in the full Treatise. They are much easier to grasp than the more abstruse defeater arguments in 1.4.1-2. Hume even alludes to his weightier defeater arguments when he says “Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics” (A 27). Furthermore, these arguments target the same two core beliefs as his more serious skeptical arguments (in T 1.4.1-2). The important point for Hume’s purposes in the Abstract is that his readers grasp his conclusion: “that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it” (A 27). Even the merely rhetorical arguments illustrate Hume’s basic stance towards skepticism.

244 Hume writes that “Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my Treatise of Human Nature. It fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots” (MOL, xxxiv).
Hume deploys several merely rhetorical skeptical challenges in the first *Enquiry*. My case for their merely rhetorical status rests on the following considerations. First, merely rhetorical arguments serve Hume’s aim of driving his readers into a skeptical dilemma which in turn motivates them to practically moderate their commitment to their epistemic obligations. Second, the merely rhetorical skeptical challenges are flagrantly incoherent with Hume’s overall position not only in the *Treatise* but also in the first *Enquiry* itself. Third, in at least one case he actually says that one of the merely rhetorical skeptical challenges does not succeed.

Hume wants to lead his readers to a certain conclusion about skepticism in the first *Enquiry*. He expresses the desired conclusion briefly at in Section 5, “Sceptical Solution to these Doubts” (EHU 5.1-2), and at more length at the end of Section 12, “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy” (EHU 12.21-34). Hume’s basic point is that even if skeptical challenges to our core beliefs are irrefutable—even if our core beliefs have no epistemic justification—we are practically justified in holding them and practically unjustified in suspending them. “For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour” (EHU 12.23). In order to make the point that sometimes we practically ought not to not fulfill our epistemic duties, Hume needs to convince us that sometimes our epistemic and practical duties conflict. Any argument which shows that practically indispensable (obligatory) beliefs are epistemologically unjustified (forbidden) accomplishes this purpose. Without such arguments, we never have to choose between epistemic and practical duties, and are never forced to subordinate our epistemic duties to our practical duties. So long as his readers, take
themselves to face an insuperable skeptical challenge to their core beliefs, they have a
good reason to take Hume’s way out and subordinate their epistemic oughts to their
practical oughts.

Hume’s main presentation of skeptical challenges to core beliefs occurs in Parts 1
and 2 of Section 12, running up to his exposition of the practically moderate Academic
position in Part 3. A comparison with Part 4 of the *Treatise* sheds light on his rhetorical
moves. In the *Treatise*, Hume first presents a skeptical challenge to the deliverances of
reason (T 1.4.1), then to belief in body (T 1.4.2, continuing on through 1.4.4). He regards
these skeptical challenges as sound. In the first *Enquiry*, Hume first presents substantially
the same skeptical challenge to belief in body (Section 12, Part 1), then a pair of different
challenges to reason (Section 12, Part 2).

The challenge to belief in body in Part 1 of EHU 12 is substantially the same as
that in the *Treatise* (as I explained in a previous chapter), and I take it Hume regards it as
sound by his own lights—a genuine skeptical threat to a core belief. Here Hume assumes
that our natural vulgar belief in body is defeasibly justified but faces defeaters from
reason. Although this skeptical challenge is sound and successful by Hume’s lights, his
deployment of it here teaches much about his merely rhetorical arguments.

In the first place, Hume does not make the merely rhetorical argument against
belief in body that he makes in *Treatise* 1.4.7.3 and Abstract 27. In those texts, he
suggests that belief in body is unjustified simply because it is not produced by reason.
But here, Hume assumes the opposite: that the natural vulgar belief in body is defeasibly
justified, even though it is not produced by reason. If Hume had assumed that the natural
principles which produce belief in body are unreliable unless proven otherwise, the
argument would be an example of the “antecedent skepticism” he rejects at the beginning of the section (EHU 12.1-3). But the skeptical argument which assumes the reliability of the propensities of the imagination, but then produces defeaters for their particular deliverances, is a form of the “consequent skepticism” which is a live possibility for him.

Second, Hume dramatically shortens and simplifies his presentation of the defeater argument against belief in body. This may explain why he retains it, rather than replacing it with the merely rhetorical argument he uses in Treatise 1.4.7.3 and Abstract 27. Since he can make the sound skeptical argument against belief in body in a concise and accessible form, he prefers it to the merely rhetorical argument, which is also brief and accessible but also intrinsically defective (by Hume’s lights).

Hume presents skeptical challenges to reason in Part 2 of Section 12 of the first Enquiry. Instead of presenting the skeptical argument against reason from Treatise 1.4.1, he patches together three other bits from Book 1 of the Treatise and now repurposes them as skeptical arguments. The argument from Treatise 1.4.1 manages to undermine both belief in demonstrative inferences, and belief in probabilistic or inductive inferences. In the absence of this argument Hume must present separate arguments to target “abstract” reasoning and inductive inference respectively. Why would Hume replace the sound argument from Treatise 1.4.1 with these other two, merely rhetorical arguments? A rhetorical explanation is readily available. The argument from Treatise 1.4.1 is very abstruse and refined (T 1.4.1.10-11; 1.4.7.7). Hume wants to make more widely accessible arguments.245

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Garrett leaves it open whether Hume drops the argument simply because he “judged these topics unnecessary and too complex for the later and more streamlined work” or because he lost confidence in its soundness. Garrett, Hume, 227. Against the view that Hume drops the argument because he has lost faith in its soundness, I note that he reprises it in Part 1 of the Dialogues: “All sceptics pretend, that, if reason be
First, as noted above, he seems to indicate that there are good arguments against the core belief in the finite divisibility of space and time (EHU 12.18-20). In other words, abstract reasoning supports the absurd, unintelligible notion of infinite divisibility. But as a matter of fact, Hume himself says in a footnote that “It seems to me not impossible to avoid these absurdities and contradictions”; Hume has on hand “the readiest solution of these difficulties,” which he briefly references (EHU 12.20n34).²⁴⁶ The merely rhetorical function of Hume’s “skeptical challenge” to abstract reasoning is on the face of the text. Hume explicitly says that the challenge fails, but he is willing to capitalize on the fact that others might think it succeeds.

Second, Hume presents “sceptical objections to moral evidence, or to the reasonings concerning matter of fact” (EHU 12.21). First he references some “popular objections” which he immediately discards as unsound. But then he brings up the “philosophical objections,” which seem to give the sceptic “ample matter of triumph” (EHU 12.22). The objection is that inductive inferences are produced merely by “custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like the considered in an abstract view, it furnishes invincible arguments against itself, and that we could never retain any conviction or assurance, on any subject, were not the sceptical reasonings so refined and subtile, that they are not able to counterpoise the more solid and more natural arguments, derived from the senses and experience” (D 1.11). Cf. Owen, “Scepticism with Regard to Reason.” 109.

²⁴⁶ Fogelin rightly notes that “if Hume is right in saying that the doctrine of infinite divisibility is avoidable, then…no general skepticism with regard to reason is forthcoming.” Fogelin, Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 152. Garrett notices the solution in the footnote, but still tries to construe the argument for infinite divisibility as inducing doubt about reason: “Even if ultimately soluble, he [Hume] suggests, the naturalness and difficulty of such paradoxes offers a basis for some lowering of the probability that attempted abstract reasoning—that is, attempted demonstration—is veracious.” Garrett, Hume, 227. However, the fact that many fallacious arguments are initially attractive and beguiling does not seem like a serious cause for worry.

other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful” (EHU 12.22). Hume has already developed this point, and suggested its skeptical implications, in Sections 4 and 5.

There are several good textual reasons to think that this is a merely rhetorical skeptical challenge, and not one which Hume himself regards as a threat to our core beliefs. First, it is immediately preceded by a skeptical challenge to abstract reasoning which Hume explicitly says he rejects. This makes it plausible to think that his argument against inductive reasoning also fails by his lights. Second, this argument assumes that production by reason is necessary for epistemic justification. But Hume’s discussion of belief in body, in Part 1 of Section 12, assumes the opposite: that beliefs produced by natural though non-ratiocinative principles of the imagination are defeasibly justified. Third, to doubt our natural beliefs, even in the absence of any specific defeating argument, is not consequent skepticism, but is a form of antecedent skepticism—which Hume rejects (EHU 12.1-3).247 Perhaps the reason Hume puts the skeptical argument against body before the arguments against reason—reversing the order of the Treatise—is to put more textual distance between his eschewal of antecedent skepticism (EHU 12.1-3) and his quiet deployment of antecedent skepticism here (EHU 12.22). I conclude that this argument for inductive skepticism (both here and in Sections 4-5) are merely rhetorical.

One merely rhetorical skeptical challenge is notable for its absence from Section 12 of the first Enquiry: the skeptical challenge to objective necessary connections. As noted above, Hume pitches the unintelligibility of objective necessary connections as a

247 Fogelin acknowledges that, if Hume’s theory of causal inference raises any skeptical problem at all, it is only as a form of antecedent skepticism, which Hume officially repudiates. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 46. Fogelin thinks that Hume has simply made a blunder (ibid). I read Hume more charitably, as arguing from the assumptions of interlocutors to show that they lead to a skeptical impasse.
skeptical challenge to a core belief in Treatise 1.4.7.5, and seems to suggest the same thing again in Section 7 of EHU. But the skeptical suggestion in EHU 7 is even fainter and less definite than that posed in Treatise 1.4.7.5, which, upon review, really does little more than express the same surprise as in Treatise 1.3.14. Hume really makes no effort in the first Enquiry even to make a rhetorical skeptical challenge out of the unintelligibility of objective necessary connections. If he had wanted to do so, he easily could have in Part 2 of Section 12. This bears out my earlier contention that even in the Treatise he does not take this seriously as a skeptical threat to a core belief. Belief in objective necessary connections is completely dispensable by Hume’s lights.248

5.3 Conclusion

Hume occasionally raises skeptical problems that he himself thinks are unproblematic. He sometimes writes as if beliefs unsupported by argument are ipso facto epistemologically unjustified. He sometimes writes as if the unintelligible notion of objective necessary connections enters into our core beliefs. And at one point he suggests that the arguments against the core belief in the finite divisibility of space and time might

248 Immanuel Kant takes Hume’s criticism of the intelligibility of objective necessary connections to be his central skeptical argument. For Kant, causation without objective necessary connection is no longer the idea of causation at all, so Hume’s alternative analysis of the causal relation is a non-starter. “The very concept of a cause so obviously contains the concept of a necessity of connection with an effect and a strict universality of rule that it would be entirely lost if one sought, as Hume did, to derive it from a frequent association of that which happens with that which precedes and a habit (thus a merely subjective necessity) of connecting representations arising from that association”. Kant, Prolegomena to any future metaphysics, trans. Gary Hatfield, in Theoretical Philosophy after 1781, ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), B 5; 138. Hume and Kant may be able to agree on the fact that belief in causal relations is a core belief. But because they differ in their analysis of the concept of cause, Hume’s argument constitutes a skeptical threat to the belief in causes by Kant’s lights, but not by Hume’s own lights. Kantian assumptions have perhaps have led some interpreters to regard Hume’s argument against objective necessary connections as one which Hume himself recognizes as a skeptical threat to a core belief. See for example De Pierris, “Hume’s Pyrrhonian Skepticism,” 363-4.
be sound. But further examination shows that these are simply rhetorical maneuvers, not Hume’s own real positions. Hume uses these skeptical challenges to convince readers, by any means available, that some of their most central ordinary beliefs are epistemologically unjustified. This prepares the way for accepting Hume’s solution: that we are practically obliged to hold epistemologically justified propositional attitudes only to the extent that it is agreeable or useful to ourselves or others.
CHAPTER 6: HUME’S PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO EPISTEMIC SKEPTICISM

Introduction

In the final section of Book 1 of the Treatise, “Conclusion of this book,” Hume provides a catalogue of the skeptical threats which occur to him upon review (T 1.4.7.1-7). Although some of the skeptical threats he here enumerates are merely rhetorical (T 1.4.7.3, 1.4.7.5), the two most important ones show that the deliverances of reason contradict the belief in external objects (T 1.4.7.4; cf. T 1.4.2-4) and undermine themselves (T 1.4.7.7; cf. T 1.4.1). These skeptical arguments force us to choose between assenting to reason and retaining our core beliefs. Hume responds to this dilemma by espousing the Title Principle, which permits us to ignore reason when we feel like it and thereby retain our core beliefs.²⁴⁹

An important line of interpretation takes the Title Principle as an epistemic principle which rescues the epistemic justification of our core beliefs by permitting us to ignore their rational defeaters. Against this reading I argue that the Title Principle violates the epistemic norms of philosophy, which include the default principle that reason should always be assented to (6.1). Hume responds to epistemic skepticism by subordinating the

²⁴⁹ The Title Principle says “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” (T 1.4.7.11).
pursuit of philosophy (with its epistemic demands) to practical interests (6.2). The Title Principle is a merely practical norm which expresses this subordination (6.3).

**6.1 Why the Title Principle is Not an Epistemic Norm**

The rational defeat of two of Hume’s core beliefs force him, in the first half of “Conclusion of this book,” to ask what maxim he should adopt to guide belief formation. Either he must refuse to assent to reason, or else he must give up core beliefs which are practically indispensable for common life (as well as for scientific research). He concludes “For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case” (T 1.4.7.7). Four paragraphs later, Hume adopts the Title Principle as the maxim to guide belief formation, a principle which indulges the occasional rejection of reason, particularly in the case of skeptical challenges. Several commentators construe the Title Principle as an epistemic principle, in virtue of which our core beliefs are epistemologically justified even in the face of good inductive arguments that undermine or refute them. After explaining the life-or-reason fork which Hume articulates at two points in the final skeptical catalog of the *Treatise*, I argue that the Title Principle is not epistemic. My argument hinges on the claim that “philosophy” is Hume’s epistemologically normative method of inquiry and belief formation. Since Hume indicates—both before and after expressing the Title Principle—that philosophy demands unqualified assent to reason, and since philosophy consists of Hume’s epistemic norms, the Title Principle cannot be an epistemic norm. The life-or-reason dilemma is actually a

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250 As I noted in the Introduction, commentators who construe the Title Principle as an epistemic principle include Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 131; Garrett, *Cognition*, 234-5; Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 217; cf. 203n12; Ridge, “Epistemology Moralized,” 89; Schmitt, 368-375. Garrett is the first to have dubbed these lines “the Title Principle.”
life-or-philosophy dilemma and therefore a life-or-epistemic-justification dilemma. Hume lays hold of the horn of life.

The insoluble life-or-reason dilemma emerges first in the form of a “manifest contradiction” at the end of Hume’s discussion of belief in mind-independent objects (T 1.4.7.4). Natural and necessary though non-ratiocinative principles of the imagination lead us to believe in mind-independent objects. Equally natural and necessary principles of the imagination produce an inductive inference that contradicts the belief in mind-independent objects. The contradiction between reason and the core belief forces us to choose between them:

How then shall we adjust those principles together? Which of them shall we prefer? Or in case we prefer neither of them, but successively assent to both, as is usual among philosophers, with what confidence can we afterwards usurp that glorious title, when we thus knowingly embrace a manifest contradiction? (T 1.4.7.4)

By preferring the non-ratiocinative principles which produce belief in external objects, we reject the deliverances of reason. But by preferring reason we reject belief in external objects. To vacillate, assenting to reason most of the time but to contrary principles when they produce belief in external objects, is unworthy of “philosophers.”

The argument for “scepticism with regard to reason” (T 1.4.1) generates a “very dangerous dilemma” which again forces us to choose between adhering to reason and retaining our core beliefs (T 1.4.7.6-7). If we “reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding” (T 1.4.7.7), then we must suspend all the deliverances of demonstrative and probabilistic reason. Only a trivial propensity prevents
us from rationally, recursively diminishing our confidence-levels to nothing in accordance with the Corrective Norm. But suspending all of the deliverances of reason is practically unlivable. On the other hand, we could depart from the demands of reason, in one of two different ways. We might “assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy” and reject all of the deliverances of reason (T 1.4.7.6). This option is intellectually outrageous: “if we assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy; beside that these suggestions are often contrary to each other; they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become ashamed of our credulity” (T 1.4.7.6).

Alternatively, we might “establish it for a general maxim, that no refined or elaborate reasoning is ever to be receiv’d” (T 1.4.7.7). This option saves us from the self-subversion of reason without requiring us to accept every trivial suggestion of the fancy. But it still destroys all science and philosophy, which consist in refined reasoning. It lacks intellectual integrity on other grounds as well. The rejection of refined reasoning is justified by a chain of reasoning that is quite refined, and so is self-defeating. The maxim is also *ad hoc*: “You proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination [viz., the quality whereby we ignore refined reasoning], and by a parity of reason must embrace them all” (T 1.4.7.7). The unacceptability of the ban on refined reasoning means that we are again caught between the horns of “a false reason” (which bows to trivial suggestions of the fancy) “or none at all” (the suspension of the self-subverted deliverances of reason)

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251 It seems that, for Hume, accepting all the trivial suggestions of the fancy implies rejecting all or virtually all of the deliverances of reason. This seems to be the implication of Hume’s assertion that the rejection of the fancy entails adherence to the understanding. It also seems to be the implication of his previous assertion that the trivial propensities of the imagination are “opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning” (T 1.4.4.1).
Hume concludes “For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case” (ibid).252

Philosophy, as Hume construes it, unqualifiedly endorses assent to the deliverances of reason.253 Hume describes good and bad inductive inferences specifically in terms of what the “philosophers” do and do not sanction (T 1.3.13.1). *Treatise* 1.4.7 bears this point out as well. To whatever extent we cut off “refin’d or elaborate reasoning,” to that extent we “cut off entirely all science and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.7). The philosophers reject education and “trivial propensities of the imagination” like the Propensity to Project because they conflict with reason (T 1.3.9.19; 1.4.3.11-1.4.4.1). In short, philosophy endorses the default principle that reason ought always be assented to. So the life-or-reason dilemma is also a life-or-philosophy dilemma.

The Title Principle, which permits us to ignore reason, represents therefore either a deviation from or a revision of the norms of philosophy. Conceivably, Hume could take a “particularistic” approach to philosophy whereby he revises its norms to accommodate the beliefs of whose philosophical merit he is already certain.254 But the textual evidence

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252 Many commentators construe the Dangerous Dilemma as itself a skeptical argument or a doubt-inducing consideration. For example, Garrett says that reason’s inability to provide an acceptable solution to the Dangerous Dilemma “renders the veracity of reason less probable than expected.” Garrett, *Hume*, 227. Hume however does not explicitly draw this further conclusion about the veracity of reason. On my reading, the insolubility of the Dangerous Dilemma is not itself a skeptical argument. It does not threaten the epistemic status of any core belief. Like the “manifest contradiction,” the dangerous dilemma simply expresses the practical situation in which we are left by skeptical arguments. We have to choose between philosophical (epistemic) justification and the retention of our core beliefs.

253 I defended this claim in Chapter 1. The philosophers endorse more than the deliverances of reason; they also endorse the deliverances of other permanent, irresistible, and universal principles of the imagination (T 1.4.4.1-2). But when these narrowly natural non-ratiocinative beliefs conflict with the deliverances of reason, the latter defeat the epistemic justification of the former. Garrett refers to the principle that “reason ought to be assented to” as a “default principle.” Garrett, *Hume*, 230.

indicates that he does not revise the norms of philosophy. Instead, the Title Principle
expresses Hume’s recommendation that we sometimes ignore the demands of
philosophy, and in particular the demand that reason always be assented to. Several lines
of textual evidence support this reading.

First, the Title Principle is embedded in a broader discussion of how far we are
obliged to pursue philosophy at all. In the throes of a “philosophical melancholy and
delirium” Hume adheres entirely to philosophy and suspends all his beliefs (T 1.4.7.8; cf.
T 1.4.7.9). Next he forgets about philosophy and plays backgammon (T 1.4.7.9). Then he
remembers his former philosophical pursuits and wants to swear them off entirely: “I am
ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce
the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.10). At last he
decides that he will follow philosophy whenever he feels like it, and no more: “Nay if we
are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination,
which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner” (T 1.4.7.11).

I call the preceding sentence the Inclination Principle, since it says that we ought
to pursue philosophy only from an inclination to do so. Note that the “ought” of the
Inclination Principle cannot be a philosophical ought. It does not state a norm of
philosophy, but rather a norm about when we should (and should not) follow philosophy
itself. If the Inclination Principle were a philosophical norm, then philosophy itself would
require us to sometimes disobey philosophical requirements, a self-defeating norm.

The Title Principle immediately follows the statement of the Inclination Principle,
and clearly stands in an appositional relation to it. The Title Principle reads as an
explication of the Inclination Principle:
Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. 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. (T 1.4.7.11)

The text demands that we take the “ought” of the Inclination Principle and the “ought” of the Title Principle in the immediately following sentences in the same sense; a shift in meanings would constitute a complete non sequitur. But, as I have just argued, the “ought” of the Inclination Principle cannot be a philosophical “ought.” So neither can the “ought” of the Title Principle. Just as the Inclination Principle says “Only follow philosophy when you feel like it,” the Title Principle adds “And in particular, only follow reason, philosophy’s chief authoritative faculty, when you feel like it.” So the Title Principle is not a revision of philosophy as a normative method which always requires assent to reason. Rather, the Title Principle expresses Hume’s permissive stance towards adherence to that method.

Second, the Title Principle violates the philosophical stricture against “successive assent” to conflicting principles. The Title Principle recommends that we sometimes assent to reason, and sometimes to the conflicting principles. But to sometimes assent and sometimes dissent from reason, as the Title Principle recommends, is unworthy of the “glorious title” of philosophy (T 1.4.7.4). Furthermore, if “You proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination” then “by a parity of reason [you] must embrace all of them” (T 1.4.7.7). The Title Principle gratuitously violates this principle of parity of reasoning. It tells us to follow reason against the trivial propensities when we feel like it,
and then again to reject reason in favor of trivial propensities when they save us from abject skepticism.

Third, Hume consistently associates strict adherence to philosophy with total suspension of belief (which he elsewhere describes as Pyrrhonism). If philosophy sanctioned the Title Principle, philosophy would not lead to suspension of our core beliefs, since the Title Principle permits us to ignore the rational defeaters of core beliefs. Hume’s first response to the “very refin’d and metaphysical” skeptical arguments he has been considering is to “reject all belief and reasoning” and “look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (T 1.4.7.8). He refers back to this moment as “philosophical melancholy and delirium”—a delirium characterized by unyielding commitment to the demands of philosophy and therefore of reason (T 1.4.7.9, emphasis mine). In the “Abstract” he writes that “Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it” (A 27). In the first Enquiry, Hume insists that “Pyrrhonism, or the excessive principles of scepticism,” cannot be refuted by philosophy but only by action (EHU 12.21). The excessive principles of skepticism “may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them” (EHU 12.21). The skeptic is in his “proper sphere” when he displays “those philosophical objections, which arise from more profound researches. Here he seems to have ample matter of triumph” (EHU 12.22). Skeptical objections show that mankind “are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against

255 When Hume resolves “never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.9), he is referring back to precisely this moment when, for the sake of adhering to sound reasoning and philosophy, he was ready to renounce all belief. In the Letter to a Gentleman Hume identifies the Pyrrhonian moment in the Treatise with his “Philosophical Melancholy and Delusion,” which he quickly thereafter renounced (L 20).
them” (EHU 12.23).

Since philosophy leads to the very Pyrrhonism from which the Title Principle saves us, the Title Principle cannot itself belong to philosophy.

Since philosophy requires unqualified assent to reason, it follows that either the Title Principle is not an epistemic norm, or else that philosophy is not an epistemologically normative method of inquiry. I have already presented a case that philosophy is an epistemologically normative method. On my view, therefore, the Title Principle is not an epistemic norm. But other commentators argue that Hume has a different fundamental concept of epistemic normativity, one that comports with the Title Principle and permits violations of the norms of philosophy.

Garrett gives this line of argument perhaps its most rigorous development. He argues that Hume’s fundamental normative epistemic concepts are truth and probable truth. It follows from this view that philosophy as a method, and assent to reason in particular, have epistemic merit only if they produce true or probably true beliefs. To make the contrast clear, on my reading, it is an analytic truth that beliefs sanctioned by philosophy (which include the deliverances of reason) are epistemologically justified. On Garrett’s reading, it is contingently true, if it is true at all, that the beliefs sanctioned by philosophy (including the deliverances of reason) are epistemologically justified. Garrett concludes that the deliverances of reason are not always epistemologically justified. Since some deliverances of reason—all of which are sanctioned by philosophy—are not

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256 In a footnote in the Dialogues Hume says that there is not even a “philosophical dogmatist” who “denies, that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science, and that these difficulties are in a regular, logical method, absolutely unsolvable” (D 12.8).

257 Garrett, Hume, 152-164.
epistemologically justified, then philosophy is not Hume’s epistemologically normative method of inquiry.²⁵⁸

According to Garrett, Hume presents five skeptical considerations in “Conclusion of this Book.”²⁵⁹ None of these five considerations prove outright that any of our core beliefs are epistemologically unjustified. In fact, the skeptical considerations do not directly target core beliefs at all. Rather, they all lower the probability that the faculty of reason is veracious. If the faculty of reason is not veracious, then its products are not probably true, and they lack epistemic merit.²⁶⁰

But Hume has countervailing considerations that weigh in the balance against the weight of the skeptical considerations. After the skeptical review, he passes through a series of mood changes in which he resumes his old beliefs.²⁶¹ He then embraces the Title Principle, which underwrites the positive deliverances of reason while proscribing its destructive skeptical arguments.²⁶² The Title Principle fits the very beliefs which Hume has naturally resumed in the course of his mood changes. On Garrett’s reading, “Hume’s

²⁵⁸ Garrett focuses on the epistemic status of reason and does not draw the specific implications for philosophy which I spell out here.
²⁶⁰ Loeb’s reading resembles Garrett’s insofar as Loeb too thinks that Hume’s skeptical challenge is not primarily directed towards the epistemic status of first-order core beliefs, but towards epistemic norms. Loeb, Stability, 12-20. For Loeb and Garrett both, Hume needs to find epistemic norms that comport with his fundamental epistemic criterion. Garrett thinks Hume solves the problem: the Title Principle meets his epistemic criterion (which, according to Garrett, is truth or probable truth). Loeb argues that in Treatise 1.4.7 Hume renounces his own normative epistemic principles, since they fall short of his epistemic criterion (which, according to Loeb, is stability). So Hume is primarily a skeptic about epistemic norms, and only secondarily and derivatively a skeptic about his first-order core beliefs. On my reading, Hume is an epistemic skeptic about his first-order beliefs precisely because he knows that they fall short of epistemic (philosophical) norms about which he has no doubt. As I have noted previously, I agree with Broughton that Hume’s epistemic norms remain the same throughout the Treatise, despite the negative epistemic evaluative conclusion he draws about our first-order beliefs. Broughton, “The Inquiry in Hume’s Treatise,” 542-547.
²⁶¹ Garrett, Hume, 228
²⁶² Ibid. 228-30
psychology makes it nearly impossible to hold a belief with a given degree of strength without, upon reflection, also holding with a similar degree of strength that that belief is true or probably true—thereby attributing to it a fundamental epistemic value.” So the reliability of the Title Principle and the truth or probable truth of its deliverances have a good deal of probabilistic weight of their own.

When the probabilistic weight of the skeptical considerations is placed in the scales against the probabilistic weight of the Title Principle and its deliverances, the latter outweigh the former. “Probable reasoning and the senses are powerful sources of belief that make powerful appeals to the general sense of probability, and they cannot in the end be defeated by the skeptical considerations.” While the weight of the skeptical considerations rightly moderates our confidence in the beliefs condoned by the Title Principle, those beliefs remain intact. When reason is accompanied by some propensity, it is reliable and its deliverances are true or probably true. The Title Principle is Hume’s final epistemic norm, and its deliverances are epistemologically justified.

Garrett’s reading is attractive in part because it imputes to Hume an assumption widely shared among contemporary epistemologists: the assumption that truth-conduciveness is necessary to epistemic merit. Furthermore, it presents a Hume who takes skepticism seriously, but who nonetheless overcomes it and saves his own scientific enterprise from epistemic disaster. However, the textual evidence tells against this reading.

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263 Ibid. 232. Garrett’s earlier defense of this claim is compact: “because reflecting on one’s own belief-that-p involves retaining the belief while also coming to have a lively idea of that belief [2.1], reflecting on one’s own belief-that-p leads naturally to a non-conceptual belief-that-[p]-is-true.” Hume, 236.

264 Ibid. 236
First, it is difficult to locate a particular text in *Treatise* 1.4.7 indicates that Hume weighs the probabilistic force or epistemic value of the skeptical arguments against the probabilistic force or epistemic value of the Title Principle. The exclusive focus of *Treatise* 1.4.7.10-14 appears to be on the agreeableness and utility of different doxastic policies. Hume does not appear to defend the Title Principle with reference to truth or probability at all in this section.

Second, Hume says that whenever we consider the skeptical arguments, we will find them compelling. No countervailing considerations will outweigh them or appeal more strongly to our sense of probability.

This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur’d, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it. ’Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them; and take it for granted, whatever may be the reader’s opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world. (T 1.4.2.57)

Hume’s point here is that we recover our ordinary beliefs only when we do not attend to the skeptical arguments. But on Garrett’s reading, we sustain our ordinary beliefs
precisely when we weigh the skeptical arguments in the balance against the alleged epistemic value of the Title Principle. At least in this one instance, on Garrett’s view, “intense reflection on these subjects…in opposition…to it” successfully overcomes skeptical doubt. Garrett too says that Hume “often notes that powerful but momentary skeptical doubts can continue to recur on occasion from the consideration of certain topics even after a more moderate continuing epistemic stance has been achieved.”²⁶⁵ In fact, Hume says that the skeptical doubt always recurs when we consider the relevant topics. Although the skeptical doubt is momentary, it recurs at precisely the moments when we weigh the beliefs sanctioned by the Title Principle against the skeptical considerations. The upshot is that Hume does not weigh the probable reliability of reason (as circumscribed by the Title Principle) against the countervailing skeptical arguments, and even if he did, the skeptical arguments would always win out. So even on Garrett’s account of Hume’s epistemic criteria of truth and probable truth, there is no reason to think Hume intends the Title Principle as an epistemic norm.

Garrett adds another argument in favor of the epistemic value (truth or probable truth) of beliefs formed in accordance with the Title Principle:

It is psychologically untenable, in his psychology, to take pleasure in the satisfaction of either curiosity (“to know” foundations and principles) or ambition (“of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of making a name by my inventions and discoveries”) without taking one’s own discoveries to be true or at least probably true.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 218
²⁶⁶ Ibid 232
But Hume, in accord with the Title Principle, returns to philosophy and reason just in order to satisfy his curiosity and ambition (T 1.4.7.12). So Hume must think that the beliefs he forms are true or probably true, and therefore have epistemic merit.

I think Garrett is right that, most of the time, Hume thinks that his scientific discoveries are true or probably true, and that he therefore finds them satisfying to his curiosity and ambition. But this is compatible with the claim that, every time he again reflects intensely upon the rational defeaters of his core beliefs, he concludes that those beliefs are either false or probably false. In such bleak moments, he does not find that his discoveries gratify his passions of curiosity or ambition. Soon after, his mood changes, his first-order core beliefs return upon him, and he carries on as before.

Michael Ridge proposes another account of Humean epistemic normativity which, like Garrett’s, supports the Title Principle and permits violations of the norms of philosophy. Ridge proposes that Hume makes morality, rather than reliability, the ultimate standard for epistemic norms. Hume moves past his skeptical dilemma by following doxastic maxims that are immediately agreeable or useful to himself or others. The Title Principle is such a norm. Maxims that are immediately agreeable or useful to oneself or others meet Hume’s moral standards. But Ridge thinks that by embracing the morally correct Title Principle to govern belief formation, Hume intends not just to provide an ethics of belief but also an epistemology—an “Epistemology Moralized.” Because the Title Principle meets Hume’s moral standards, it qualifies as an epistemic

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268 So far forth, I not only agree with Ridge, but am deeply indebted to his trenchant and seminal exposition of the moral and prudential justification of the Title Principle.
Since the Title Principle permits us to ignore the rational defeaters of our core beliefs, it eliminates the epistemic skeptical threat.

I find Ridge’s case for the prudential and moral justification of the Title Principle compelling, one to which I am indebted and on which my view builds. However, I demur from Ridge’s claim that Hume’s moral standards also function as an epistemic criterion. Ridge does not offer anything in the way of explicit argument for this part of his interpretation. He simply points out that, for Hume, reliance on the understanding is not a reliable method of belief formation, but it is a practically justified method. Ridge seems to assume that any norm that tells us what to do with our understanding, or any norm that governs belief-formation, is *ipso facto* an epistemic norm. It follows from this assumption that the Title Principle is not only a practical but also an epistemic norm. But norms having to do with the faculty of reason or with belief formation are not necessarily epistemic. I have argued that because the Title Principle contradicts the norms of philosophy, it is certainly not epistemic.

### 6.2 The Subordination of Philosophy to Practical Interests

Caught on the horns of the life-or-philosophy dilemma, Hume responds by subordinating the pursuit of philosophy to practical interests. Since philosophy, consistently pursued, demands the suspension of our core beliefs, complete adherence to philosophy is no more practically justified than it is psychologically sustainable (6.2.1). However, the moderate pursuit of philosophy in the context of a mixed way of life

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269 Ibid. 189.

270 The same remarks could be made about Owen’s position. Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 197-223. Ridge and Owen both assume that the faculty of reason (the understanding) is the locus of Hume’s epistemology, rather than philosophy.
affords pleasure and benefit to those who incline towards it (6.2.2). Philosophy provides a comparatively safer and more agreeable method of inquiry and belief formation than its main alternative, superstition (6.2.3). A “true sceptic” pursues philosophy “in this careless manner,” that is, on purely practical grounds (6.2.4). Hume’s response to his skeptical problems does not rehabilitate the positive epistemic status of our core beliefs. Instead, his response provides a practical justification for ignoring the epistemic demands of philosophy when philosophy condemns our core beliefs.

It may be helpful here to recall the difference between philosophical (epistemic) and practical (prudential and moral) justification, as discussed in the Introduction. An action is prudentially justified if it advances the agent’s own long-term interests. It is morally justified only if it is produced by a character trait which is immediately agreeable or useful to the agent or to others.271 “The philosophers” do not evaluate beliefs or belief-forming processes on the basis of their agreeability or utility. A belief is philosophically justified if it is produced by permanent, irresistible, and universal principles of the imagination, and does not meet with defeat (see Chapter 1). So Hume’s response to skepticism, on my view, is that retaining our core beliefs is immediately agreeable and useful both to ourselves and others, even though these beliefs meet with rational defeat and fall short of the normative epistemic demands of philosophy. Because he holds that our core beliefs are philosophically unjustified, Hume is an epistemic skeptic. Because he holds that we are practically justified in holding our core beliefs, he is not a practical skeptic. Because he thinks that psychologically we inevitably retain our core beliefs, he is not a belief skeptic.

271 Although we should keep in mind that, for Hume, the proper objects of moral evaluation are character traits rather than actions, we can in a derivative fashion evaluate actions as well (T 3.3.1.4-5).
6.2.1 The Rejection of Extreme Skepticism (Pyrrhonism)

The first practical reason for resuming our core beliefs is that resistance is futile. Nature prevails over argument and we take up our defeated core beliefs again, whether we want to or not.

Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life… my natural propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this indolent belief in the general maxims of the world. (T 1.4.7.10)

The mere fact that we have a natural and powerful psychological propensity to hold our core beliefs does not by itself practically justify our submission to them. Consider, for example, someone who has a natural and powerful psychological propensity to believe that they can fly from the tops of tall buildings. This belief is literally fatal if acted upon by wingless beings. It is practically rational to resist this belief for as long as possible, even if the belief is natural and ultimately irresistible. Hume explicitly says that he is not entirely opposed to resisting his natural inclinations. He simply demands that the benefit

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272 Many texts support the claim that we are psychologically incapable of suspending our core beliefs for long. “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras” (T 1.4.7.9) “I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding” (T 1.4.7.10). “Our author…upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it” (A 27). “The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life” (EHU 12.21). Pyrrhonism is not “durable” outside the philosopher’s closet (EHU 12.23; cf. 12.24). In the Letter to a Gentleman Hume again notes that the Pyrrhonian doctrine is psychologically impossible to live by (L 19-20).

273 Arguably, Hume makes this very point when he says “Very refin’d reflections have little or no influence upon us; and yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence” (T 1.4.7.7).
of resisting a natural belief outweigh the pain and trouble of the resistance: “Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance” (T 1.4.7.10).274

But there are no benefits to trying to suspend core beliefs. After his “philosophical melancholy and delirium” subsides, Hume asks rhetorically

Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest? (T 1.4.7.10)

Faced with the life-or-philosophy dilemma, he explicitly opts for life: “I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.10). In the first Enquiry Hume rejects Pyrrhonism on the same practical grounds.

For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, What is his meaning? And what he proposes by all these curious researches? He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer… [A] Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately

274 By “good reason” Hume means a good practical reason, not a good theoretical reason. The sentence occurs as a response to preceding rhetorical questions about the practical value of torturing his brain “with subtilities and sophistries”: “to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest?” (T 1.4.7.10). On the other hand, good theoretical reasons too obviously support the unnatural suspension of core beliefs.
cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. (EHU 12.23)

Pyrrhonism demands a psychologically impossible feat. Even if we managed to suspend our beliefs, only harm would result.

6.2.2 The Moderate Pursuit of Philosophy

When his “sentiments of spleen and indolence” pass and “a serious good-humour’d disposition” returns, Hume realizes that philosophy sometimes is pleasurable (T 1.4.7.11). In the right circumstances he feels “naturally inclin’d” to pursue philosophy (T 1.4.7.12). By resisting this inclination when it arises, “I feel I shou’d be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy” (T 1.4.7.12).

Although Hume returns to the pursuit of philosophy, he does not return to the total suspension of his core beliefs which philosophy demands. He instead returns to a positive use of philosophy, deploying this normative method in positive belief formation and theory construction. “[I] am naturally inclin’d,” he says, “to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation” (T 1.4.7.12). He goes on to list all of the subjects about which he desires to form theories: moral good and evil, the foundations of government, the causes of the passions, aesthetics, truth and falsehood, reason and folly (ibid). One might object that Hume has no right to follow philosophy in his positive theory construction if he will not follow philosophy down the ineluctable path to Pyrrhonism. But Hume can reply that he is practically justified in making a positive use of philosophy, while ignoring its
Pyrrhonian demands. He flouts philosophy’s parity of reasoning requirement on practical grounds.

Hume flatly denies that all people should pursue philosophy. Not everyone is led, either by their strength or weakness of mind, to inquire beyond the bounds of common life (T 1.4.7.14). English gentlemen in particular frequently have this “earthy mixture.” Hume sees no practical reason for “refining them into philosophers:”

Of such as these I pretend not to make philosophers, nor do I expect them either to be associates in these researches or auditors of these discoveries. They do well to keep themselves in their present situation. (T 1.4.7.14)

Philosophy does not hold intrinsic value for everyone. Some people, in some moods, enjoy pursuing philosophy to some extent. But those without the time or temperament for philosophy have no practical obligation to pursue it.

Hume concludes Book 1 by noting that just as he has a practical justification for holding epistemologically defeated beliefs, he also has a practical justification for holding them with certainty—at least from time to time (T 1.4.7.15). On reflection Hume holds all of his beliefs tentatively. But in the moment of belief-formation it is natural to form them with certainty, and it would cost too much psychological trouble to fight this natural tendency. Not only does Hume give practical justifications for his beliefs, but he also gives practical justifications for his confidence-levels.

Hume also gives a practical justification for the return to positive philosophy in the first Enquiry. He defends “a more mitigated scepticism or Academical philosophy” on the practical grounds that, unlike Pyrrhonism, it is “both durable and useful” (EHU 12.24). It is sufficient to reject a fanatical devotion to philosophy (Pyrrhonism) which
demands suspension of core beliefs. Academic skepticism has no such consequence does not demand the suicidal suspension of core beliefs (EHU 5.2). Academic philosophy, “in almost every instance, must be harmless and innocent” (EHU 5.1). This “species of mitigated scepticism” is “of advantage to mankind” (EHU 12.25).

However, Hume’s discussions of Academic skepticism in Sections 5 and 12 of the first Enquiry do not emphasize as clearly as the Treatise the practical justification for pursuing (and disregarding) philosophy. The reason for this difference is not far to find. Hume moves the practical defense (and delimitation) of the pursuit of philosophy to Section 1, “Of the Different Species of Philosophy.” Speculative, abstract philosophy stands in need of practical defense just because it has undeniable liabilities (EHU 1.3-4). The abstract turn of mind vanishes when we leave our study (EHU 1.3). Abstract scientists rarely achieve lasting fame, since small errors can vitiate their entire theory (EHU 1.4). “The mere philosopher” seems “to contribute nothing either to the advantage or pleasure of society,” since “he lives remote from communication with mankind, and is wrapped up in principles and notions equally remote from their comprehension” (EHU 1.5). Nature warns:

Abstruse thought and profound researches I prohibit, and will severely punish, by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries will meet with, when communicated. (EHU 1.6)

Hume concedes the practical liabilities of abstruse thought, and endorses a mixed way of life. But he also wants to provide a practical defense of the pursuit of rigorous philosophy, for those who are so inclined, within the context of that mixed way of life.

275 Cf. Fogelin, Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 140-144.
The pursuit of rigorous speculative philosophy is neither obligatory for all nor forbidden to any (EHU 1.7). He argues that “the accurate and abstract philosophy” benefits society in many ways, and is as necessary to the easy philosophy as the anatomist is to the painter (EHU 1.8-9). To those with “curiosity,” abstract philosophy is immediately agreeable and harmless (EHU 1.10). Rigorous philosophy also has the beneficial effect of defeating false philosophy and superstition (EHU 1.11-12). The final paragraphs of the chapter outline the other “many positive advantages, which result from an accurate scrutiny into the powers and faculties of human nature” (EHU 1.13).

Since Hume has already provided this practical defense of philosophy in Section 1, he need not belabor the point in Section 12 when he commends Academic skepticism. Instead he emphasizes two other points about Academic skepticism. First, it prescribes chastened confidence levels in all beliefs. Over against unreflective dogmatism and Pyrrhonian agnosticism, Academics conclude only that we ought to moderate our dogmatic certainty. Already in Section 5, Hume notes that “The academics always talk of doubt and suspense of judgment, of danger in hasty determinations” (EHU 5.1). In Section 12 he expands on this thought and distinguishes Academic from Pyrrhonian

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276 My reading agrees with Garrett’s remark that “the Enquiry emphasizes in its opening section the practical value of philosophical reasoning and in its closing section the uselessness of extreme universal skepticism.” Garrett, Hume, 233. Garrett hurries to add that EHU “does not propose that the acceptance of such a default principle [reason ought to be assented to] would be justified only by the personal pleasure of following it or that its only normativity would be moral.” Ibid. I agree with Garrett that the norms of philosophy (including the default principle) do not possess merely moral normativity or justification. Philosophical normativity is distinct from moral normativity. Sometimes, philosophical norms are also morally normative (insofar as following philosophical norms is immediately agreeable or useful to ourselves or others). At other times, they are morally unjustified.

277 The chastened confidence-levels of Academic skepticism echo the final paragraph of Book 1 of the Treatise, where Hume declares that if he has ever expressed certainty about any of his beliefs, “such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other” (T 1.4.7.15).
doubts. Academic philosophy “may, in part, be the result of this Pyrrhonism, or excessive scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection” (EHU 12.24). Hume agrees with the Pyrrhonians about “the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations,” and about “the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature” (EHU 12.24). So far forth he thinks that “a small tincture of Pyrrhonism” is salutary (ibid). But whereas the Pyrrhonist advises us, in light of these strange infirmities, to suspend all judgment, Hume and the Academics merely affirm that “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).

The second thing about Academic skepticism which Hume emphasizes is that when it comes to positive belief formation, the Academic endorses only philosophy as a method. This point is easily missed because Hume expresses it in different terms than he does in the Treatise. In the Treatise Hume indicates that only when we leave the realm of common life must we choose a method to guide us. He then describes the methodological options as philosophy on the one hand and superstition on the other, and commends philosophy over superstition on practical grounds. But in the first Enquiry, Hume recommends that we confine ourselves to the sphere of common life (EHU 5.1-2, 12.25). This sounds like a prohibition on philosophy altogether, which, according to the Treatise, only begins when we leave the sphere of common life. But in the first Enquiry Hume identifies the scope of philosophy with the sphere of common life: “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected”
(EHU 12.25). So long as the method is philosophy and right reasoning, the sphere is common life. Although in Section 12 Hume does commend philosophy (“judgment”) over alternative methods of belief-formation (“imagination” in the narrow, bad sense), he omits the point that philosophy is a safer and more agreeable guide than superstition.

6.2.3 The Relative Practical Warrant of Philosophy and Superstition

Hume’s subordination of philosophy to practical concerns could very well open the door to all sorts of intellectual bad behavior. A religionist or any other purveyor of absurdities could just as well say that their method of belief formation is as pleasant and useful as any other. In order to justify the pursuit of philosophy, Hume needs to show not only that philosophy has some practical benefit, but that it has more practical benefit than its rivals.

He responds to the potential claims of superstition in Treatise 1.4.7.13. He poses the question in terms of what method will guide us in the beliefs we form about matters

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278 Hume makes the same identification of the scope of “philosophy” and the sphere of common life in the Dialogues when Philo says that the sceptic “considers besides, that every one, even in common life, is constrained to have more or less of this philosophy; that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning; that the larger experience we acquire, and the stronger reason we are endued with, we always render our principles the more general and comprehensive; and that what we call philosophy is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life; and we may only expect greater stability, if not greater truth, from our philosophy, on account of its exacter and more scrupulous method of proceeding” (D 1.9).

279 In Dialogues 1.12-16, Cleante and Philo take up this very question, as to whether Philo’s self-restriction to the sphere of common life rules out even a consideration of questions about the origins of the world. As the rest of the book makes clear, Philo is very willing to discuss the origin of the world, so long as the discussion is governed by the norms of philosophy and right reason.

280 Ridge highlights this worry and provides his own answer. Ridge, “Epistemology Moralized,” 167, 184-194. On Ridge’s view, Hume himself finds reliance upon the understanding (rather than on superstition) immediately agreeable, and this gives him a practical justification for employing it. I agree with Ridge’s point. However, while this argument is, I think, genuinely Humean in spirit, Hume focuses on proving to other people that following philosophy (rather than superstition) will be more immediately agreeable and useful for them. Hume does not directly address the worries about circularity which Ridge tries to answer.
lying outside “the sphere of common life.” For “’tis almost impossible for the mind of
man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of
daily conversation and action.” Hume is led outside that sphere by his strength of mind—
curiosity and ambition. If he were not led outside the sphere of common life by his
strength of mind, then “it wou’d necessarily happen, that from my very weakness I must
be led into such enquiries.”

Hume gives a practical criterion for the doxastic method we ought to prefer in our
enquiries outside common life: “we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our
guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable.” Hume makes no
claim that philosophy is more reliable or truth-conducive than the alternatives. Skeptical
challenges aside, “We might hope to establish a system or set of opinions” which is
“satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical
examination”; but as for truth, “that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for” (T 1.4.7.14).

Hume divides the entire field of methodological alternatives for belief-formation
outside the sphere of common life into two categories: philosophy and superstition. He
argues that philosophy is the safest and most agreeable guide.

And in this respect I make bold to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple
to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination. For as
superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it
seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of
our lives and actions. Philosophy on the contrary, if just, can present us only with
mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are
merely the objects of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to
interrupt the course of our natural propensities….Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous. (T 1.4.7.13)

Hume does not defend philosophy over superstition on the grounds that the former is less susceptible to error, but on the grounds that philosophy causes less harm than religion.

6.2.4 Philosophy on Skeptical Principles

I have argued that Hume is a skeptic in the sense that he denies that our core beliefs are epistemologically justified. I think this is the same sense in which Hume usually uses the terminology of skepticism. For example, when he argues for “scepticism with regard to reason” and “scepticism with regard to the senses,” he argues that the deliverances of reason, and our perceptual beliefs in mind-independent objects, fall short of the normative demands of philosophy.

However, in the latter half of Treatise 1.4.7, Hume uses “skepticism” in two different senses which extend the basic concept of epistemic skepticism. Both senses are compatible with my fundamental claim that Hume is an epistemic but not a practical skeptic. First, he says that the skeptic not only denies that our core beliefs are epistemologically justified, but also goes on to hold those same beliefs on purely practical grounds:

I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I shew most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles. (T 1.4.7.10)

When Hume says “I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature,” he pithily expresses the two main points of the whole paragraph: first, that our core beliefs are
psychologically irresistible (“I must…”), and second, that yielding to irresistible beliefs is practically permissible (“I may…”). Holding these beliefs is “blind submission” because the beliefs are philosophically unjustified. By following his practical interest rather than philosophical obligations, Hume says he shows “most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles.” He makes the same point in the next paragraph:

In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, ’tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise. (T 1.4.7.11)

The point here is that Hume holds the beliefs he does not because they are epistemologically justified, but because “it costs us too much pains to think otherwise.” This practically justified acceptance of core beliefs is a way of preserving our skepticism.

Second, Hume talks about skepticism at the meta-level, not merely as an evaluative attitude towards first-order beliefs, but as a particular attitude towards the pursuit of philosophy. The skeptical way to pursue philosophy is to do so only on the practical grounds of a current inclination, as the Inclination Principle dictates. To philosophize on skeptical principles is to do so only because we feel so inclined, not because it will lead to truth. He elaborates on this meta-skepticism a few paragraphs later:

If the reader finds himself in the same easy disposition, let him follow me in my future speculations. If not, let him follow his inclination, and wait the returns of application and good humour. The conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so over-whelm’d with doubts and scruples, as totally to reject it. A

281 Thus also Fogelin: “It is the blindness of the submission—accepting something without having, or even seeking, justificatory grounds—that shows most perfectly his skeptical dispositions and principles.” Fogelin, _Hume’s Skeptical Crisis_, 131.
true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them. (T 1.4.7.14)

The alternative to philosophizing merely out of a present inclination, is to pursue philosophy out of a conviction that doing so will lead to truth. This conviction motivates the Pyrrhonist to strictly adhere to philosophy even when doing so crosses her inclination. But Hume rejects this faith in the truth-conduciveness of philosophy: “I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty” (T 1.4.7.10). Strict adherence to philosophy leads not to truth, but only to philosophical melancholy, delirium, and universal agnosticism.282

6.3 The Title Principle as a Merely Practical Norm

In light of the preceding considerations, the place of the Title Principle in Hume’s response to epistemic skepticism is fairly clear: the “ought” of both the Inclination Principle and of the Title Principle is practical, not philosophical and therefore not epistemic. Hume responds to epistemic skepticism by following practical norms rather than philosophical norms when they conflict. He expresses this subordination of

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282 Hume does affirm not only the immediate agreeability but also the usefulness of following philosophy, as I will go on to show. But Hume does not seem to think that the long-term utility of following philosophy practically justifies any significant sacrifice of immediate pleasure. I can agree with Fogelin that “With respect to our motive for pursuing philosophy, on this approach, it is the same as our motive for playing backgammon or conversing with merry friends: In appropriate circumstances and carried out in the appropriate way, it can be fun.” Fogelin, Hume’s Skeptical Crisis, 132. These are “Hume’s skeptical grounds for reentering his study”—not truth-conduciveness. Ibid, 133. “One pursues a philosophical topic for the intrinsic pleasure it gives.” Ibid, 135.
philosophy to practical interests in what I have called the Inclination Principle and in its corollary, the Title Principle:

Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. 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. (T 1.4.7.11)

The Inclination Principle says that we should only follow philosophy when we feel so inclined—that is, when doing so is immediately agreeable to us. That is, we should follow philosophy—obey its norms—only when we have a practical justification for doing so. This is the general principle of which the Title Principle merely an instance. Philosophy endorses the default principle that reason ought always be assented to. The Title Principle says we practically ought to obey that particular philosophical norm, the default principle, only when we are so inclined, when we feel some propensity to assent, when assent is more agreeable than trying to withhold assent. As Hume explains a few sentences before the Title Principle: “If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, ’tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise” (T 1.4.7.7).

An adequate interpretation of the Title Principle should explain its relative obscurity. The principle only appears at this one place in the entire Hume corpus. Granted, it plays a key role here, for it practically permits us to ignore reason’s defeater arguments against our core beliefs. But Hume spends most of Treatise 1.4.7.8-15 talking about the practical justification for philosophy, not talking about reason. In the parallel
Section 12 of the first *Enquiry*, Hume does not express the Title Principle at all, but only discusses the limited practical warrant of philosophy.\(^{283}\)

On my reading, there is a good explanation for this relative obscurity: the Title Principle is only one application of the far more fundamental and general Inclination Principle. The Title Principle tells us that we can ignore reason when reason threatens our core beliefs. This suffices as a response to the rational defeater arguments against inferences (T 1.4.1; cf. 1.4.7.7) and belief in body (T 1.4.2-4; cf. T 1.4.7.4 and EHU 12.7-14). But there might be other skeptical arguments to which the Title Principle is not well adapted. Take for example the traditional problem of induction, which Hume advances (merely as a rhetorical move, in my view; cf. Chapter 5) at various points in his corpus. This skeptical argument presupposes that beliefs not supported by reason are not epistemologically justified. The Title Principle does nothing to solve this problem. It tells us only when reason is insufficient for epistemic justification, not when reason is unnecessary. But we can easily apply the Inclination Principle to meet this challenge too. Whether philosophy demands that we assent to rational defeaters of inductive inferences, or demands that we withhold assent to inductive inferences because they are not produced by reason, the Inclination Principle tells us to retain inductive inferences anyhow. Suspending inductive inferences costs too much pain, whatever philosophy may require. There are indefinitely many ways in which the Inclination Principle could be

\(^{283}\) Just because Hume does not state the Title Principle in the first *Enquiry* does not mean he implicitly dispenses with it. Here I disagree with Garrett who says that “Because the skeptical recital of the first *Enquiry* omits reason’s potential self-annihilation and the Dangerous Dilemma, the later work does not invoke the Title Principle; it can instead implicitly retain the simpler default principle, *reason ought to be assented to.*” Garrett, *Hume*, 233. But Hume needs the Title Principle not only to overcome the skeptical argument against reason which generates the dangerous dilemma (T 1.4.7.7), but also to overcome the rational skeptical argument against belief in mind-independent objects, an argument which he retains in the first *Enquiry* (EHU 12.7-14; cf. T 1.4.2, 1.4.7.4). So he cannot implicitly retain the default principle in the first *Enquiry* either; here too he must implicitly embrace the Title Principle.
applied to cope with different kinds of skeptical arguments. The Title Principle is just one example (although an important example, since it is fitted to the skeptical arguments Hume himself takes most seriously).

Garrett agrees that “the disposition to reason in accordance with the Title Principle does indeed achieve moral approval in the Treatise as a trait that is useful to its possessor.”284 But he argues that the Title Principle must have epistemic as well as moral normative force.285 Garrett argues that beliefs which we regard as epistemologically unjustified are not stable beliefs.286 But stable beliefs are necessary in order to morally evaluate a given character trait. In order to morally assess the disposition to follow the Title Principle, we must have stable beliefs about the causal consequences of that disposition. We also need stable beliefs about the sentiments that that disposition would elicit from the common point of view. So if we regard all of our beliefs as epistemologically unjustified, we will lack the stable beliefs necessary to morally evaluate the disposition to follow the Title Principle. Either Hume approves of the Title Principle both epistemologically and morally, or neither epistemologically nor morally.

I can agree with Garrett that moral approval presupposes the causal beliefs which he mentions. But I think Garrett overstates the destabilizing force of negative epistemic assessment. Hume is able to hold beliefs as true which he simultaneously believes are not epistemologically justified.287 Hume cannot hold his beliefs while he reflects intensely on

285 Ibid.
286 For Garrett, epistemologically justified beliefs are those we take to be true or probably true. Ibid.
287 This point may find additional substantiation from Hume’s discussion of education. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the deliverances of education are also often incorrigible though epistemologically defeated (T 1.3.9.17-19). Although Hume does not explicitly say that education-produced beliefs are incorrigible for those who believe that they are epistemologically unjustified, it seems likely that this is what he means. Like amputees who forget that they lack a limb (T 1.3.9.18), even philosophers may find themselves
the rational defeater argument which show that they are improbable. In this sense, his beliefs are unstable, because he loses them again every time he thinks hard about the skeptical arguments. But after Hume emerges from his “philosophical melancholy and delirium,” he resumes the beliefs of common life without claiming that he can answer the rational defeaters. In fact he freely admits that he cannot answer the skeptical defeater arguments. It is true that Hume cannot morally approve of the disposition to follow the Title Principle while he is intensely meditating on skeptical objections. But it does not follow that he cannot morally approve of the Title Principle when he emerges from his closet. For then he regains beliefs which he knows he would not hold, were he to think through the relevant arguments in accord with the rules of philosophical probability. Hume can and does morally approve of the disposition to follow the Title Principle on the basis of causal beliefs which, by his own admission, face insuperable defeaters.

6.4 Conclusion

Despite the fact that philosophy affords no epistemic justification for continuing to hold any core beliefs, let alone scientific theories, Hume goes right on believing and theorizing. For the right people, in the right mood, pursuing philosophy—investigating the world and forming theories according to its methodological norms—affords innocent pleasure. Suspending our core beliefs, as philosophy also demands, only brings pain. Other methods of inquiry (like superstition) are dangerous. As for truth—“that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for” (T 1.4.7.14).

Note that I do not say Hume regains beliefs which he knows are false. I attribute to Hume the ordinary view that belief means regarding as true.
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