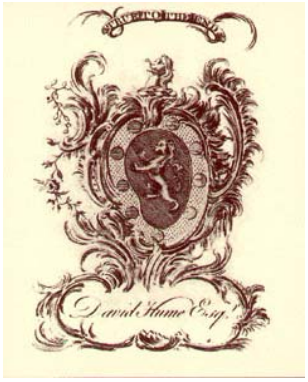

Hume's "Of Skepticism with Regard to Reason": A Study in Contrasting Themes

Robert A. Imlay

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HUME'S *Of Scepticism with regard to reason:* A STUDY IN CONTRASTING THEMES.*

This paper attempts to describe the complex dialectical interplay among the contrasting rational, sceptical and naturalist elements which appear in Section I, Part IV of Book I of Hume's Treatise of Human Nature. At the same time we shall try to show that, contrary to Hume's own evaluation of that section, it is the sceptical element, in which the unreliability of reason is supposedly demonstrated, as opposed to the naturalist element, in which its unreliability is supposed to remain hidden from us, that deserves to triumph. With these two goals in mind and in order to make it easier for the reader to follow the inevitable twists and turns of the dialectic, we have divided the paper into two three-sectioned parts. The first part bears the title "Reason and Scepticism", while the second part bears the title "Naturalism".

The first section of Part I is concerned with proving that Hume's attempted reduction of all knowledge to probability is frustrated by his failure to explain how we can make mistakes in simple operations with small numbers. If so, the first phase of his sceptical assault against reason fails to dislodge her from her throne. If the second section is right, the second stage of the sceptical assault fares no better. For Hume's attempted reduction of all probabilities to zero is shown to rely on an unsatisfactory formula for calculating the probabilities in question. In the third section an effort is made to show that the attempted reduction of the second section, if it had been a success instead of a failure, would have destroyed reason but left scepticism intact.

*I should like to thank Howard Sobel for his penetrating and unsparing criticism of an earlier version of this paper.

Hume's conviction, on the other hand, that the flawed reduction in question is unflawed and destroys both leads to a prolonged discussion, initiated in the first section of Part II, of his naturalism. Indeed, this theme dominates the rest of the paper. Thus it deserves a part to itself. If we are correct in the first section of Part II, Hume's naturalism is best interpreted as a doctrine of instincts relying for its doctrinal status upon a failure to accept the conclusion of the sceptical argument directed against reason. But, as we try to bring out in the second section, the specific psychological inability with which Hume could in the final analysis give substance to this failure of acceptance is left without any causal foundation. Finally, in the third section that inability is seen to run afoul of reason as Hume himself understands it. And note is taken of the fact that reason so understood and the sceptical argument directed against reason that Hume adopts for his own both commit him willy-nilly to rejecting for good or ill one standard definition of knowledge.

Reason and Scepticism

I

Nowhere are the rational elements in Hume's philosophy more in evidence, ironically enough, than in Section I, Part IV of Book I of the Treatise entitled *Of Scepticism with regard to reason.* For it is there we are told in the very first paragraph that *in all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible.*[1] *Our reason,* moreover, *must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect.* (T180) In other words, reason, left to its own devices, would produce truth and, presumably, only truth.

Anyone who steadfastly adheres to such principles will reject out of hand one kind of scepticism with regard

to reason. That is the kind which results from the alleged discovery that reason, left to its own devices, compels us to embrace one or more contradictions, an obvious form of falsity.[2] It is a kind of scepticism which Bayle cultivated so assiduously. And yet, despite the influence which Bayle's writings exerted upon Hume, they never convinced him of the viability of this kind of scepticism. On the contrary, apart from some wavering in the Enquiry, he was as adamant as any Leibnizian rationalist that right reasoning leads only to truth.[3] Or, if that smacks of a tautology, he was as adamant as any Leibnizian rationalist that reason left to its own devices is always right.

What kind of scepticism with regard to reason is Hume prepared, then, to entertain? It is one which depends initially upon *our fallible and uncertain faculties* (T180) which lead us to misapply the certain and infallible rules of the demonstrative sciences. But reason, as already indicated, is not one of these faculties. Rather, it is *by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers* (T180) that we mistake the false for the true. What Hume probably has in mind here are things like failure to pay attention and lapses of memory. They are both common causes of error. They were, moreover, explicitly recognized as such in the Cartesian tradition which forms the backdrop to so much of what transpires in this section of the Treatise. On the other hand, however, Descartes himself set definite limits to the efficacy of these causes of error. For he held that some truths are so simple that they merely have to be entertained in order to be seen to be true.[4] And he seems to have thought that at least some additions of two small numbers figured among such truths.[5]

Does Cartesian procedure here have any relevance to Hume? It would seem that he has a grudging respect for it even when he is quite consciously flouting it. For he specifically mentions *accompts of any length or importance*

as being prey to the inconstancy of our mental powers. This situation is to be rectified in part by the *artificial structure of the accompts*. (T181) And it is only when he has satisfied himself that as a result our assurance in a long numeration does not exceed probability that he turns to additions of two numbers large or small. Even then, however, he does not address himself directly to the question of how we come to make mistakes in such simple operation with small numbers. Rather, he produces arguments designed to show that since we can make mistakes in long enumerations we must be able - presumably whether we can explain the mechanics of it or not - to make mistakes in even the shortest ones. Nor is any allowance made for the size of the numbers involved. If, on the other hand, he had been able to explain the mechanics of it, such arguments would not even have been required. Moreover, if he is unable to produce such an explanation covering numbers both large and small, it is plausible to assume that something is wrong with the arguments.

Hume's personally unacknowledged failure to undermine directly the paradigmatic reliability of immediate inference - elsewhere and in a different context an actual commitment to its reliability is explicitly made - [6] hardly promotes his effort to cultivate scepticism with regard to it. Indeed, if we were to accept a premiss of one of his arguments, namely, that *if any single addition were certain, every one wou'd be so, and consequently the whole or total sum* we should, ironically enough, have no choice on the evidence at hand but to affirm the antecedent and conclude that he is, despite himself, providing an argument for the infallibility of at least some total sums as opposed to the fallibility of immediate inference per se, as he had intended. (T181) And so much the worse for his scepticism with regard to reason. The premiss, however, is quite untenable. Hume himself, as we have seen, has already insisted on the inconstancy of our mental powers.

But, surely, such inconstancy would allow me to add 7 and 5, say, get 12, forget and put down 13 instead. I may then add 13 and 2 and get 15. I may be certain of the two single additions involved here without being certain of the sum, which is in fact wrong. That Hume should have deliberately committed himself to a premiss which is so obviously incompatible with such a homely phenomenon gives some indication of the dire straits to which he is reduced in his attempt to discredit immediate inference indirectly. An explanation of how it is that immediate inference may be mistaken, if one is forthcoming, would, on the other hand, have allowed him to dispense with such an unappealing premiss.

II

Hume, nonetheless, is satisfied, at least for the moment, that *all knowledge resolves itself into probability.* (T181) He then proceeds to produce an argument designed to show that all probabilities are reducible to zero. It essentially goes as follows:

> *In every judgment...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.*
>
> *...Having thus found in every probability, beside the original uncertainty inherent in the subject, a new uncertainty deriv'd from the weakness of that faculty, which judges, and having adjusted these two together, we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties. This is a doubt, which immediately occurs to us, and of which, if we wou'd closely pursue our reason, we cannot avoid giving a decision. But this decision, tho' it should be favourable to our preceeding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still further our first evidence, and must itself be weaken'd by a fourth doubt of*

> *the same kind, and so on in infinitum... No finite object can subsist under a decrease repeated in infinitum...all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence.* (T181-183)

What are we to make of this argument? There does seem to be a flaw in it. For Hume seems to be convinced that with the introduction of each new probability judgment the probability or the original sum, say, will diminish until at infinity it reaches 0. Actually he should have said that at infinity it converges on 0.[7] But in the circumstances that is not an important criticism. What is important is his conviction that with the introduction of each new probability judgment the original probability assigned to the sum needs must diminish at all. Such a diminution would inevitably occur if in order to find the probability of a probability I simply multiplied the two together. Such a procedure, however, ignores the probability however slight that the original probability is different and perhaps even higher than I initially judged it to be. Thus if it is, given my faculty of judgment, .7 probable that the original probability of the sum is .8, it may nonetheless, given that same faculty, be .3 probable - it could be no higher - that it is .9. If moreover, I add the two together, as I should, I get .7 x .8 + .3 x .9 = .83. This number, needless to say, is higher than the one assigned as the original probability of the sum. And even if we continued the process, as well we may, of asking for the probability of the relevant judgment of probability there is no reason to believe that the series would converge on 0.[8]

III

Earlier we mentioned Descartes and his belief that at least some additions of two small numbers merely have to be entertained in order to be seen to be true. Hume,

on the contrary, seems to interpret him as holding that everything is open to doubt antecedent to all study and philosophy. For as Hume understands him, Descartes is prepared at the start to doubt his very faculties among which reason figures. But once one doubts reason it is clearly pointless to try, as Hume's version of Descartes does, to show by rational means that such a doubt is misplaced. (EHU149-50) Hume, ironically enough, is forced to anticipate a similar criticism of his own sceptical argument as we have just described it. Here again the criticism is directed against someone who is compelled to employ reason in order to gain his end. In this case the end is the vindication of scepticism at the expense of reason. But the vindication, being in the form of an argument concerning probabilities, is supposed to be rational. So, reason is not destroyed. Or, if the vindication is not rational, it will not constitute a genuine vindication of scepticism. (T186)

Hume's reply to this criticism, if I understand it correctly, is that the sceptic merely employs the weapon with which his opponent unwittingly provides him from his own stock, namely, reason. He does not commit himself by that action to an evaluation either favourable or unfavourable of the weapon in question. As a result, he has as much logical right as anyone else to employ it up until the time when it is seen to destroy itself along with, Hume might have added, whatever justification there might have been for believing that it was his opponent's weapon in the first place. Reason's destruction in turn does guarantee that there can be no ultimate vindication of scepticism or, for that matter, of anything else. But, if scepticism is destroyed, reason is destroyed along with it. (T186-187)

I find this a very effective reply to the criticism in question. It is not, however, a perfectly accurate account of the state in which we should find ourselves if Hume's sceptical argument directed against reason were

sound. For, contrary to what he seems to believe, scepticism is not destroyed in the battle with reason that he describes. Rather, it emerges triumphant, even though no statement to this effect can be rationally vindicated. Similarly, although reason destroys itself in the battle, no statement to this effect can be rationally vindicated. And Hume might have thought that since the absence of rational vindication in the latter case was accompanied by the destruction of reason the same absence of the rational vindication in the former case would be accompanied by the destruction of scepticism. But this train of thought seems to have little to recommend it.

Naturalism

What then of Hume's naturalism as it appears in this section of the Treatise? Hume holds that the ultimate victor in the struggle between reason and scepticism is nature or, more precisely, custom working through the sensitive or instinctual as opposed to the cogitative part of our nature. It is nature filtered through custom that is supposed to prevent us in a purely alogical way from accepting the overly refined arguments of the sceptic, particularly the argument we considered in the first part of this paper. (T183) Hume, curiously enough, does not seem to have taken very seriously the possibility that one may accept the overly refined arguments of the sceptic and nonetheless continue to believe, albeit without justification from one's own standpoint, in the efficacy of reason. And yet one is led to ask how such a procedure would be so very different from, say, the one he attributes to us with respect to the uniformity of nature. Such a uniformity is one in which, according to him, we continue to believe even though the belief can be shown by refined argumentation to have no rational justification. Indeed, this persistence of belief in the face of sceptical considerations that are supposed

to render it rationally gratuitous is one of the more constant and certainly one of the most original elements in the shifting concept of nature as it manifests itself in Hume's philosophy. To insist, on the other hand, that nature prevents us from accepting the overly refined arguments of the sceptic makes it impossible to give a coherent explanation of how Hume himself managed to produce the argument allegedly destroying reason and presumably accepting its conclusion. The argument has to be produced in order for its refined nature to be appreciated in the first place. Its conclusion has to be accepted in order for the call upon nature to fill the breach left by reason to be adequately motivated.

Failure to accept the conclusion would, nonetheless, have at least one important systematic advantage from Hume's point of view. For, while it would leave his naturalism in the present context at least without adequate motivation, it would make it easier to understand how he might have come to think that it was rationally justified and, as such, something for which good arguments could be adduced. Acceptance of the sceptical conclusion, on the other hand, would convert his naturalism itself into one more example of a belief we persist in retaining - the belief in the uniformity of nature has already been mentioned in this connection - in the face of evidence depriving it of any rational foundation. And while Hume has succeeded in convincing many of us that the belief in the uniformity of nature can and does survive the awareness of such a deprivation, it would be harder to put a similar case for the belief in his naturalism per se of which the characterization of the belief in the uniformity of nature appears to be a corollary. The naturalism presents itself as a doctrine concerned with the alogical, instinctual character of belief rendering it impervious to a sceptical assault, no matter how dialectically compelling, aimed at putting us in a condition where we withhold all beliefs. But would it

be possible to espouse such a doctrine and at the same time be persuaded that, even if it should turn out to be true, there is no evidence for it? A doctrine relating to instincts like the belief in the uniformity of nature is one thing. An instinctual doctrine relating to such instincts is quite another.[9]

II

But if we are not to fall prey to such a persuasion it becomes important to understand how we are prevented from appreciating the full effect of the sceptical argument as Hume understands it. How does nature accomplish this task so necessary to her own doctrinal status? Hume's answer seems to be that the successive judging about a judgment in infinitum, a refinement which the sceptical argument certainly possesses, strains the mind. Thus diverted from its natural course, the mind prevents us from accepting the argument in question.[10] This answer, however, will hardly do. It presupposes wrongly, as Laird has pointed out, the impossibility of seeing where an infinite series leads without taking an infinite number of steps.[11] Indeed, Hume would have been better off to admit that we do see where the series leads - such a feat does not seem unduly to have strained his mind - but to insist on the infinite number of steps as an indispensable way of bringing the conclusion of the sceptical argument home to us. And since we obviously cannot take an infinite number of steps the conclusion is never brought home to us. The distinction between seeing where a series leads and having it brought home to us would, needless to say, require further clarification. The possibility remains open, moreover, that it is a distinction based on no real difference.

Should we, then, like Laird substitute for mental strain "the atmosphere of unreality that hovered round all abstruse arguments once the moment of philosophical

enthusiasm had passed?"[12] There is little doubt that Hume thought that philosophical arguments of sceptical intent bathed in the atmosphere Laird describes. Indeed, they did not even have to be sceptical in intent, as his remarks on Berkeley's arguments make abundantly clear. (EHU155) On the other hand, however, there is no evidence as far as I can see that he held this opinion of all abstruse arguments. He did not, for example, hold it of mathematical arguments which are in his view characteristically abstruse.[13] And those he did reject or, at the very least, hesitated to accept did not suffer their fate because they were abstruse. Rather, it was because their conclusions asserted or implied the infinite divisibility of extension, a capacity which Hume took to be impossible. Similarly, I would suggest that it is not the abstruse nature of sceptical arguments that is supposed to prevent us from accepting them. It is the paradoxical nature - Laird's atmosphere of unreality - of their conclusions, a characteristic especially prominent when we are no longer attending to the arguments, that fulfils this prophylactic function.[14]

There is, nonetheless, a problem here. For to cite the allegedly paradoxical nature of the conclusions in question is not to tell us how nature prevents us from accepting them. Indeed, in this respect Hume's original explanation in terms of mental strain has the advantage over the present one. Mental strain is a natural phenomenon that does all too often limit our powers of comprehension, if not of acceptance.[15] The absence, on the other hand, of a corresponding natural phenomenon to explain why we find the conclusions of sceptical arguments paradoxical robs Hume's appeal here to nature of its initial significance. It can now mean little more than that our inability to accept these conclusions is like the principles of association which *must be resolv'd into original qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain.* (T13)

III

What, then, of Hume's contention mentioned at the beginning of this paper that *our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause of which truth is the natural effect* (T180)? This contention more precisely formulated would seem to commit him, whether he is aware of it or not, to the existence of a causal connection between our reasoning and the discovery of truth. A causal connection, as Hume would be the first to agree, holds between events.[16] Truth, being a universal, is in any case incapable of entering such a relation. On the other hand, however, if there is a causal connection between our reason and the discovery of truth, it is, nonetheless, in conflict with at least one manifestation of our original and not further explicable inability to accept the conclusions of sceptical arguments. I am thinking, needless to say, of the conclusion of Hume's sceptical argument directed against reason. He clearly takes this argument to be sound, i.e. to adhere to the canons of reason, even if it is supposed ultimately to discredit those same canons. As a result, owing to the causal connection he thinks he discerns between our reason and the discovery of truth, Hume ought to expect us to assent to its conclusion. For, surely, to discover that something is true is to assent to it. Unfortunately, owing to the original and not further explicable inability he thinks he discerns in us to accept the conclusions of sceptical arguments, he ought also to expect us to dissent from its conclusion.

Which of these two mutually inconsistent expectations is to be preferred? It would seem to be the former as opposed to the latter. Hume's naturalism, as we have already had occasion to argue, is already in difficulty. And in any case the failure to extract from his writings a satisfactory account of how it is supposed to accomplish the task he assigns to it in this section of the Treatise

is a substantial one. Indeed, it bestows an unenviable and suspicious ad hoc character on any subsequent attempt like the one we made to convert it into an original and not further explicable inability to accept the conclusions of sceptical arguments. A causal connection between our reason and the discovery of truth, on the other hand, would, if there is one, have to be original and not further explicable. For any explanation of it would surely have to adhere to the canons of reason before it would be taken to be adequate to the causal connection in question. But this requirement would itself stand in need of explanation and, what is more important, for the very same reason as the original explicandum stood in need of explanation. It, too, in other words, commits one to a causal connection between our reason and the discovery of truth.[17]

A causal connection between our reason and the discovery of truth is, then, not to be further explained. And this is as it should be. For acceptance of the conclusion of the sceptical argument directed against reason would in any case render it impossible to place any confidence in such an explanation. Indeed, the causal connection like scepticism itself would become something that we know to be true, if we know it at all, in the absence of evidence either explaining or justifying it. The possibility of such knowledge is incompatible with one standard definition of it as justified true belief.[18] It is, nonetheless, standard or not, a definition of knowledge that for good or ill Hume could not consistently accept.

Robert A. Imlay
University of Toronto

1. A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), p.180. Hereafter cited as T.

2. One is, needless to say, put in mind here of Kant's alleged antinomy of pure reason and the limits for human knowledge that he drew from it. More recently

the paradoxes of naive set theory led mathematicians to axiomatize the subject in such a way as to prevent the paradoxes from arising, i.e. they were no longer content to leave reason to its own devices.

3. An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding from Enquiries... ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1902), pp.156-58. Hereafter cited as EHU.

4. Haldane and Ross, The Philosophical Works of Descartes, corrected ed. (Cambridge, 1934), II, p.42 (hereafter H.R.). Oeuvres de Descartes, ed. by C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1879 - 1910), VII, pp.145-46. (hereafter A.T.).

5. H.R., I, pp.158-59. A.T., VII, pp.35-36.

6. (T96-97). He says in the note there that an inference of a cause from its effect is the strongest of all species of reasoning and *more convincing than when we interpose another idea to connect the two extremes.* An addition of two small numbers would also presumably be free from such an interposition. For the two ideas involved in the addition of 7 and 5 to get 12 would be the idea of the sum of 7 and 5 and the idea of 12. And this would be an example of what we have called "immediate inference." Hume, it may be noted, employs the same language in the note in question.

7. H. A. Pritchard, Knowledge and Perception (Oxford, 1950), p.195.

8. Hans Reichenbach, "Are Phenomenal Reports Absolutely Certain?", Philosophical Review, vol. 61 (1952), pp.151-52. The formula Reichenbach gives is "q. p + (1 - q) .p'" where in the case at hand p is the probability I assign to the original sum and q is the probability in view of my limited powers of judgment that such an assignment is correct. p' is the probability I assign to the sum in case the original probability assigned to it is false.

9. For a divergent point of view see A. J. Ayer, Probability and Evidence (London and Basingstoke, 1972), pp.5-6. If we do admit the possibility of an instinctual doctrine here as Ayer would seem prepared to do, it will nonetheless be markedly different from the other instincts of which the doctrine treats. For they, presumably, are the property of all human beings - we all believe in the uniformity of nature - but it is doubtful whether the majority of human beings understand let alone believe the alleged doctrinal consequences of such a belief.

10. (T185). It is especially the first full paragraph on this page which lends itself to this interpretation.

11. John Laird, Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature (London, 1932), p.178.

12. Laird, p.178. In the interest of precision it should be noted that Laird speaks of mental fatigue where we speak of mental strain. I think that our interpretation is closer to the text.

13. It is, indeed, this characteristic which in Hume's view distinguishes the arguments of the mathematical sciences from those of the moral ones. See Enquiry, p.61.

14. By "paradoxical" I mean "in conflict with our common sense notions." This does not imply, however, that conclusions of sceptical arguments possessing this characteristic are in Hume's view consequently false. Indeed, he believes that the conclusion of the one with which we have dealt in this paper is true.

15. The distinction is worth making. Hume's view that mental strain limits our powers of acceptance does not seem to have much in its favour. Admittedly, the mental strain that goes into the comprehension of an argument may later induce scepticism on my part as to the acceptability of my original acceptance of its conclusion. And the scepticism would probably be based on the fact that arguments involving mental strain are usually abstruse. For there is a connection between such abstruseness and the occurrence of error. But the fact remains that despite the strain I was under I did originally accept the conclusion. An acceptance accompanied by mental strain is, needless to say, still an acceptance.

16. Although Hume couches his definitions of causality in terms of objects, he tends to use "object" and "event" in this context interchangeably. Thus, in the Enquiry in the paragraph immediately preceding the one where he gives his two definitions of cause, he notes that *this idea of a necessary connexion among events arises from a number of similar instances which occur on the constant conjunction of these events.* And in this paragraph itself "object" and "event" are used interchangeably. (See EHU75-76)

17. Hume himself in all likelihood would accept this line of thought. For to require an explanation of the causal connection between reason and the discovery of truth seems tantamount in the absence of such an

explanation to doubting at the start our faculties, among which reason figures. And we already know what Hume thinks of that.

18. For important criticism of the definition see Edmund L. Gettier's by now classic "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Analysis, 23-6 (1963). pp.121-23.