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HUME'S "DIALECTIC"

Hume's treatment of contradiction in his discussion of external existence has generally been understood to resemble the Pyrrhonian model of dialectic; consequently, Hume has been viewed as a sceptic and an irrationalist.¹ According to that model of dialectic, the sceptic, by showing that equally strong arguments can be constructed both for and against a proposition, raises doubts about the ability of reason to determine the truth or falsity of beliefs.² However, I will argue that Hume's treatment of contradiction differs significantly from Pyrrhonian dialectic. I will further argue that his treatment of contradiction is strongly analogous to the Kantian model of dialectic. According to Kant, dialectic is a method which not only shows that reason generates contradictions but which also provides a critique of the logic generating those contradictions.³ The goal of Kant's dialectic is thus distinctly different from the goal of Pyrrhonian dialectic. For Kant, dialectic is a method for resolving scepticism. The parallels between Hume's treatment of contradiction and Kant's dialectic will suffice to show that Hume's "dialectic" is also a method for resolving, rather than generating, scepticism.

I

Two features of Pyrrhonian dialectic have been deemed relevant for Hume's treatment of contradiction in his discussion of external existence. The Pyrrhonist argues that (1) if equally strong arguments can be given for and against a proposition, it is impossible to assess the truth or falsity of the proposition on the basis of any argument; and (2) if it

is impossible to assess rationally the truth or falsity of propositions, we must content ourselves in practical life with following custom and convention in all matters of opinion.

Hume describes the contradiction in our belief in external existence as an opposition between two equally natural and unavoidable modes of inference. Both modes of inference are operations of the imagination. Hume does not give a special name to the first of these modes of inference, but he describes it as an "irregular" inference based upon the resemblance of two distinct mental operations (T 203-204).⁴ The second is reflective, or causal, inference based on observation of the constant conjunction of like objects. Causal reasoning is reflective insofar as it is regulated by rules and is, consequently, a check or monitor for judgments resulting from the irregular or unchecked operation of the imagination. These two principles of inference lead to two different judgments about the nature of our perceptions:

The imagination tells us, that our resembling perceptions have a continu'd and uninterrupted existence, and are not annihilated by their absence. Reflection tells us, that even our resembling perceptions are interrupted in their existence, and different from each other. (T 215)

Just as the Pyrrhonian sceptic maintains that the constructibility of equally strong arguments establishing contradictory propositions makes it impossible to decide which proposition is true, Hume similarly maintains that two opposing modes of inference have an equal influence on the mind and therefore are "unable mutually to destroy each other" (T 215). However, Hume's account of this contradiction would be Pyrrhonian only if he argued that these principles, in addition to being equal in psychological

force, also have the same epistemic status. Only their having the same epistemic status makes it impossible to decide rationally whether one of the two principles is a reliable guide for making sound empirical inferences.

Popkin, a defender of the Pyrrhonian reading of Hume, maintains that this is just what Hume does argue. Reflection for Hume, he maintains, is no more a rational principle than is unchecked imagination:

There is no rational basis for believing that those objects that have constantly been conjoined in the past, will be so conjoined in the future. It is only custom, or "a certain instinct of our nature," that makes us believe that they will be so conjoined, and this instinct which may be hard to resist psychologically, may well be fallacious and deceitful. The basis for all factual and probable reasoning is thus irrational. ⁵

If reflection is as irrational a principle as unchecked imagination, then the opposition between reflection and unchecked imagination would be an opposition between equally irrational principles. Consequently, a rational assessment of the truth or falsity of propositions about the nature of our perceptions cannot be based on either of these principles.

This Pyrrhonian reading of Hume is reinforced by a parallel between the solutions to contradiction which Hume and the Pyrrhonian sceptic recommend. Hume's solution is carelessness and inattention (T 218). Popkin stresses that this solution resembles the Pyrrhonian recommendation that we follow custom and convention because we are unable to assess rationally which of our opinions are true. ⁶ To quote Hume:

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... 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. (T 269)

The Pyrrhonian reading of Hume depends upon the false assumption that for Hume custom or instinct is necessarily an irrational principle. Although Hume repeatedly claims that causal inference has no basis in "reason," the sense of "reason" to which he refers is deductive reasoning. Causal reasoning is based on custom because it has no foundation in any principle external to itself. By arguing that causal inference is not justified by any demonstratively certain principle, Hume is not arguing that causal inference is irrational.⁷ Rather, he intends to show that causal inference has its own distinct kind of rationality: "We infer a cause immediately from its effect," writes Hume, "and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others" (T 97n). Reflection and unchecked imagination, therefore, do not have the same epistemic status for Hume. Consequently, in discussing the contradiction between reflection and unchecked imagination, he leaves no doubt which of the two opposing principles is a reliable guide for making judgments about the nature of our perceptions:

I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system... 'Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and 'tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions are uninterrupted, and are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses. (T 217)

Thus, for Hume, the issue brought out in the contradiction between reflection and unchecked imagination must concern the psychological opposition between these two principles, not the epistemic opposition between them. If Hume recommends

carelessness and inattention as the solution to their opposition, it is not because he believes that reason is incapable of deciding the truth or falsity of opposing beliefs. To explain Hume's true motive for recommending carelessness and inattention, I will turn to the Kantian model of dialectic for a clue.

II

According to Kant, contradictions are symptomatic of natural illusions to which human reason is necessarily subject. Dialectic is the criticism of the logic of these natural illusions. In general outline, a criticism of the logic of illusion must (1) provide a criterion for determining the "objective validity" of concepts; (2) provide an account of the proper sphere of application of transcendent concepts and of how these concepts appear to be objectively valid concepts; and (3) show that, while natural illusions are inevitable, false judgments about them are not. Let me briefly rehearse some of the details of Kant's application of this method of dialectical criticism.

Kant's criticism of natural illusion begins with a criterion for what constitutes an objectively valid concept. Objectively valid concepts are a priori concepts which are the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience (the categories). Kant distinguishes these concepts from transcendent concepts, a priori concepts which are not conditions for possible experience. Contradictions arise because these transcendent concepts have the appearance of objectively valid concepts. The illusion of their objective validity is explained in part by their origin.

Kant argues that human reason is necessarily architectonic, i.e., it naturally seeks complete systematization of its principles. Therefore, in addition to reasoning according to categorical concepts which are the necessary conditions for the unity of appearances, human reason is naturally inclined to reason according to concepts which are the necessary conditions for the unity of these categorical principles. These concepts are transcendent because they are only conditions for the complete systematization of principles and not for the unity of appearances; consequently they are only "subjectively valid." However, transcendent concepts, like categorical concepts, are necessary conditions for unity. Because the relationship between condition and conditioned for transcendent concepts and categorical concepts resembles the relationship between condition and conditioned for categorical concepts and appearances, transcendent concepts have the illusory appearance of objectively valid concepts.

Kant argues that because human reason is naturally architectonic, the illusion of the objective validity of these transcendent concepts is unavoidable: "This is an illusion," he writes, "which can no more be prevented than we can prevent the sea appearing higher at the horizon than at the shore, since we see it through higher light rays" (CPR 299). While these illusions are unavoidable, deception by them is not. Contradictions occur only if we fail to distinguish between the objective validity of categorical concepts and the subjective validity of transcendent concepts. While criticism of the logic of illusion cannot remove natural illusion, it can provide a means by which we are able to avoid being deceived:

The transcendental dialectic will therefore content itself with exposing the illusion of transcendent judgments,

and at the same time taking precautions that we be not deceived by it. (CPR 300)

Although dialectic cannot dissolve natural illusions by pointing out their causes, it can resolve scepticism based on the contradictions which arise out of false judgments about these illusions. Dialectic resolves scepticism by showing that contradictions are the result of confusing two distinct operations of human reason, of which only one has an objectively valid employment. By showing that only one of these operations has an objectively valid employment, dialectic prevents us from being deceived by the natural illusions of reason and falling into contradiction.

Hume, of course, shares neither Kant's views concerning the nature and origin of natural illusion nor concerning the criterion for determining the validity of concepts. Therefore, Hume's "dialectic" is not a Kantian dialectic. However, the general outline of Kant's dialectic can be mapped onto Hume's discussion of contradiction in his account of belief in external existence. That is, it can be shown that Hume (1) provides a criterion for determining the empirical validity of ideas; (2) provides an account of how certain empirically illegitimate ideas arise and how they come to have the appearance of empirically legitimate ideas; and (3) maintains that while these natural illusions are inevitable, false judgments about them are not. If these parallels can be established, it follows that Hume's treatment of contradiction is intended to resolve, not to generate, scepticism.

Hume's first principle that all ideas are derived from impressions provides his criterion for determining the empirical validity of ideas. Whatever ideas cannot be traced to preceding impressions are denounced as fictions and illusions. Because all ideas

are derived from impressions, it is impossible to have ideas of objects which are specifically different from impressions, i.e., of objects having non-experiential properties (T 68). Consequently, Hume argues that the only empirically legitimate idea of external existence that we can have is of the succession of diverse, discontinuous, yet related perceptions (imperfect identity).⁸

However, Hume also maintains that our belief in external existence is inextricably tied to an empirically illegitimate idea of perfect identity, an identity which entails the continued and distinct existence of perceptions which are experienced as variable and discontinuous. Even an illusion is an idea, and Hume, if his first principle is not to be contradicted, must explain how this illusion can arise from some empirical association of ideas. Consequently, Hume takes up the second stage of dialectic: to explain the origin of illusion. To summarize this process briefly, the illusion of continued and distinct existence arises out of a resemblance between two "actions" of the mind, viz., the "ease of transition" between ideas as the mind contemplates a succession of closely related perceptions (an imperfect identity), and the "smooth and uninterrupted progress of the imagination" as the mind contemplates an unchanging object through a fictional succession of time (a perfect identity) (T 203-204). Because these two mental operations resemble one another so closely, the mind confuses the imperfect identity with perfect identity, and so attributes an invariableness and continuity to perceptions which are actually variable and discontinuous.⁹ We maintain the illusion by imagining that our perceptions continue to exist without our perceiving them.

Like Kant, Hume argues that natural illusions cannot be removed, even if their illusory nature has been detected. Also like Kant, Hume maintains that contradictions do not result from natural illusions alone; they are precipitated by false judgments about these illusions. Human reason would be genuinely contradictory only if fallacious judgments, as well as illusions, were inevitable. Hume distinguishes three possible judgments pertaining to this illusion, two of which are fallacious and contradictory, one of which is neither:

In considering this subject we may observe a gradation of three opinions, that rise above each other, according as the persons, who form them, acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge. These opinions are that of the vulgar, that of a false philosophy, and that of the true; where we shall find upon enquiry, that the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge. (T 222-23)

To understand how Hume deals with scepticism by recommending carelessness and inattention as a solution to the contradiction resulting from natural illusion, one must clarify how these three different "opinions" or judgments differ from one another. Let us consider them in order.

The vulgar believe that their variable and interrupted perceptions have a continuous and distinct existence. They are led to this belief because (1) they suppose (rightly, as Hume believes) that perceptions are their only objects (T 209) and (2) they believe, as a result of the illusion-producing function of the imagination, that related perceptions possess perfect identity and so also continued and distinct existence. Hume dismisses the vulgar system of belief because it contradicts the reflective, empirically

sound, judgment that perceptions are in fact interrupted, variable, and discontinuous. The contradiction is either not apparent to, or is ignored by, those following the vulgar system of belief.

According to Hume, the purpose of philosophy is to detect the contradictions in vulgar beliefs and to remedy these contradictions so that errors can be avoided; "Philosophical decisions," he writes, "are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (EHU 162). But Hume does not treat all philosophical systems as equal. Regarding the contradictions inherent in the vulgar system, Hume distinguishes between true and false philosophical systems which attempt to correct these contradictions. False philosophy attempts to eradicate the contradiction entailed by the vulgar system by a doctrine of double existence according to which perceptions are mental entities caused by objects specifically different from them, which objects are themselves never perceived. I take Hume to include all forms of representational realism as examples of false philosophy. By introducing a saving distinction between objects and perceptions, representative realism attempts to remedy the contradiction by attributing continued and distinct existence only to unperceived substances or an unperceived substrate and attributing the observed variability and interruptedness only to perceptions understood as subjective and mental. Hume finds a two-fold difficulty with this philosophical solution: (1) the hypothesis of double existence has no "primary recommendation" to reason; and (2) it has no primary recommendation to the imagination, since it "acquires all its influence on the imagination from the vulgar [system]" (T 213).

According to Hume, false philosophy cannot recommend itself to reason because it is impossible to

conceive objects which have no experiential properties. Any judgment concerning the existence of an unperceived entity can be made only on the basis of a causal inference (T 74). All knowledge of causal relations require the observation of the constant conjunction of like objects. Since such relations are observed only between perceptual objects and never between perceptual objects and imperceptible objects, it is not possible, on the basis of causal reasoning, to infer the existence of objects specifically distinct from our perceptions.

Hume argues that the hypothesis of double existence has no "primary recommendation" to the imagination because it presupposes the truth of the vulgar claim, derived from the illusion-producing imagination, that there must be objects which exist continuously and independently. False philosophy differs from vulgar opinion only in attributing these illusory properties to different existences -- to imperceptible entities rather than to perceptual objects themselves. Hume thus claims that false philosophy is "over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition" (T 218). It denies the vulgar supposition in denying that perceptions have a continued and invariable existence. It "establishes" -- i.e., supports -- the vulgar supposition by postulating a new class of objects solely on the authority of the same illusion-producing function of the imagination motivating the vulgar supposition. Hume rejects this philosophical solution as false because it presupposes the source of contradiction it purports to eradicate.

Hume believes that any adequate philosophical solution to the contradiction between the two opposed judgments concerning the nature of our perceptions must

come to terms with the illusion-producing role of the imagination. True philosophy makes a place for illusion without being deceived by illusion. The purpose of Hume's true philosophy, like Kant's transcendental philosophy, is to detect, not to remove, the mind's natural illusions.¹⁰

We are now in a position to evaluate the meaning of Hume's recommendation of "careless and inattention" as a solution to the contradiction that arises from natural illusion. True philosophy adopts carelessness and inattention on the basis of "moderate," or to use the expression of the Enquiry, "mitigated" scepticism. What does this mitigated scepticism mean? True philosophy is sceptical concerning the natural illusions of the imagination just because it properly recognizes their illusory character. However, since detecting an illusion does not destroy it, even the experience of true philosophers continues to be shaped by the illusion. Consequently, true philosophers continue to experience a psychological opposition between natural beliefs about perceptions, even after the epistemic status of these beliefs has been determined. True philosophers free themselves from the psychological opposition between natural beliefs by mitigating their scepticism when engaged in practical activity. Hume's recommendation of carelessness and inattention is not an indication that he believed a rational assessment of two opposing beliefs is impossible. It is symptomatic of his view that natural illusions, though detectable, are not removable. In practical activity, rationality is measured by what is practically effective rather than by truth or falsity. Practical life simply does not require the careful distinctions demanded by theory. Since the question of the epistemic status of illusion does not arise within purely practical

activity, one is, when so engaged, naturally inclined to mitigate one's scepticism. Hume's recommendation of carelessness and inattention, therefore, is a recommendation to use these distinctions only when it is appropriate.

So understood, the Humean solution to contradiction resembles the Kantian one in distinguishing two roles of the imagination and attributing an empirical validity to only one of them. Hume's solution is just as non-sceptical as Kant's in relying upon a rational assessment of the epistemic status of opposed natural beliefs, not on a blind submission to psychological inclinations. Hume further argues that, because this philosophical solution detects but does not remove natural illusions, true philosophers must become careless and inattentive in their practical activity in order to resolve the psychological opposition which inevitably persists. If the sceptical attitude of true philosophers is suspended in practical life, that is done because it is unreasonable and inappropriate to import into unreflective activity distinctions needed only to resolve problems which arise in theoretical activity.

III

Is it contradictory to argue that Hume "solves" scepticism with mitigated scepticism? No, because we are talking here about two different kinds of scepticism. Certainly Hume is sceptical concerning our ability to have knowledge of objects which are beyond experience. Hume is a "sceptic" about metaphysics. But this limited scepticism is a consequence of a non-sceptical theory of belief. A sceptical theory of belief is scepticism concerning the ability of human reason to assess rationally which of our beliefs are

true. Pyrrhonian dialectic is used to support a sceptical theory of belief. I have argued that Hume's treatment of contradiction is disanalogous to Pyrrhonian dialectic because he does not question the ability of human reason to determine which of our beliefs are empirically sound beliefs. I have proposed that Hume's treatment of contradiction is closely analogous to Kant's version of dialectic, a dialectic intended to resolve Pyrrhonian scepticism. Just as Kant solves the antinomies of pure reason through a criticism, not a dissolution, of transcendental illusion, so Hume solves contradictions between natural beliefs through a criticism, not a dissolution, of natural illusion. Hume's "dialectic" is similarly intended to resolve Pyrrhonian scepticism insofar as it (1) proposes a criterion by which empirically valid ideas can be distinguished from illusions, (2) explains the origin of these illusions on the basis of empiricist principles, and (3) maintains that, while natural illusions are inevitable, false judgments about these illusions, which precipitate contradictions, are not.

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1. The most visible representative of this view is Richard Popkin in "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and Critique of Pyrrhonism," in Vere Chappell, Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 53-98, recently reprinted in Richard Popkin, The High Road to Pyrrhonism, eds. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), pp. 103-132. All references to this article will be to the Chappell edition. Although Hume himself criticizes Pyrrhonism, he does so on the basis of an inaccurate characterization of Pyrrhonism,

namely, that the Pyrrhonian recommends that judgment be suspended even in practical action, a recommendation Hume thinks is impossible to put into practice. Popkin goes so far as to argue that Hume "maintained the only 'consistent' Pyrrhonian point of view" (p. 64). The Pyrrhonian interpretation of Hume has also been supported by A.H. Basson in David Hume (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1958), pp. 140-142.

There are others who, though not explicitly describing Hume as a Pyrrhonian, consider Hume's treatment of contradiction between natural beliefs in the Treatise to be sceptical. Hume, they allege, provides at best a psychological solution to this contradiction. See for example, John Passmore, Hume's Intentions (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1952), p. 147; more recently, Daniel Breazeale, "Hume's Impasse," in Journal of the History of Philosophy 13 (1975), 311-333; and John Immerwahr, "A Sceptic's Progress: Hume's Preference for the First Enquiry," in McGill Hume Studies, eds., D.P. Norton, N. Capaldi, W. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, Inc., 1979), 227-238. Also, Manfred Kuehn, one of the first to draw attention to the similarities between Hume's contradictions and Kant's antinomies, argues that Hume's solution, unlike Kant's, is sceptical. See Manfred Kuehn, "Hume's Antinomies," in Hume Studies 9 (1983), 25-45.

2. See Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, trans. R.G. Bury (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), I, passim.
3. Kant, to underscore the difference between his dialectic and Pyrrhonian dialectic, describes Pyrrhonian dialectic as the "logic of illusion," and his dialectic as the "critique of dialectical illusion." See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1929), p. 99. Hereafter cited in the text as CPR with page numbers following.

A disanalogy between Hume and Kant concerns the ultimate goal of dialectic. For Kant, the goal of dialectic is not merely to resolve scepticism, but to achieve certainty (CPR 395). For all his criticism of dogmatic metaphysics, Kant yet aspires to the Cartesian ideal of certitude. Hume, on the other hand, renounced all aspirations to certitude (T xviii). However, this disanalogy is not sufficient to negate the thesis that Hume, like

Kant, employs dialectic to resolve, not to generate, scepticism.

4. Following common practice, I use the following abbreviations with page numbers following to incorporate references into the body of the text: T = A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1888; reprinted edition. P.H. Nidditch, 1978); EHU = Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902).
5. Popkin, p. 60.
6. Ibid., pp. 89-90.
7. For a useful summary of the debate concerning whether Hume treats causal inference as rational or irrational, see Tom L. Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg, Hume and the Problem of Causation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), Chapter II.
8. Although the first appearance of the term "imperfect identity" occurs in the context of Hume's discussion of personal identity, it is used to designate the identity attributed to distinct but related perceptions (see, for example, T 256). The distinction between perfect and imperfect identity has been used by L. Ashley and M. Stack to explain Hume's theory of personal identity in "Hume's Theory of the Self and Its Identity," in Dialogue 13 (1974), 239-54. For a discussion of the difficulties surrounding the concept of imperfect identity see W. von Leyden, "Hume and 'Imperfect Identity'," in Philosophical Quarterly 7 (1957), 340-52 and David Wood, "Hume on Identity and Personal Identity," in Australasian Journal of Philosophy 57 (1979), 69-73.
9. There is a suggestive parallel here between Hume's distinction between a relation of ideas and a relation of mental actions and Kant's distinction between rules for the unity of appearances and rules for the unity of principles.

Hume's causal explanation of the illusion of continued and distinct existence is but one instance of a general principle of association which he introduces in the discussion of space and time early in the Treatise: "Resembling ideas are not only related together, but the actions of the mind, which we employ in considering them, are so

little different, that we are not able to distinguish them. This last circumstance is of great consequence; and we may in general observe, that wherever the actions of the mind in forming any two ideas are the same or resembling, we are very apt to confound these ideas, and take the one for the other. Of this we shall see many instances in the progress of this treatise" (T 61).

10. My interpretation of Hume's distinctions among vulgar belief, false philosophy, and true philosophy has been influenced by Donald Livingston, although my interpretation also departs from his. Like Livingston, I argue that Hume does not assimilate true philosophy to representative realism. Unlike Livingston, I argue that Hume does not assimilate true philosophy to the vulgar system of belief either. According to Livingston, Hume does not pronounce the vulgar system to be absolutely false, but false only from the perspective of modern philosophy. Livingston argues for this interpretation in "The Status of the Popular System in Treatise I, IV, II-IV," a paper presented to the Hume Society meeting at York University, Toronto, Canada, August 1982. I disagree with John Bricke who argues that Hume in the final analysis does favor representative realism when we think in a "scientific" rather than popular frame of mind. Bricke maintains that Hume's true philosophy is the theory of representational realism. (See Hume's Philosophy of Mind (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 24.) I find this interpretation difficult to reconcile with Hume's statement that "the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge" (T 222-223). The context of this statement suggests that "mistaken knowledge" refers to any postulation of substances underlying perceptions.