



**How to Become a Moderate SKeptic: Hume's Way Out of  
Pyrrohonism**

Yves Michaud

*Hume Studies* Volume 11, Issue 1 (April, 1985), 33-46.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

**<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.**

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact [humestudies-info@humesociety.org](mailto:humestudies-info@humesociety.org)

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

HOW TO BECOME A MODERATE SKEPTIC:  
HUME'S WAY OUT OF PYRRHONISM

The nature and extent of Hume's skepticism have been assessed in various ways. He was viewed as a radical skeptic until the end of the XIXth century. Many contemporary interpretations, which can be traced back to Kemp Smith's book, have claimed since that a reassessment was indispensable if we are to take seriously either the very project of a science of human nature or Hume's naturalist conception of belief. The idea of a science of human nature presupposes that at least some sort of positive knowledge is possible. The naturalist conception of belief claims that some of our beliefs, though lacking rational justification, are nevertheless unavoidable and gain this way a certainty all their own. Both the Treatise of Human Nature in Book I and the Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding<sup>1</sup> conclude with a moderate or mitigated skepticism after making a strong case for radical pyrrhonism.

In this paper I wish to carry out two connected tasks: first I want to consider whether Hume's skepticism in the Treatise is the same as that of the Enquiry or not; second, I want to determine which arguments he puts forward for his shift from pyrrhonism to modern skepticism.

I

The most noticeable differences between the Treatise and the Enquiry occur immediately after the analysis of causation.

In the Enquiry we find almost nothing concerning the reality of the external world and the nature of the self, but Hume emphasizes heavily the

anti-metaphysical and anti-theological outcomes of the science of human nature in his sections on Liberty and Necessity (VIII), on Miracles (X), on Providence and a possible future state (XI). He stresses the devastating agnostic consequences of his principles and his agnosticism culminates in the dreadful censorship of the final lines of the book.

On the contrary, the fourth part of the Treatise, Book I, offers an intricate and sophisticated treatment of various subjects. The intricacy shows in the very title of this part: "Of the Sceptical and Other Systems of Philosophy." Hume actually intertwines the exposition of his skeptical system -- an expression which sounds odd -- with the critical examination of rival systems and an attempt at accounting for the nature of things. These intricate undertakings are the direct upshot of Hume's analysis of causation. He thinks he has established that our causal beliefs are the products of custom alone and that nevertheless they are our only reliable beliefs. Lacking any rational justification, they are simply natural -- which means that we cannot hinder ourselves from making inferences and predictions. Accordingly, reason has been immersed in the wider concept of imagination and thus naturalized: it is "nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls" (T 179). Basically, some beliefs are unavoidable. Now, a crucial problem is to know how far we can go into the analysis of such natural beliefs. In the Treatise, Hume sets out to investigate some of them whereas in the Enquiry he is more prudent and merely talks of instincts without considering their mechanism.

In the Treatise, the tentative analysis of these natural beliefs has important metaphysical outcomes. Using the concepts and principles of his new-born science of human nature, Hume provides us with

a new ontology which states the nature of things from the standpoint of our beliefs concerning it. Thus, we get a Humean version of the nature of the external world and of the nature of the self. Unfortunately, this assessment of what there is on the basis of what we believe there is has unwanted skeptical effects. Hume's "as if" ontology tends to appear definitely fictitious, all the more so because the analysis of our natural beliefs is not successful and even quite defective. So, the skeptical outcome pushes through the positive project itself as the failure to account for our natural beliefs shakes the very belief in their special reliability. Such is, for example, the blatant result of the study of our belief in the external world (T 217).

Again, in the Treatisé, Hume is eager to emphasize the devastating anti-metaphysical implications of his thought. Under the head "Other Systems" of his title, he develops a violent attack aimed at illusions and metaphysical gibberish. Locke's representational theory of perception, the categories of scholastic thought, the contemporary distinction of primary and secondary qualities, the theories concerning the materiality and the immateriality of the soul, the prevailing accounts of the identity of the self are, each in its turn, criticized and dismissed. This hypercritical enterprise is, in a way, justified by the project of a science of human nature; a thorough methodological skepticism is a preliminary step for the empirical investigation to follow. But it may go too far and endanger the whole enterprise, all the more since the natural beliefs which prop up the skeptical system lack rational foundation. That's why, finally, the skeptical system is in jeopardy of being itself as incredible as the metaphysical systems under examination. Thus, Hume's attack against the self qua

substance is so ruinous that his own account, when presented, lacks credibility.

Above all, we should not forget the vicious circle in which Hume is caught. For the science of human nature is part and parcel of that human nature it purports to investigate. Which means that philosophical analysis itself is a product of human nature. Philosophical statements have a conceptual content, but they are uttered by people who are acted on by beliefs, sentiments, passions. In the course of the third part of the Treatise, Book I, Hume has gradually stressed this self-reference of philosophical analysis. He even went so far as to say that in philosophy too we must follow our taste (T 103). This cast an additional light on the idea of a skeptical system.

So far, we have suggested that skepticism stemmed from the defects of the analysis of natural beliefs and from the deliberate attack against metaphysical systems. Now we come to realise that it also is the result of this self-reference of philosophical research: we do not know how to assess our philosophical beliefs themselves. The waverings and hesitations of Hume in the final section of Book I of the Treatise are typical of this complex situation which induces a definitely complex skepticism. I proceed to the analysis of its formulation.

## II

First, it is worth stressing that Hume provides us with a deliberately literary approach. His arguments are shrouded in a literary form which dramatizes them, as though it was impossible to draw the line between stating an argument and being submitted to its forceful influence. The content of a

statement is accompanied by a corresponding feeling. Of course, the notion of impression of reflexion accounts for this fact.

Now, what steps does Hume take in the final section of the Treatise, Book I?

To begin with, he states rhetorically his predicament, accusing the weakness of the very faculties he must use in his inquiries. Self-reference is at once lurking. The scope of reason is narrow and the imagination operates in contradictory and unsteady ways.

The only remedy to this initial skeptical despair is belief, since it is the condition for assenting to arguments: "The memory, senses and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas" (T 265). The ensuing conclusion is devastating: we have to rely on our beliefs whatever their unsteadiness and inconstancy, whatever also the contradictions between them (such as the one between causal belief and our belief in the enduring existence of objects). Such contradictions bring about a state of uncertainty. In order to keep safe from this uncertainty, Hume considers a possible distinction between the spontaneous beliefs of common life and our philosophical conclusions. His attempt is totally disappointing: in ordinary life we follow beliefs which are natural illusions of the imagination, but the understanding, when left to itself in philosophical reasonings, subverts itself. Now, Hume is facing the two horns of a dilemma: either we trust the fallible impulses of the imagination or we trust the self-destructive mechanisms of the understanding. None of these possibilities is in itself commendable; moreover, we have no principle to the effect that we ought to

choose one horn of the dilemma rather than the other. Hence the famous passage:

Shall we, then, establish it for a general maxim, that no refin'd or elaborate reasoning is ever to be received? Consider well the consequences of such a principle. By this means you cut off entirely all science and philosophy: You proceed upon one singular quality of the imagination, and by a parity of reason must embrace all of them: And you expressly contradict yourself; since this maxim must be built on the preceding reasoning, which will be allow'd to be sufficiently refin'd and metaphysical. What party, then, shall we choose among these difficulties? If we embrace this principle, and condemn all refin'd reasoning, we run into the most manifest absurdities. If we reject it in favour of these reasonings, we subvert entirely the human understanding. We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all (T 268).

Hume adds "For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. I can only observe what is commonly done." (T 268)

So, what do we observe? The mere fact that usually natural belief prevails; but this prevalence does not license a rule to the effect that we ought to act in such and such a way. Actually men act under the influence of belief, but a common use does not imply a compulsory rule.

What's more, a new problem arises: it happens that natural beliefs fail to operate or operate intermittently. Hence the unsteady relationships between common sense beliefs and philosophical convictions -- which are beliefs too. Hume exemplifies this unsteadiness through the basically illogical moves of his text, pp. 268-269. The philosopher, on the verge of rejecting all belief and reasoning, is rescued

by nature which cures his melancholy, but the recovery is not permanent and again he starts wavering:

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. But does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure (T 269).

There is no reason for any choice. Skepticism does not lead to ataraxia. According to Sextus' definition of skepticism, the sequence of steps should be: conflict of opinions, undecidability, equal strength of the arguments, epochè and then ataraxia. Ataraxia consists in a complete absence of belief and brings in a sort of happiness -- at least the skeptical version of happiness. For Hume, who emphasizes now the unsteadiness of beliefs rather than their lack of reason, any state of mind turns out to be a mood. Skeptical doubt is just one mood among rival ones. Sometimes it comes over us, sometimes it fades away and we have no rule to the effect that we should act in one way rather than in another. We are perpetually oscillating and basically irresolute. Hume has so successfully reduced reason to belief that skepticism is now both unbearable and unavoidable. It cannot be escaped but does not lead to ataraxia. If the main question raised by pyrrhonism is whether it is possible or not to live without belief, to suspend all judgment concerning what really exists and simply follow the appearances, it is clear that Hume's pyrrhonism is quite peculiar and, in any event, very radical. Having challenged the value of rational arguments and substituted for them mere manners of conceiving or beliefs, he now recognizes that our beliefs elude our power. Man are both unable to live without beliefs and

to escape from their unsteadiness. Thus skepticism is not a philosophical position which could be argued for or challenged: it is a psychological fate. It is not irrelevant to suspect a neurotic situation. All the more so since in Hume uncertainty is related to uneasiness and pain.

To put the whole thing bluntly, Hume's withdrawal to the seemingly secure field of belief boils down to a cure which is worse than the disease. Skepticism tends to be a sort of illness -- with no remedy. Whenever we reason, we fall into skeptical doubts. Whenever we follow our natural dispositions to common sense, we still depend on momentary affections. In any case, skeptical doubts generated by rational inquiry are as natural as our dispositions to reasoning. We keep on wavering. Nature can provide a temporary relief but we cannot rule out a return of our philosophical dispositions. Speculating is as natural as assenting to common sense and the shuttling from the one to the other generates despair and anxiety. That's why Hume's skepticism in these final pages is not affected but truly desperate -- though it be itself a temporary mood.

Surprising as it may be, there nevertheless seems to be a way out. Again Hume appeals to steady sentiments: we should rather trust our dispositions: "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 270)

Now what sort of "ought" is the ought in question? It can't be that of a prescriptive rule and has nothing to do with reasons. It is the effect of a causal process, that is the effect of a lively disposition: a natural bent toward a moderate practice of philosophical inquiry. Thus moderate skepticism

originates in a steadier and good-humoured disposition. The text on pp. 270-271 leaves no doubt:

At the time, therefore, that I am tir'd with amusement and company, and have indulg'd a reverie in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a riverside, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally inclin'd 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. I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falshood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. I am concern'd for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I feel I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy (T 270-71).

Does Hume offer any justification for adopting this position? I am afraid not. He only suggests repeatedly that this conversion to a moderate form of philosophical inquiry depends on the nature of our sentiments. The quoted passage substantiates a very passive and precarious commitment to the new philosophy. Which means that Hume makes the same sort of deduction of an ought from an is he will rule out in morals. Describing our psychological dispositions when

thinking and reflecting, he simply states that things are that way. But from such a description, no general principle follows, for the wild wanderings of the imagination or the despairs of radical skepticism are as natural as the moderate preoccupations of good-humoured philosophy, -- except that they are less frequent and less pleasant. At best, we might imagine some psychological training which would favor this disposition. In any case, mitigated skepticism is not rationally concluded: it is the natural affect of our constitution and of our having alternate intellectual dispositions. From the past experience of our mental oscillations, we come to think that we ought to temper our speculations with empirical limitations. Mitigated skepticism is thus the natural effect of the observation of past mental experiences, a custom built from the past. Hume's terminal remarks on the permanent temptation of dogmatism may be interpreted both as an additional rule and as a symptom that we can't reach a fully secure position. The way out of pyrrhonism remains provisional.

### III

Now, what about the nature of Hume's skepticism in the Enquiry? I think that in the Enquiry the theme of the self-reference of philosophy has been soft-pedalled to the point of almost vanishing. Instead, Hume offers us a detailed statement of the various sorts of skepticism, a table or chart of its varieties.

The antecedent skepticism which precludes the investigation is either radical or moderate. If there was a truly radical antecedent skepticism, we would never escape from it for, in order to do so, we should use the same faculties we judge unreliable. As regards

the moderate form, it is reputed a sound methodological principle.

The core of Hume's development deals with the two sorts of consequent skepticism. Its radical version is studied in the vein of ancient skepticism and Hume offers us a series of topoi. Doubts can concern the evidence of the senses or reason -- be it demonstrative reasoning or moral reasoning about matters of fact.

As regards the evidence of the senses, Hume restates some of the arguments first issued in the Treatise (T I-iv-2 and T I-iv-4) and his position boils down to the renewed opposition between natural instincts and reason. Natural instincts, that is beliefs, are recognized as questionable by rational analysis, but reason affords no additional evidence of its own and leads to skepticism. Hume stresses the naturalness and the irrationality of instincts and he drops the argument from the inconstancy of beliefs. In a sense, his appeal to the notion of instinct fits in with this shift of emphasis.

Concerning reason, he points out some contradictions in our abstract reasoning, arguing from the puzzles about infinite divisibility and the concept of a vacuum (E 156-8). Such difficulties do not seem insuperable for he is aware of the defects of his analyses in this domain.

As we may imagine, the big skeptical attack aims at moral reasoning. It originates in the now well-known philosophical objections to the validity of factual inferences and causal statements. Once more, Hume contrasts philosophical arguments with natural beliefs or instincts and he underlines the natural and irresistible necessity of following those beliefs:

Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a

momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches (E 160).

Up to this point, Hume's analysis does not depart much from that of the Treatise but for the fact that he examines skeptical attitudes from a distance, as possible philosophical positions to argue for or to discard. In the Treatise, as I suggested earlier, he theatrically exemplified the comings and goings of philosophical positions. However, he finally takes a definitely new step when he introduces an identifiable final position: the mitigated subsequent skepticism or academic skepticism. Moreover, he is quite clear about the way we may come to adopt this position:

[It may] be the result of this Pyrrhonism, or excessive scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection (E 161).

He repeatedly says that this skeptical attitude is the effect of reflection: it is a "result", a "natural result" (E 162). We experience the sublimity of the imagination and then correct it by pyrrhonism or, conversely, mitigate pyrrhonism by common sense and reflection.

Now pyrrhonism is not so much to be eschewed than used as a remedy to natural dogmatism. We must balance our natural propensity to dogmatism by the experience of a radical doubt which never endangers the power of natural instinct. Moderate skepticism is thus the quasi-mechanical result of this balancing.

Hume achieves this result through two conceptual inflections.

As I already insisted, he drops the considerations concerning the unsteadiness of belief. Besides, he introduces the idea of a reflective process which brings about moderate skepticism as its natural effect. If I am not mistaken, it means that moderate skepticism is causally produced. On this point I agree with the conclusion of R.J. Fogelin's paper "The Tendency of Hume's Skepticism": "In sum, Hume's skepticism and his naturalism meet in a causal theory of skepticism itself."<sup>2</sup> But I disagree with Fogelin on two other points. First, I am not certain that Hume entertains quite the same position in the Treatise and in the Enquiry, as I hope to have shown. Second, I think that a precise version of how moderate skepticism is causally reached can be put forward if we draw on Hume's conception of general rules. Though he introduces them in a rather disparaging way (they are "the source of what we properly call prejudice"), he makes an extensive use of them, and distinguishes two sorts. What we may name first order general rules are those upon which we conjecture far more uniformity than was observed in nature. They are balanced and countervailed by second order general rules which allow us to distinguish between accidental and essential circumstances. These are corrective general rules which operate in reverse of the first and in an antagonistic way. Both sorts of rules have the same basic mechanism: that of custom. The first proceed from immediate resemblance, whereas the corrective rules proceed from another sort of custom, that relative to our experience of the operations of our understanding: "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" (T 149). We simply contrast a spontaneous custom with a reflected one. "Thus our general rules are in a

manner set in opposition to each other". Sometimes the ones, sometimes the others prevail "according to the disposition and character of the person" (T 149-50). Now we are in a position to understand in what fashion the causal process which leads to moderate skepticism is a case of normalization of our thought operations by general rules. From the experience of our skeptical doubts, we may indeed conclude the total impossibility of any knowledge whatsoever -- such is the pyrrhonian doubt or the radical cartesian doubt -- but on further reflection, when we take into account the alternate comings and goings of dogmatism and doubt, of belief and uncertainty, we are causally driven to adopt a moderate skeptical attitude. This solution has a definite Humean flavor but it implies that we stop insisting on the radical unsteadiness of beliefs and that we do not scrutinize any longer the puzzling self-reference of philosophical statements. Actually, as is clear from the Enquiry, the escape from pyrrhonism requires a relative blindness to the question of the nature of philosophical inquiry and, on the contrary, a renewed dogmaticism concerning the certainty of the science of human nature qua empirical science.

Yves Michaud  
 Université de Rouen

1. All references are to the Selby-Bigge editions of Hume published by Oxford University Press.
2. R.J. Fogelin, "The Tendency of Hume's Skepticism" in The Skeptical Tradition, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983), p. 410.