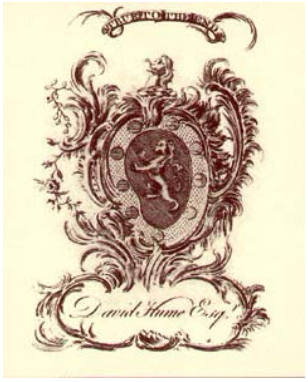

The Role of Reason in Hume's Theory of Belief
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Hume Studies Volume XIV, Number 2 (November, 1988) 372-389.

THE ROLE OF REASON IN HUME'S THEORY OF BELIEF

Much has been written on Hume's theory of belief, yet problems of interpretation remain as serious as ever. The most pervasive and persistent problem relates to the role reason plays in Hume's conception of belief. When Hume says that belief is a matter of feeling, does he mean to say that reason has nothing to do with it, or that belief is not a matter of choice? Does he imply that one cannot be blamed for believing as one does? The view that belief is unavoidable and not a matter of choice, and its implication, seem counter-intuitive, if not drastic. Are there grounds for attributing such a view to Hume?

There is indeed a tendency to interpret Hume as saying that reason plays no role, not just in the moral sphere, but in the understanding as well. Thus, Barry Stroud claims that "in Hume's hands the denigration of the role of reason and the corresponding elevation of feeling and sentiment is generalized into a total theory of man."[1] Elsewhere I have argued against this view *insofar as it relates* to Hume's moral theory.[2] But the dismay at Hume's (alleged) denigration of reason is even greater in the case of belief. For instance, Antony Flew considers Hume's view that belief is "a species of natural instincts, which no reason or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or to prevent" as a "drastic and disastrous conclusion."[3] According to Flew, one drastic and disastrous consequence of such a view is that "insofar as belief really is necessary and unavoidable we can neither criticize others for the irrationality of their convictions nor retain any confidence about the rationality of our own."[4]

In a more sympathetic reading of Hume, J.A. Passmore has cited evidence to show that Hume acknowledges that belief can be a matter of choice, and thus there can be an ethics of belief.[5] However, in doing so Passmore presents an inconsistency in Hume's view of belief, and does nothing to account for this inconsistency. Barbara Winters also sees inconsistencies, or paradoxes, in Hume's treatment, not only within Book I of the Treatise, but also between it and the other two Books (and between the Enquiries).[6] Her resolution of the paradox is the suggestion that there are two conceptions of reason in Hume, the "traditional" and the "naturalistic," the former "plays no role in our acquisition of fundamental beliefs," and the latter is such that we do indeed "arrive at our beliefs through reasoning."[7]

In this paper I wish to argue that there are no inconsistencies, or paradoxes, in Hume's treatment of belief, and that his view is neither drastic nor disastrous. I wish to show that there is no 'denigration' of reason, and that while belief is a matter of feeling, it is also, to an important degree, a matter of choice.

I

In promoting the "undoubted truth, that belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling,"[8] Hume does write in such a way as to encourage the interpretation that he subordinates the role of reason to feelings (or sentiments, or passions), or worse, that he denigrates the role of reason. He tells us that belief is not "some new idea, such as that of reality or existence, which we join to the simple conception of an object" (T 623). If it were, "it wou'd be in a man's power to believe what he

pleas'd" (T 624), as the mind can mix or join any two ideas. Hume tells us that we can easily "discover by experiments" that belief "arises immediately, without any new operation of the reason or imagination" (T 102). The widely quoted sentence is the following: "When the mind ... passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason..." (T 92). These and other statements clearly encourage the interpretation that belief does not arise from reason, or indeed that reason has nothing to do with belief. Depending on how far one sees the downgrading of reason, we have either the 'subordination thesis' (which has been attributed to Norman Kemp Smith) or the 'denigration thesis' (which can be attributed to writers such as Barry Stroud).

Having interpreted Hume as saying, at the very least, that belief is not based on reason, the problem for his critics is to say what is for Hume the basis of belief. Here, Hume's writings encourage the interpretation that belief arises automatically, or unavoidably, or independently of the will, or indeed willy-nilly. From Hume's claim that belief "may be most accurately defin'd, [as] A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" (T 96), and his explanation of this claim, he is interpreted as saying that a lively, strong, vivid impression has the tendency to confer those qualities onto another idea, thus turning it into a belief. This interpretation leads most naturally to the objection, which has been raised by Norman Kemp Smith, that "(If) any and every impression has ... an <u>infective</u> power, it is not surprising that belief should know no proper bounds, and ... should so spread in <u>endemic</u> forms, to the perversion of all proper standards of thought and action."[9] In other

words, we will find that beliefs can pop up anywhere, that a person can believe almost anything willy-nilly. But this is precisely what Hume says cannot happen -- it is not "in a man's power to believe what he pleas'd." Clearly then, either Hume's theory of belief is internally contradictory, or the usual interpretation of it is incorrect. I shall, by giving my own interpretation, endeavour to show that the usual interpretation of it is incorrect.

II

Hume's theory of belief is set firmly against the background of his naturalistic epistemology. As Hume sees it, the atoms of the mind are the impressions of the senses and the ideas formed from those impressions. Ideas are either exact copies of impressions or made up from those copies. Ideas are stored in the memory, and are recalled in thoughts. The capacity for constructing new ideas from impressions and existing ideas is the imagination as well as the process of reasoning. Since ideas are only copies of impressions, they do not have the same qualities of vividness, strength, solidity, and so on, that impressions have. And ideas manufactured by imagination and reasoning have even less, or none, of those qualities.

The other plank in Hume's epistemology is the claim that nature has endowed us with a trust in our senses. We simply trust what we see, hear, touch, etc. Our senses inform us that there is an external world, and nature has conspired to make us place a trust on this information, to make us 'suppose' that objects that strike the senses "have an existence DISTINCT from the mind and perception" (T 188), to make us <u>believe</u> in our senses. This is a <u>natural</u>

belief given to us, but not suggested by our reason (as some rationalists claim) or by the senses themselves (as the 'vulgar' suppose). For Hume then, seeing is believing, and so also is hearing, touching, etc. This explains why belief generally is explicated by Hume in terms of the vividness, strength and solidity of ideas, which are the qualities of the impressions themselves. It also explains why Hume insists that every belief must involve an impression, or be traced back to one. Thus, our belief that, for instance, Caesar was killed in the Senate house is linked to the impressions we formed when we read about the incident in history books, which in turn are linked to similar impressions of various generations of historians, and so on "'till we arrive at those who were eye-witnesses and spectators of the event" (T 83).

Whenever the mind associates an idea with a present impression, that idea assumes to some extent the qualities (of vividness, etc.) of the impression. A similar idea can arise purely in the imagination (i.e. not in association with an impression), but it will be different from the former idea in that it does not have any of the qualities mentioned, or only have them to an insignificant extent. We can imagine that the house is on fire. Being only in the imagination, this idea is, as Hume would say, cold and lifeless. By contrast, if we have impressions of smoke, i.e. seeing and smelling smoke, the same idea will arise in the mind through inference, but it is an idea with force and vividness, qualities that come from the idea's being associated with the sense impressions of smoke. If we then believe that the house is on fire, we will be moved to take actions as if we see that the house is actually on fire. Hume asserts, "as a general maxim in the science of human

nature," that "when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity" (T 98). The power of association and transfer is indeed the work of nature which enables us to anticipate dangers and avoid them, without actually seeing them coming. Without it, "we should every moment of our lives be subject to the greatest calamities" (T 119). On the other hand, cold and lifeless ideas of the imagination do not have the same influence on the will. For if the mind were "mov'd by every idle conception of this kind, it would never enjoy a moment's peace and tranquillity" (T 119).

I have tried to explain Hume's definition of belief as "a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression." It follows from the definition that belief is not an extra idea or impression. The belief that p and p are not two different ideas but one and the same idea. To say that reasoning produces beliefs is to say that from a certain idea or impression that p, another idea is generated, which is the belief that p. This is what Hume denies. To believe that the house is on fire is not to have the idea that the house is on fire and another idea which is the belief to this effect. The person who believes that the house is on fire and one who simply has this idea, typically through imagination, have one and the same idea. The difference, Hume says, lies in the manner of conceiving this idea. It is a matter of feeling. I shall try to explain below what Hume means by this.

III

If I am right in my interpretation so far, there are two elements in Hume's belief: the inference from an impression to an idea and a feeling or sentiment characteristic of belief. Both are necessary for a belief. The sentence quoted earlier -- "belief ... arises immediately, without any new operation of the reason or imagination" (T 102, emphasis mine) -- gives an early indication that Hume does not say that belief involves no operation of the reason, only no new one. We need reason to draw the inference that p, but from p to the belief that p, no new reasoning is required. The inference in question is not simply a transition from one thought to another, but a causal inference which is the work of reason (aided in the process by, Hume says, resemblance and contiguity). While reason does not turn p into a belief that p, which is a matter of feeling (see below), without the work of reason there is nothing to feel. Unless I infer that the house is on fire (on seeing smoke), I cannot believe that the house is on fire. Reason has to do its work for there to be beliefs. However, all that reason does is to put the inferences before the mind. What happens next is none of its doing. And what happens is that towards the inference, or one of them when there are competing inferences, there arises a feeling which is difficult to describe, "that certain je-ne-scai-quoi, of which 'tis impossible to give any definition or description" (T 629). At the same time, it is a feeling "which every one sufficiently understands" (T 106), and "its true and proper name is belief" (T 629). Reason presents the possibilities to the mind, and our feeling-part either gives or fails to give its assent. As I

argued in the paper referred to above, reason has to do certain work before one can feel that an action is moral or immoral. This is similar to and consistent with Hume's treatment of belief.

Certainly, there are many beliefs based on superstition, indoctrination, or prejudice. In a sense, we may say that reason has no role to play in such beliefs. However, these cases show only that good reason has not played a part, not that the reasoning process is not involved. A superstitious belief, for instance, is either acquired as a generalization from coincidences, or taken on authority from someone else. The former involves some inductive reasoning, and the latter some reasoning concerning the authority of the source of the belief. In both cases, faulty reasoning is involved, but faulty reasoning is still reasoning. Indeed, as I shall point out later, the possibility of faulty reasoning is a matter of concern for Hume. It is not difficult to overlook the role of (faulty) reasoning when superstition, indoctrination and prejudice are involved. The reason for this is the fact that superstition etc. exist in a person as general attitudes which automatically make a person believe in certain things. My belief that you will experience bad luck seems to pop up automatically after seeing you walk under a ladder. In a sense, reason plays no role in such a particular belief. However, what happens here is that I recognize this to be an instance of the general (superstitious) belief (and as such it is not all that automatic) that walking under a ladder will bring bad luck. But the latter is not a belief without any reason whatsoever, as I have shown. I shall have more to say later about automatic beliefs.

It is true that Hume's concept of reason covers a wide range. While Hume mostly talks about what he calls experimental reasoning, which is the customary inferences from causes to effects, he also includes in the term reason what he calls argumentation, or ratiocination, which is the process in which we consider relations and comparisons of ideas, and argue (rather than infer) from causes to effects. In this latter process we are guided by "the power of abstraction of the mind," and we employ our "intellectual faculties." Experimental reasoning gives rise to judgements of facts, whereas argumentation gives rise to judgements of pure relations (the modern equivalents of which are roughly inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning respectively). This latter kind of reasoning is probably what Barbara Winters, in the article cited above, refers to as the "traditional conception" of reasoning. However, it would be wrong to suggest, as Winters does, that this kind of reasoning does not play any part in beliefs (and equally wrong to suggest that the other kind of reasoning leads to beliefs without an intervening feeling or sentiment). We can have beliefs about matters of pure relations just as we can have beliefs about matters of facts. We can believe that two plus three makes five just as we can believe that the house is on fire. The only difference is that in matters of pure relations, it is not possible "for the imagination to conceive any thing contrary to a demonstration" (T 95), whereas in matters of facts we can indeed imagine that, for instance, the house is not on fire despite all the evidence to the contrary. In either case, what reason does is to present to the mind all the evidence. What happens next -- when one feels the force of assent or conviction -- is not for reason to

determine. Reason is impotent only in this final stage.

If this is what Hume wants to say, and I believe it is, and believe further that it is psychologically sound, reason has an important role, indeed an indispensable role, to play. Hume does not denigrate, nor subordinate, the role of reason. What then, is the basis for the subordination thesis, or the denigration thesis? I suspect that writers who subscribe to these theses have focused rather exclusively on that stage of belief where the belief-feeling is produced (in some natural and inexplicable way, according to Hume). Admittedly, Hume has quite a lot to say about this stage of belief formation, but this is only because he wants to counteract the rationalist influence. The other source of misinterpretation lies in what Hume says about reasoning itself. In many passages in the Treatise Hume says that the inference from impressions to ideas can be automatic, and escape our attention altogether. Sometimes we do not catch ourselves making the inference. Thus, Hume makes the observation that "the past experience, on which all our judgments concerning cause and effect depend, may operate on our mind in such an insensible manner as never to be taken notice of, and may even in some measure be unknown to us" (T 103). A non-swimmer, he observes, does not stop at the water's edge and "reflects on any past experience, and calls to remembrance instances, that he has seen or heard of, in order to discover the effects of water on animal bodies" (T 103-4). Hume goes on to say that "custom operates before we have time for reflexion." This passage and its conclusion have been taken to support the interpretation that beliefs arise in spite of

ourselves, or unavoidably, or that we cannot help but believe.

What are we to make of the case discussed by Hume? It looks as though this is the sort of case where no reasoning is involved. Actions seem to be automatic. To the extent that such actions are based on the agent's forming some beliefs, such beliefs are also automatic. However, the fact that there are cases involving split-second decisions cannot be generalized to support the view that Hume wishes to subordinate, or denigrate, the role of reason. Nothing in Hume's argument about the case licenses this interpretation. These cases show only that the necessary inferences have become habitual. They do not show that reasoning is superfluous. Indeed, we need to do a lot of reasoning before actions can become habitual. When I see an object moving in front of my car, I apply the brakes automatically. But this action, or rather reaction, was not automatic when I first started learning how to drive. It took a lot of inferences from the general behaviour of the car to the effects of applying the brakes. What we seem to do automatically is actually the result of countless past experiences. The role of reason increases, and our awareness of it increases, as past experiences are less extensive, or as custom leads to varying inferences. A grown-up may stop at the water's edge without first making the necessary inferences, but a child who has less experience and has not formed the habit of reasoning under similar circumstances may have to check his or her steps, and make whatever inferences he or she can. The failure to do so has resulted in many drowning accidents.

A similar explanation applies to those beliefs that seem to arise automatically from

superstition, or prejudice, or education. Whatever makes me think that walking under a ladder will bring bad luck has become so habitual that I seem to believe straightaway that you will experience bad luck just on seeing your walking under a ladder. Likewise, indoctrination has made people respond automatically in certain ways. However, this is not possible if reason has not been involved. One cannot indoctrinate someone who is devoid of reason.

It is curious that Hume's critics should focus on cases involving customary beliefs. Far from showing that Hume has denigrated reason, these cases actually present a bigger problem for those who wish to say that beliefs result only from reasoning. It is more urgent for them to explain why there seems to be no reasoning involved when one makes a split-second decision. In the case of beliefs arising from superstition, etc., it would appear that Hume's opponents would have to say that such beliefs are entirely a matter of feeling. If so, it is Hume's opponents who have to explain why beliefs should not spread "in endemic forms." One point that has not been noted by many commentators is that Hume has asserted that the psychological state of believing does not always accompany inferred ideas, even though many of them have a considerable degree of vivacity, force, etc. He stresses that we "conceive many things, which we do not believe" (T 94). More frequently, the mind will associate many ideas with one impression. From the impression of smoke, the mind may be moved to the idea that the house is on fire, or the idea that my neighbour is again burning rubbish in his backyard incinerator, or the idea that my roast is burning in the oven. It is custom, based on past experiences, that leads to all these ideas; all of them receive their share of vividness, force

and solidity from the impression of smoke. Yet I cannot believe all three. In this situation reason has to do more work, calling in other relevant ideas, searching for corroborating impressions, making further inferences, before the mind is placed in a situation where belief or assent can arise.

Not only may custom sometimes lead to ideas which are inconsistent with one another, it is sometimes too weak to produce ideas at all, in which case again further reasoning is necessary. Hume says that in cases where the causal connections are "more rare and unusual," the mind, with its faculty of reason, "may assist the custom and transition of ideas" (T 104, emphasis mine). More importantly, Hume goes on to say that we find "in some cases, that the reflexion produces the belief without the custom; or more properly speaking, that the reflexion produces the custom in an oblique and artificial manner." This is the case, Hume says, where a scientist reaches a conclusion after only one experiment.

We have seen that Hume has a great deal to say about the operation of reason in the process of belief formation. Hume indeed speaks of an epistemic network which regulates reasoning:

> Of these impressions or ideas of the memory we form a kind of system, either to our internal perception or senses; and every particular of that system join'd, to the present impressions, we are pleas'd to call a reality (T 108).

From this system, or the epistemic network woven together from past experiences, we infer things that we have not actually experienced. Thus the mind forms new systems "which it likewise dignifies with the title of realities" (T 108). The latter systems are the object "of the judgment." With this

epistemic network, a person can situate the mind in such circumstances as to believe certain things and not others. If someone supposes that Caesar died in bed, a person with an epistemic network woven from what he or she has read about ancient history will meet the proposition with incredulity, even if the proposition is made with force, vividness and vivacity. It is not the case that we can believe just anything.

IV

I have argued that there are two elements in Hume's theory about how beliefs are formed: the inference from an impression to an idea and a feeling or sentiment characteristic of belief. What is automatic and unavoidable is the second. The first element can sometimes seem to be automatic, as in the case of split-second decisions, but is usually not so. But even in cases involving split-second decisions, reason has already played its part. If belief is purely a matter of feeling then one can indeed believe willy-nilly. However, the agent can and often does exercise control over the first element of belief, namely, the inference from impressions to ideas. It is this element that prevents beliefs from spreading in endemic forms, as feared by Norman Kemp Smith. It is this element that makes a person's belief subject to scrutiny. It is not the case, as Flew says it is, that "we can neither criticize others for the irrationality of their convictions nor retain any confidence about the rationality of our own." There is indeed, as Passmore says, an ethics of belief. Of course, faulty reasoning is always a possibility, as I have

pointed out. But it is precisely this possibility that gives significance to the ethics of belief.

The claim I am making is that, for Hume, we can choose to do things likely to produce the belief that p. It is precisely because we do have some control on what we believe, and because the force and vividness and other qualities of impressions tend to make certain ideas related to them believable, that we must guard against believing the wrong things. The poets' vivid images can induce us to believe their fiction (T 121); a liar, by repeating his or her lies often enough, can in the end believe his or her own lies (T 117). More importantly, Hume cautions us that custom "may lead us into some false comparison of ideas" (T 116), making us believe, for instance, that our amputated limb is still there, that our loved one who has just died is still "in his chamber or in any other place, where [we] were accustom'd to find him" (T 117). If reason plays no role in belief, as the usual interpretation goes, there is no point in employing reason to guard against believing the wrong things. That Hume urges us to be on guard is undeniable. Credulity, or "a too easy faith in the testimony of others," is regarded by Hume as a "weakness of human nature" (T 112). He also laments the fact that "upon examination we shall find more than one half of those opinions, that prevail among mankind, to be owing to education" (T 117), rather than to sound reasoning. About those opinions Hume says that "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 117). Clearly, Hume does worry about beliefs based on superstition, prejudice and indoctrination. When superstition etc. become entrenched as general

attitudes, beliefs about many things can arise automatically, and there is a danger that they can become no less endemic than as if they were purely a matter of feeling. (Indeed, it is not only the case that the reasoning involved in these beliefs is faulty; there is very little of it, and feeling, or rather passion, is the dominant element.) What then is the cure? The answer, according to Hume is that more and better reasoning is required. In the (first) Enquiry, Hume tells us that "a wise man (should proportion) his belief to the evidence."[10] In the Treatise, he tells us that "as 'tis frequently found, that observation is contrary to another, and that causes and effects follow not in the same order, of which we have had experience, we are oblig'd to vary our reasoning on account of this uncertainty, and take into consideration the contrariety of events" (T 131). Superstitious beliefs and those based on prejudice and indoctrination are 'unphilosophical' because the inferential rules concerning the philosophical relations of impressions and ideas have not been properly followed. It is precisely because we need to be on guard against making incorrect inferences that Hume has devised certain "general rules" by which "we ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects" (T 149). A reflexion on these rules "keeps us from augmenting our belief upon every encrease of the force and vivacity of our ideas" (T 632). The usual interpretation, that Hume has denigrated reason, would make the whole section on the rules of judging causes and effects totally inexplicable.

To sum up, Hume's position is clear and consistent throughout: reason plays an indispensable role in belief by presenting the mind with causal inferences from impressions to ideas which we may or

may not believe; it is only after having been placed in a certain situation, or set of circumstances, that a belief-feeling arises, or fails to arise. Belief is a mental state that cannot be produced by reason, anymore than reason can produce states of hunger, or thirst, or moral blame and approbation. What Hume says about his own philosophy is a clear illustration of my interpretation. Thus, Hume naturally believed in his own system of philosophy, but his belief did not arise from thin air: it came after his reasoning had done its work. But it was not his reasoning that made him believe, although it was his reasoning that placed him in the situation where he believed as he did. It was his reasoning that supplied him with all the philosophical relations, all the contrasts with the rationalist, sceptical and other systems. Having received the evidence supplied by his reason, having considered and reconsidered it, he felt arising in him a feeling, a sentiment, "concerning the superiority of [the] influence" of his own arguments, and chose to "give ... preference to [his] set of arguments above another," thus believing in his own philosophy. This supreme belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling that he had, reflecting, as Hume says, his own "taste." "'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy" (T 103). Belief is a matter of feeling, but we do not and above all should not believe just anything.

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1. Barry Stroud, Hume (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 10.

2. A.T. Nuyen, "David Hume on Reason, Passions and Morals," Hume Studies 10 (1984): 26-45.

3. Antony Flew, Hume's Philosophy of Belief (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 99.

4. Ibid., p. 98.

5. J.A. Passmore, "Hume and the Ethics of Belief," in G.P. Morice (ed.), David Hume: Bicentenary Papers (Edinburgh: University Press, 1977), pp. 77-92.

6. Barbara Winters, "Hume on Reason," Hume Studies 5 (1979): 20-35.

7. Ibid., p. 29.

8. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, second edition, revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) p. 624. Further references will be cited as 'T' followed by the relevant page number(s). Unless otherwise indicated, all emphases are in the text.

9. Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London: MacMillan and Co., 1941), p. 378.

10. David Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 110.