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Beyond Our Senses: Recasting Book I, Part 3 of Hume's *Treatise*

SAUL TRAIGER

The early sections of Book I, Part 3 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*¹ are widely studied, and with good reason. They contain Hume's skeptical arguments about what we now call inductive inference or what Hume called reasoning from experience. Very little attention, however, has been paid to Hume's extensive treatment of the social context of belief formation and correction which dominates Sections iv-xiii of Part 3. When these sections are noticed at all, they are seen as, at best, embellishments and digressions, at worst, as unfortunate muddles. Purified of Sections iv-xiii, Part 3 is simpler (and shorter) than the actual Part 3; its arguments are well understood and their influence on Kant and the subsequent history of philosophy is well documented.² I will purposefully dirty the waters by attempting to account for the rich examples and the explicit treatment of the social component of belief in these neglected sections. While there are excellent reasons for stressing the importance of Hume's skeptical arguments, the text shows that Hume had a second major concern, namely to account for the formation and regulation of beliefs as they typically arise in social contexts.

What exactly is at stake? It's easy to demonstrate that Hume treats belief in social contexts in a significant chunk of Part III. There is extensive discussion of such phenomena as testimony, credulity, and education throughout. It does not follow from this, however, that the analysis of testimony, for example, is central to Hume's epistemology. As Part 3 is usually interpreted, Hume's core account of belief formation and revision is decidedly non-social.

Beliefs are formed and corrected by one's private stock of perceptions. On this interpretation, the social contexts are just fluff in Hume's account; they provide interesting but eliminable examples. Cases of belief formation through testimony, on this view, can be accounted for by a theory of causal inference which makes no reference to social factors, to other believers and their perceptions.

It is my contention that Hume's purpose in Book I, Part 3 is to offer a theory of belief which does justice to the social nature of belief formation and correction. Most beliefs are transmitted through testimony and education. We tend to believe what we are told; yet we can also reject testimony on reflection. While causal inferences, like those from flame to heat, sometimes make reference only to our own perceptions, most of the time those inferences take us "beyond our senses" by inferentially connecting us to the impressions and ideas of others.

In what follows I assess the importance of testimony and other social elements in Hume's epistemology. Social elements make reference to persons and perceptions other than those of the epistemic agent. I will highlight and attempt to account for Hume's attention to social-epistemic contexts in Part 3 of Book I, beginning with Hume's claim that causal inference takes us "beyond our senses." The claim can be read both individualistically and socially. I argue that it must be interpreted socially in at least some key passages. A further claim is that Hume not only illustrates causal inference with social examples, but makes use of the complexity of such examples to account for the inference. When our causal inferences involve testimony, as they often do, the impressions from which the inferences are made are of a special sort. They are impressions of words or utterances. Hume pays special attention to this type of causal inference when discussing the difference between reading fiction and history at T 97–98. This and neighboring passages on the interpretation of the words and utterances of others will figure prominently in my interpretation of the core of Book I, Part 3.

Some Preliminaries: Knowledge and Probability

Part 3 is entitled "Of knowledge and probability." Its sixteen sections span 107 pages of the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition, making it the most extensive part of the *Treatise*. The title is important. It announces that knowledge and probability are separate epistemological categories, and it quickly becomes apparent that Hume's interest is with the latter. Only the first section deals with knowledge. The remaining fourteen sections concern probability.

In Section i, Hume distinguishes two groups of philosophical relations, those which "depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together, and such as may be chang'd without any change in the ideas" (T 69) and those which don't depend on the ideas alone. Contiguity, identity, and cause and

effect belong to the second group. If I consider the idea of my pillow and the idea of my bed, and nothing else, I can't tell whether my pillow is close to my bed. I may have two resembling perceptions of a tomato, but I can't determine whether I'm dealing with the same tomato from the resemblance, no matter how exact. Causation, like contiguity and identity, doesn't depend on the ideas alone; we can't discover causes "merely from their idea." But there's a difference between cause and effect and the other two relations which don't depend merely on our ideas, Hume claims. He simply asserts that these other relations can't be discovered by a mere comparison of ideas; for causation we are told what else is needed, namely memory and experience.

The rest of the first section concerns knowledge, i.e., relations which can be discovered by a mere examination of the ideas. These four relations, resemblance, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in any quality, and contrariety, "are the foundation of science" (T 73). So knowledge involves the relations which depend only on the ideas. Probability, however, is not simply a matter of relations which don't depend on the ideas. Two of the three relations, identity and contiguity, don't properly count as reasoning at all, since the relata can be present when we compare them. "When both the objects are present to the senses along with the relation, we call *this* perception rather than reasoning" (T 73). Causation is the only relation among perceptions which does not depend merely on the ideas and counts as reasoning.³

Hume's first important conclusion in Part 3, then, is that reasoning can be divided into that which yields knowledge, the foundation of science, and that which yields probability. Of the seven philosophical relations, there are "three relations, which depend not upon the mere ideas" and of those three "the only one that can be traced beyond our senses, and informs us of existences and objects, which we do not see or feel, is causation" (T 74). With this taxonomy in hand, Hume sets out to explain this relation fully: "This relation, therefore, we shall endeavour to explain fully before we leave the subject of the understanding" (T 74).

Beyond Our Senses

What constitutes a *full* explanation of the relation of cause and effect? All we know at this point is that causation takes us "beyond our senses." A typically Humean form of explanation is to trace the concept in question back to original impressions. If that is Hume's plan here, then we're already faced with a difficulty: How could the very phenomenon under study, the relation which takes us beyond our senses, be explicated in terms of the senses? Hume immediately recognizes that the idea of cause and effect can't be derived from some original impression and he concludes "The idea, then, of causation must be deriv'd from some *relation* among objects; and that relation we must now endeavour to discover" (T 75).

It's important to follow the twists and turns in the text in the early sections of Part 3. Hume's purpose is to fully explain the one special philosophical relation, the one which takes us beyond our senses. He quickly dismisses the attempt to locate an original impression from which the idea is derived and instead looks for the relations which obtain in causal inference. These are, of course, contiguity, succession, and necessary connection. Of these three, necessary connection is given special attention, beginning in section iii, "Why a cause is always necessary." Since necessity is a component of the idea of causation, Hume is concerned with it when trying to find the origin of the idea of causation. Understanding necessity is a stop on the path to understanding the derivation of the idea of causation, which is itself a stop on the path toward a full understanding of the relation of cause and effect. Hume's treatment of necessity represents just part of what Hume is up to in Part 3 of the *Treatise*.

One component of a full explanation of the relation of cause and effect, then, is the derivation of the idea. The idea of cause and effect can't be derived directly, and instead Hume explains how it is generated by the relations. For a full explanation, Hume must account for the role of causation in our reasoning, and he must explain how such reasoning takes us "beyond our senses." Now if explaining the origin of our idea of necessity were Hume's only task, then showing how causation takes us "beyond our senses" might involve something like accounting for the way the various relations provide the idea of necessity in the absence of an impression of necessary connection. Hume could mean, simply, "How do we make inferences about that which is not present on the basis of our own mental contents?" If, however, a full explanation includes an account of how we reason, then "beyond our senses" could also mean something like "outside of the individual." If Hume means this by "beyond our senses" his question would be different. It would be: "How do we make inferences where the contents of our beliefs make reference to objects which are not provided in perception?"

It might be objected that for Hume, *no* objects are provided in perception; the desk in front of me is no more directly perceived than is the Hague when I am in California. All beliefs make reference to objects which are not provided in perception, simply because objects are never provided perceptually. If this is right, then the two readings of "beyond our senses" collapse into one.

Whether a belief is about something in the believer's vicinity or about something remote, the causal inference responsible for the belief involves an idea of something which is not presented as an impression. This is the case when we infer the presence of heat on seeing fire. The impression from which we infer the idea of heat is not an impression of heat, though an impression of heat must be part of our perceptual history in order for the idea of heat to be available. In the case of conjunctions like fire and heat, where cause and effect are in the vicinity, that is, within my perceptual range, I could have had

the impression, in this case, of heat, in place of the idea. I can see fire, and then, approaching it, feel heat. Such a case would be perception, however, not causal inference. The same holds for causal inferences involving physical objects. If I infer that the egg rolling toward the edge of the table will break on the floor, I can follow up the inference with the perceptual event of seeing the egg break.⁴ These inferences go beyond the senses by anticipating something not yet sensed. But some causal inferences are different; they are inferences either from or to things to which one does not have direct perceptual access. Our beliefs about Caesar are of this kind. Caesar is beyond our senses; he is outside our perceptual horizon. Without having the sensory experiences of the events which befell Caesar, we can still form beliefs about him via the sensory experiences of others, as they are reported in words and utterances.

I will argue that the text reveals this second sense of "beyond our senses," that Hume attempted to provide not just an account of the necessity of causal inference in Part 3, but an account of the mechanism of causal inference where that mechanism produces belief using resources from outside, in the sense just articulated, the perception and memory of the believer. So far I've only distinguished the two possible readings. Most commentators only recognize the first.

Kemp Smith, for example, reviewing the early sections of Part 3 says:

Thus, at last, the stage is set for the central argument of Book I. The causal relation is the only relation which can carry the mind beyond what is sensed or felt. How comes it to do so? What is the nature of the causal relation, and of the inference through which this enlargement of experience comes about? By what right, and in what manner, is it thus in a position to aid us?⁵

So far, so good. But Kemp Smith goes on to quote Hume's attempt to define causation as constituting Hume's answer to these questions. So Kemp Smith runs together two things which I believe must be kept distinct: (1) the attempt to explicate the idea of causation, and (2) the attempt to explicate the mechanism by which causal inference takes us beyond our senses. More recently, Antony Flew discusses causation only in the context of Hume's account of necessity, citing only those passages from Part 3 which concern the definition of the necessity of causation. The bulk of Part 3 is ignored.⁷

Robert Fogelin says the following about Hume's project in Part 3 :

It is just this feature of causation, that it provides a basis for belief beyond the perceived or remembered, that gives it paramount importance in Hume's system. Initially, we can state Hume's question in the following way: how do causal relations provide the basis (the ground, support, or warrant) for an inference from the perceived to

the unperceived? At the start, at least, it seems appropriate to demand that any adequate definition of causal relations provide an answer to this question.⁷

Indeed this is appropriate at the start. We must understand our epistemic concepts before we can account for patterns of justification. But it is only a start; Fogelin does not consider how the sections of Part 3 which don't attempt to define the causal relation address the central feature of causation to which I've called attention. The sins of these commentators are sins of omission. Later I'll consider greater sins.

In fact, Hume *drops* the attempt to explain our idea of necessity after Section iii, and he doesn't take it up again until Section xiv. This is clear from the latter section, which begins:

Having thus explain'd the manner, *in which we reason beyond our immediate impressions, and conclude that such particular causes must have such particular effects*; we must now return upon our footsteps to examine that question, which first occur'd to us, and which we dropt in our way, *viz. What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected together.* (T 155)

This passage shows that there are two projects, accounting for how we reason beyond our immediate impressions, and accounting for our idea of necessity. On Hume's own admission, he abandoned the latter task for eleven sections. I think that it's worth the effort to figure out the project that occupies the intervening sections.

Hume's Examples

By the end of Section iii, Hume has attempted to account for the idea of causation, but he hasn't provided a single example of cause and effect! It is remarkable that Hume writes about the idea of causation without examples, but through Section iii that's exactly what he does. The earliest examples appear in Section iv, where, I've already suggested, Hume has switched gears. The first instance of causal inference in Part 3 is the common inference "that Caesar was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides of March*; and that because this fact is establish'd on the unanimous testimony of historians, who agree to assign this precise time and place to that event" (T 82).

Why does Hume begin with this example?⁸ Wouldn't it be simpler to consider flame and heat, or billiard balls? Hume's use of this complex example makes sense if he is trying to explain a particular feature of causal inference, namely that while all such inferences take us beyond our senses, no matter how far from our senses they take us, when we trace them back, we always "arrive at some object, which we see or remember" (T 82). Hume needs an

example of a causal inference which takes us beyond our senses in this sense. An historical example such as Caesar does the trick. For us, sensory acquaintance with Caesar is out of the question. But sensory acquaintance with something, in this case, words and utterances, is required.

I've suggested that Hume wants to understand how we reason beyond our senses. How can examples like this help? The answer is straightforward: Hume claims that the most common species of causal inference is inference from our impressions of the words and utterances of others. Such inferences can be risky, but there is no avoiding them. "No weakness of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call CREDULITY, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others" (T 112); When Hume attempts to distinguish "betwixt incredulity and belief" one example of incredulity is the proposition "*that Caesar dy'd in his bed*" (T 95). Here belief is distinguished from incredulity; the proposition in question is one which we don't believe. We have the same attitude toward this claim about Caesar that we have toward the claim that "*silver is more fusible than lead, or mercury heavier than gold*" (T 95). That Hume distinguishes belief from disbelief in terms of incredulity is a clear example of his attempt to account for epistemological notions, such as belief, in the social contexts in which they occur in common life.

In Section xiii, Hume considers a skeptical problem about belief based on the reports of others. Historical beliefs, such as the belief that "there has been such a man as Julius Caesar" (T 145) are judged by examining each link in the causal chain of testimony, from the eyewitness to the current report, for example, in a history book. The judgment about each link is a matter of probability. If there is uncertainty about each link, then long chains of testimony will suffer a diminution of probability to zero. Hume concludes: "And indeed it must be confest, that in this manner of considering the subject (which however is not a true one), there is no history or tradition, but what must in the end lose all its force and evidence" (T 145). It's not just our beliefs about Caesar which could suffer, but *all tradition*. While not everyone thinks Hume succeeds in rescuing history and tradition by appealing to the "fidelity of Printers and Copists" (T 146), as he ultimately does, the passage illustrates the importance of testimony to Hume's account of the formation and maintenance of a person's system of beliefs.⁹

Although our topic is Part 3 of Book I, it should be noted that Hume again discusses testimony in Book II when his main topic is the necessity of human action. We take "certain characters or figures describ'd upon paper" to establish "the death of *Caesar*, the success of *Augustus*, the cruelty of *Nero*." Such reasoning about testimony is a form of reasoning from moral evidence, a form of reasoning which "runs thro' politics, war, commerce, oeconomy, and indeed mixes itself so entirely in human life, that 'tis impossible to act or subsist a moment without having recourse to it" (T 405). Moral evidence "is nothing

but a conclusion concerning the actions of men, deriv'd from the consideration of their motives, temper and situation" (T 404). Any reasoning of this sort occurs in a social context since it involves drawing inferences about the beliefs and motives of others, and reasoning from testimony is clearly this sort of reasoning. For Hume, discourse with others is at the core of our inferential lives. Any interpretation of Hume's epistemology which ignores Hume's appreciation of this phenomenon misses much of importance.

When one begins to reflect on the features of Part 3 to which I have called attention, it is clear that Hume isn't just explicating the idea of causation. If he were, he would be open to the charge that he is presupposing that idea, since beliefs about Caesar, for example, involve identity and contiguity in ways in which Hume has already admitted presuppose the idea of causation (T 74). Hume's point is not simply that testimony and discourse with others supply most of our beliefs. Rather, with examples of such belief as his data, Hume explores what happens when we go "beyond our senses." The results are theories of belief formation and justification which are not individualistic. Both theories make reference to persons other than the believer.

Human Testimony

Testimony is a principal cause of belief, and Hume treats it as such. In Book I, Part 3, Hume does not attempt to eliminate testimony in favor of non-social or private experience. Instead, beliefs formed by the testimony of others are Hume's paradigm examples, the data to which his theory must conform. While there are respects in which Hume's theory of belief from testimony is incomplete, Part 3 cannot be understood apart from it.

It has already been noted that Hume uses the example of beliefs about Caesar to explain the nature of belief. In Section vi, Hume defines belief as "an idea associated with a present impression" (T 93). This definition won't do, because it fails to distinguish incredulity from belief. So in the next section, Hume characterizes belief as "A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" (T 96). Vivacity appears to make the difference between incredulity and belief. Hume says that "this definition will also be found to be entirely conformable to every one's feeling and experience" (T 97). The experience Hume offers for this concerns how we read books, depending on the subject matter:

If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other, hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both; tho' his testimony has not the same influence on them. The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents. He enters deeper into the concerns of the persons:

represents to himself their actions, and characters, and friendships, and enmities: He even goes so far as to form a notion of their features, and air, and person. While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars; and, except on account of the style and ingenuity of the composition, can receive little entertainment from it. (T 97–98)

This is a remarkable passage. Does Hume think that historical texts are more exciting than fictional ones? That is not the experience of most of us! Though Hume may betray his own attraction to the study of history here, I think that Hume's claim is rather that how one takes words or utterances is crucial for fixing the relation between impressions of language and the ideas which follow on them. In both the case of taking the words to be a work of fiction and taking them as an historical tract, we begin with the same impressions. But they don't have the same relation to the ideas which we form, even though "we receive the same ideas, and in the same order." The relation of the impressions of the words on the page is mediated by beliefs about the causal history of the words on the page. If we think of them as fiction, we won't form beliefs, and our ideas won't be as lively as when we think of them as the effect of an historical event, in which case we will have belief.

Many readers of Hume miss the crucial point that the liveliness of the belief depends on how we take the impressions from which the belief is inferred.¹⁰ The same impressions in the same order can lead either to belief or incredulity. We can read fiction *as* history, and so form ideas with the vivacity of beliefs. Perhaps this is what happens when we read a *good* novel, though we clearly don't sustain such beliefs when we put it down. Admittedly, Hume does not provide a full account of our engagement with fictional discourse and its relation to belief.¹¹ The relation to the present impression is crucial, and that relation is not a simple one. Here, as in so many places in Part 3, Hume relies heavily on the fact that we bring our beliefs about other persons, their passions, positions, etc. to bear on the formation of other beliefs.¹² It may seem that Hume has bungled a simple point about vivacity by using a dubious example, but that appearance is based on a simplistic reading of the passage.

How we "take" words and utterances is a complex matter. Hume has much to say about such takings, and his observations occur in several different passages and in response to several different concerns. The most basic "taking" is one in which we take a particular sound or set of marks as a word. Unfortunately, Hume has nothing to say about this and in section vi he considers how our hearing or seeing a word produces ideas, a much higher level cognitive operation. Hume says: "Thus because such a particular idea is commonly annex'd to such a particular word, nothing is requir'd but the hearing of that word to produce the correspondent idea" (T 93). Like the act of mind

of recognizing sounds or marks as words which is so automatic Hume doesn't see fit to discuss it, the transition from words to ideas is also automatic, and often involves no reflection. Having the ideas induced by language is one thing, but taking them as reports or as fiction is another. When we are credulous, we uncritically take words and utterances as the truth. We do so, Hume thinks, because we overrate the connection between the "words or discourses of others," "certain ideas in their mind," and "the facts and objects, which they represent" (T 113). So credulity too is unreflective, but unlike our more basic understanding of words and utterances, it is guided not by established regularities but rather it is shaped by our vulgar theories of the relationship between words, minds, and the world.

Beyond the understanding of words and utterances and the uncritical acceptance of what people say is the practice of distinguishing fact from fiction. Part of our ability to discover the truth is our facility for differentiating what is *offered* as fact and what is *offered* as fiction. What is the difference between taking the words of others as history and taking them as fiction? We have present impressions of words and utterances through fiction, poetry, tragedy, oration, history, and religion. Hume owes us an account of testimony which can distinguish these, even as they bring about "the same ideas, and in the same order." This is the subject of Sections viii–x.

Sections viii–x are usually read as an adornment to Hume's definition of belief rather than as an account of how we take and how we ought to take the words and utterances of others. Hume's theory of belief requires that beliefs be causally related to a present impression; but relations other than causation seem to be involved in belief formation. Hume's task in these sections, it appears, is to provide a role for these relations without compromising the definition of belief provided in Section vii. It is clear that elaborating and defending the definition of belief is part of the project. But the text reveals the much broader epistemological concerns mentioned above.

The relations of resemblance and contiguity play an important role in belief formation. The conditions for acceptable belief make reference to them. Hume notes again in Section ix that most beliefs depend on human testimony and he begins to look at how these relations, and the relation of cause and effect, determine belief. Resemblance and contiguity turn out to be the culprits of credulity; they are the relations which often enliven unwarranted beliefs.

Hume says that there are two systems of perceptions, a system of "reality" which includes impressions and ideas of memory, and a second system of "realities" which takes us beyond the senses and memory. This second system contains beliefs, including beliefs connected to certain perceptions from the first system, namely those "I remember to have received from the conversation and books of travellers and historians" (T 108). Hume concludes:

All this, and every thing else which I believe, are nothing but ideas, tho', by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from the other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination.

(T 108)

What is striking about this passage is that belief takes the epistemic agent immediately into the public world. The system of reality includes one's own perceptions. The system of realities includes "received" perceptions. Receiving perceptions puts us in a public world of other persons. How we see that world depends on our close scrutiny of the perception-givers. The world surely contains Rome and Caesar crossing the Rubicon, but does it contain Moses crossing a parted Red Sea? Some of the impressions one can receive from books and conversations should simply be refused. But which ones?

To evaluate testimony we must notice first that receiving testimony requires that we make judgments about other persons, their characters and motives. Just as we learn not to "receive" as belief the impressions of the novelist, we learn to withhold assent from the testimony of persons who get vicarious pleasure from "reporting" new and marvelous things. Hume warns against the fearful person, who will accept all accounts of danger (T 120), and against those who have just returned from a trip to the Red Sea. The latter are likely, thanks to contiguity, to be among the "more faithful and zealous believers" (T 110). These are just a few of the many examples of the regulation of belief from testimony in these sections of Part 3. The character and motives of testifiers are relevant both as testifiers transmit belief via testimony to others and as they themselves receive testimony.

Testimony is given through discourse, i.e., via language, the words and utterances of persons. We noted above that Hume thinks that credulity results from our implicit beliefs about words and their relationship to ideas in the minds of others. In addition to features of character and circumstance which may influence the reception of testimony, Hume claims that resemblance plays a special role, owing to the fact that testimony is expressed in words. Hume explains credulity as the effect of the excessive influence of the resemblance between words and ideas:

The words or discourses of others have an intimate connexion with certain ideas in their mind; and these ideas have also a connexion with the facts or objects, which they represent. This latter connexion is generally much over-rated, and commands our assent beyond what experience will justify; which can proceed from nothing beside the resemblance betwixt the ideas and the facts. Other effects only point out their causes in an oblique manner; but the testimony of men does it directly, and is to be considered as an image as well as an effect. No

wonder, therefore, we are so rash in drawing our inferences from it, and are less guided by experience in our judgments concerning it, than in those upon any other subject. (T 113)

There is a presumption that what others report is true, and this is Hume's explanation of the cause of that presumption. In combination with our propensity to report things which are not true, we are in constant danger of receiving false beliefs others are inclined to transmit to us. The best medicine is to understand the mechanisms of belief formation and testimony transmission. When we do that we can regulate our beliefs accordingly.

The passage just quoted presents an apparent problem for my reading. I've been urging that Hume's account of testimony is central because he wants to explain the mechanism for going beyond our senses, when that means going beyond the perceptual resources of the individual. In such cases a belief is beyond the senses in that it derives from the senses of others. Beliefs derive from the senses of others when they are formed by our taking impressions of words or utterances as testimony. In this passage, however, Hume says that we are less guided by experience in our judgments regarding testimony than we are "in any other" subject. This suggests that beliefs from testimony are but a small portion of our beliefs, that most beliefs don't involve testimony at all.

Hume's point is not that most of our beliefs are not based on testimony and are instead based on testimony-free experience; Hume refers to our "judgments *regarding* testimony" (emphasis added), not our judgments *based on* testimony. These higher order judgments, about the reliability of testimony, rather than about the truth of what the testifier reports, are subject to the tribunal of experience just as are other beliefs. Further, the experiences which could count as evidence for or against these higher order beliefs need not be testimony-free; indeed many will make use of further reports from testifiers. For example, when we check out some relevant fact about the character of a testifier, we may very well rely on further testimony. Even when we seek to determine the reliability of a testifier by "looking for ourselves," that is, when we verify a claim without evaluating the character of the testifier but look instead at what's reported directly, we may still find ourselves appealing to testimony. I might check your claim that the book is 10 inches tall by using a ruler, but my acceptance of the ruler as a measuring instrument depends, at least implicitly, on the testimony of the suppliers of rulers. On Hume's view, testimony is just a kind of experience, of a piece with the evidence of our senses:

When we receive any matter of fact upon human testimony, our faith arises from the very same origin as our inferences from causes to effects, and from effects to causes; nor is there any thing but our

experience of the governing principles of human nature, which can give us any assurance of the veracity of men. (T 113)

What are those governing principles? They are the sort which we've just adduced, for example, that people report the marvelous and the contiguous. They are not principles which make reference only to pure perceptions of memory and sense, i.e., perceptions which make no reference to things outside one's own mind. Testimony is simply a variety of experience, indeed the most important in humans.

An important task, suggested by the subsumption of testimony to experience, is to explain Hume's full taxonomy of experience. Briefly, I think that Hume has four categories: (1) evidence of sense and memory; (2) common life and conversation; (3) testimony of history; (4) the fidelity of "printers and copists." The first category is the most inclusive. Any experience, including experience of words and utterances, is also sensory experience. The second category is the most complex, because it includes all human interaction and interests. History and its transmission through printing present special problems, problems which Hume discusses explicitly. For Hume, all experience includes perceptions of sense and memory, but most experience is of the sort of experience we get from our commerce as social animals.¹³

We know that the famous essay on miracles which Hume ultimately included in the *Enquiry* was originally written for the *Treatise*. Hume suppressed it, fearing that it was too hot for the times. Hume referred to this excised section as the "nobler part" of the now "castrated" *Treatise*.¹⁴ "Of Miracles" would have appeared in the middle of Part 3, as an application of Hume's social epistemology to the question of the justification of belief in miracles.¹⁵ As a generalization of the rules of evidence adduced in "Of Miracles" to all belief, Hume's discussion of probability in Part 3 is an extension of the ongoing debate about miracles in which Hume was well schooled.¹⁶ That debate presupposed that testimony could count as good evidence for belief. The issue was to determine when testimony is to be rejected. Far from reducing testimony to sensory impressions, Hume's epistemology continues the long tradition of taking testimony as a principal cause of belief.¹⁷

Belief is a matter of habit and custom. There is much to be said about the causal mechanisms which regulate custom. Hume shows that words are everywhere, that credulity is the professional liability of the vulgar. The lesson of Part 3 is not that we should avoid words for the safety of private experience. We can't do that. Part 3 is a map of the jungle of words, a map of human nature. There aren't any words we ought simply accept.

I have emphasized the social epistemology of Book I, Part 3 and its neglect in Hume scholarship. Some commentators have, however, attended to Hume's account of testimony in the *Treatise*, though generally with quite

different results. The common view is that Hume tolerated the evidence of testimony only when such evidence could be reduced to testimony-free impressions.¹⁸ The passages I've cited as demonstrating Hume's commitment to the social context of many of our causal inferences are cited by others reductionistically. A detailed treatment of such interpretations is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁹ But it should be noted that if one thinks that historical beliefs, for example, can only be justified by testimony-free experience, it is difficult to make sense of the fact that Hume has so much to say about inferential norms which don't reduce testimony to testimony-free sense impressions. I've argued that it is Hume's position that for impressions of characters and letters to induce belief, one must *take* those characters and letters as reports or beliefs of the testifier, and not as stories, fables, dreams, or mere grunts and scratch-marks. For Hume, historical beliefs are not justified by one's private experience. Rather, one must be justified in taking the words and utterances of others as historical claims, rather than in any number of other ways. One's justification for doing so is a complex matter which makes reference to the social psychology of belief formation which Hume sketches in Part 3.

Animal Inference and Social Inference

In the closing section of Part 3 Hume says that there is a "decisive trial" for any theory of the understanding, namely to account for reasoning in "beasts" as well as humans, since the arguments which establish that "beasts are endow'd with thought and reason" are "so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant" (T 176). This section appears to cut against my claim that the social aspect of belief is central to Part 3. If our inferential practices are essentially the same as those of language-less beasts, then social/linguistic phenomena such as testimony cannot have the importance to Hume's epistemology I've assigned to it.

We should take a careful look at Hume's examples of animal inference before jumping to conclusions. Surprisingly, many of these are social: Dogs shun strangers and caress their masters. "From the tone of voice the dog infers his master's anger, and foresees his own punishment" (T 178). In the *Treatise* Hume may overemphasize the similarities between human and (other) animal inferential abilities. But he tempers his claim in the corresponding section of the first *Enquiry*. There, in a long footnote, Hume explains the difference in inferential ability between humans, and between humans and other animals. Among the differences is availability of testimony: "After we have acquired a confidence in human testimony, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another" (EHU 107).

I'm not sure that Hume thinks that animals never make use of human testimony; perhaps dogs do, by responding to our tone of voice. Beasts, however, neither read nor converse. If Hume's *Treatise* were *A Treatise of Bestial Nature*, the passages I've emphasized could be excised. Beast epistemology is simpler than human epistemology. But it's *human* nature in all its complexity which most interests Hume. One simply cannot provide an account of credulity, for example, in terms of the resources of bestial inference, and Hume doesn't attempt to do so.

The "Reason of Animals" sections and other passages suggest what I have no desire to deny, that there is a core account of causal inference which is non-social, or at least non-linguistic. Not all inferences are inferences from words or utterances. So the radical possibility that all causal inference is social does not find support in the text. I've argued for the more moderate position that accounting for the social dimension of belief is Hume's second concern in Part 3, a concern which can't be assimilated to the first.

Parts 3 and 4

How does a recast Part 3 fit with what follows it? In answering this question I will limit the discussion to Book I of the *Treatise*. Part 4 of Book I treats traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems—the scope of reason, our knowledge of the external world, personal identity, and the immortality of the soul. In addressing these issues, Hume's efforts appear solipsistic. Annette Baier puts it very clearly:

...most of Part IV has been a solo attempt of a single thinker, distrustful of education and testimony, and confined to the ideas he can get for himself. Despite many references to other persons, and occasional rhetorical appeals to the reader to confirm the first-person singular findings, no appeals were made at any point to any pooling of data or to any really cooperative procedures for error detection or error correction.²⁰

The conclusion of Book I, at the end of Part 4, appears to confirm this first-person approach. There Hume admits his inability to resolve the "manifold contradictions" in his reasoning, and he despairs:

Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? (T 269)

How can Hume offer a social epistemology in Part 3, as I claim, while voicing such apparently anti-social questions as Book I draws to a close?

There are two ways in which Hume's remarks here and throughout Part 4 may be taken to be solipsistic, only one of which is at odds with the social epistemology I find in Part 3. The first is that Hume's task is to construct the external world and persons from atomistic perceptions which form the ultimate reality of the world.²¹ On this reading, Hume's ontology excludes external objects, persons, social institutions and the like. There really are only impressions and ideas. Even the self is merely a bundle of perceptions. So it's no wonder that Hume feels lost at the end of such an exercise.

Though the above passage seems to suggest otherwise, I think that Part 4 is solipsistic only in a second, methodological sense. This type of solipsism, if it can be called that, is at work in the personal identity section, for example, where Hume tries to account for the origin of a philosophically important idea, the idea of the self. The materials for the formation of such an idea may come from the head of the individual. That does not require or suggest a solipsistic conclusion, the denial of the existence of the self or the construction of a fictional self from perceptions. The way Hume does metaphysics in Part 4 is to discredit metaphysical systems by giving a deflationary account of the origin of the notions on which such systems depend, not by providing an alternative ontology.

Hume's isolation is, paradoxically, social. He is isolated from "metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians" because of his 'dis-approbation of their systems" (T 264). So Hume recognizes that group agreement is an epistemic value. But his isolation is heightened by the fact that the "infirmities" he finds in his own cognitive apparatus are "common to human nature" (T 265). It's clear that Hume hasn't really given up on the existence of others, or on the social dimension of belief. Rather, he's reporting on the consequences of his engagement with the social-epistemic phenomena. Such engagements don't always end in agreement, and they don't always bring inquiry to a close.

Were Hume committed to a stronger solipsism, it would be difficult to reconcile the Hume of Part 3 with the Hume of Part 4. Unlike Baier, I think we do see a Hume, though "distrustful of education and testimony," at the same time emphasizing our investment in it. I've argued that Hume's epistemology, rather than retreating from the social contexts in which we form beliefs, provides us with a guide through them. Hume emphasizes the continuity of our causal inferences from solitary sense impressions to our beliefs about ancient Rome.

If Hume's solipsistic worries were metaphysical, the confusion he articulates midway through the final section of Part 4 still would not represent his ultimate position at the end of Book I, but rather a temporary skeptical paralysis which is overcome by dining, backgammon, and conversation with friends (T 267). Some speculation in the *Treatise* may pull Hume away from the natural position of humans among other humans, particularly when it comes

to traditional metaphysical issues. But there's no reason to think that all reflections in the *Treatise* do that. If they did, then Hume couldn't formulate the rules of evidence he needs to discredit religion based on the occurrence of miracles, for example, or the general epistemic principles of Part 3.

I remain struck by two facts which have inspired much of the interpretation here. Hume thought that the excised section on miracles was among the most important parts of the *Treatise*, and he used examples of historical belief at the core of Part 3. An appreciation of these facts forces us to take seriously many passages in Part 3 which are usually passed over. Much of Part 3 then reads not as an annoying digression from the real task of developing skepticism about induction, but as an early start on understanding the complexity of human inferential practices in their typically social context.

NOTES

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1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in the text.

2 Recent attention to Hume's skeptical arguments has centered on the question of whether or not Hume is a skeptic, and if he is, what kind of skeptic. Those who have contributed to this debate, like virtually all commentators on Book I of the *Treatise*, share the reading of Part 3 just described. See John F. Wright, *The Skeptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

3 Hume anticipates the objection that judgments of identity and contiguity can involve more than perception. In such cases, Hume argues, they presuppose causal reasoning. The presupposition of causal reasoning in judgments of identity is also discussed in Part 4, Sections ii and vi.

4 Where causal inference involves objects, the picture is more complex than when the transition is one among perceptions. Here Hume's account will have to include the mechanisms by which we are able to form the ideas of continued and distinct objects in the first place. Here too, see I 4 ii (T 187ff).

5 Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Garland, 1983) 368.

6 Antony Flew, *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

7 Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism*, 41.

8 Caesar is an important example in many *Treatise* passages. It's clear from Hume's correspondence that he admired Caesar, but for a peculiar reason. In a letter to Mrs. Dysart, March 19, 1751, Hume writes:

I cannot but bless the memory of Julius Caesar, for the great esteem he expressed for fat men, and his aversion to lean ones. All the world allows, that that emperor was the greatest genius that ever was, and the greatest judge of mankind. (J.H. Burton, *The Life and Correspondence of David Hume* [New York: Garland, 1983])

9 See Robert J. Fogelin, *Philosophical Interpretations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 119 ff. for a discussion of Hume's argument here.

10 Cf. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism*, 55 ff.

11 David Hume, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 216–225. In "Of Tragedy," Hume consider how we take words and utterances and their relation to our passionate responses to them. Tragic events reported in works of tragedy are received with pleasure by audiences. Hume explains how tragedies can bring pleasure in spite of the fact that the subject matter conveyed is unpleasant. The pleasure can't be accounted for only from the fact that we regard the discourse as fiction, since brilliant historical oratory about unpleasant events can also bring pleasure. Hume regards the eloquence of the presentation as accounting for the pleasurable effect. He thinks that this is an example of a more general phenomenon of a subordinate passion (pleasure, from exposition of tragedy) taking over from the dominant passion (pain, from horror of things reported).

12 Some commentators have criticized Hume's theory of belief on the grounds that high vivacity is not sufficient for belief. My interpretation suggests that the target of such objections is not Hume's theory of belief. Cf. Michael Hodges and John Lachs, "Hume on Belief," *The Review of Metaphysics* 30 (1): 3–18. For a discussion with more sensitivity to the complexity of Hume's theory of belief, see John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980), 196 ff.

13 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 8.

14 Cf. Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 112.

15 My speculation is that it would have replaced or augmented Section x, "Of the influence of belief," where Hume discusses the psychological mechanisms responsible for the mind's acquiescence to claims about miracles. David Wootton places it after "Of unphilosophical probability." He claims, with David Fate Norton, that the former section anticipates the deleted miracles section. But it seems to me that "Of the influence of belief" covers, with less detailed and controversial examples, the phenomenon of credulity which is at the heart of Hume's account of the testimony for miracles. Cf. "David Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and irreligion," in *Studies in the Philosophy of the*

Scottish Enlightenment, edited by M.A. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 199.

16 Cf. Wootton, *passim*.

17 See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: a philosophical study of early ideas about probability, induction and statistical inference* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 18–22, 31–36, 176 ff.

18 See E. Anscombe, "Hume and Julius Caesar" in *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein: Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981); C.A.J. Coady, "Testimony and Observation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (2): 149–155; Frederick Schmitt, "Justification, Sociality, and Autonomy," *Synthese* 73 (1987):43–85; Michael Welbourne, "The Community of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1981): 302–14; and, most recently, Mark Owen Webb, "Why I Know About As Much As You: A Reply to Hartwig," *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (5): 260–270. Coady's position is unchanged in his recent *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 79 ff.

19 I critically examine these positions in "Humean Testimony," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (1993): 135–149.

20 Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.

21 Cf. Daniel Flage, "The Minds of David Hume," *Hume Studies* 13 (1987): 245–274.

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