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Hume and the Limits of Reason

MICHAEL P. LYNCH

In all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error.¹

So begins *Treatise* I iv 1, "Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason." The rules of reason may be perfect, but we are not. From this truism Hume cultivates a notoriously obscure argument to the effect that we should never trust our reasoning. In characteristic fashion, Hume considers the argument sound but unpersuasive. He believes that no one who reflects on it will lose faith in their reason and sets out to explain why. In this essay, I am concerned to make two main points. First, the argument is more successful than often thought; and second, reflecting on Hume's explanation for its lack of force illuminates the depth of his naturalism and contains an important insight into the limits of human reason.²

Hume actually presents two distinct arguments in "Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason."³ The arguments are distinct insofar as they are aimed at different conclusions; they are related in that they share a premise concerning our natural fallibility as reasoning agents. The first argument (T 181) is meant to show that any belief formed in the "demonstrative sciences"—any *a priori* belief about (say) mathematics—cannot be held with certainty. At best, such beliefs can be taken as probably true. This argument can be sketched as follows.⁴ In performing any set of calculations, no matter how simple, we are

susceptible to error. This we know from past experience. We will, of course, be more confident in our conclusions if we recheck our calculations, or allow others to check them for us. But while these methods can increase the subjective probability that we are right, they can never increase it all the way to 1. For the possibility that we have made a mistake always remains. Therefore, we should never be completely certain of any of our beliefs, even of those concerning rudimentary mathematics, and hence "all knowledge degenerates into probability."

Using the above line of reasoning as a stepping-stone, Hume then presents a second, more shocking argument. Here, the conclusion is a strong scepticism: reflection on our natural fallibility shows us that we shouldn't even trust our reasoning in everyday life; if we follow the argument, we will see that we actually have no justified beliefs at all. Hume thinks the arguments of each stage are epistemically related—accepting the first argument should lead one to accept the second. In this essay, I will only be concerned with the second argument. Thus, when I refer to Hume's "sceptical argument" I am to be understood as referring to the stronger, more radically sceptical hypothesis.

The paper is broken into two major sections; each corresponding to a question. The first question is: What is the sceptical argument and does it work? The second is: What does Hume take the sceptical argument to show, or: what is Hume's point in raising the sceptical argument? One might expect that the answer to this second sort of question would already be contained in an answer to the first sort. But as is often the case, things aren't simple where Hume is concerned. As I've already noted in the introduction, Hume doesn't think anyone will—or can, for that matter—believe the sceptic's conclusion, even if her argument for that conclusion is sound. Therefore, in what follows, we must keep these two issues in mind; we must separate Hume's presentation and defense of the sceptical argument, and his intended use of that argument.

I

Suppose that upon mulling over some issue in your mind, you reach a decision, *P*.⁵ Since you have made mistakes in reasoning in the past, however, you find yourself (quite prudently perhaps) doubting *P*. Now according to Hume,

...we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties. This is a doubt, which immediately occurs to us, and to which, if we wou'd closely pursue our reason, we cannot avoid giving a decision. But this decision, tho' it shou'd be favourable to our

preceeding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still further our first evidence, and must itself by weaken'd by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on *in infinitum*; till at last there remain nothing of the original probability... (T 182)

While the basic idea here is perhaps clear enough, the details of the argument Hume is presenting are not. The basic idea is that an awareness of our fallibility should, "if we closely pursue our reason" lead to a succession of doubts which undermine our original belief. Given that we realize this, the implication is that we should not believe P to start with. Thus our natural fallibility, together with the fact that, "[i]n every judgment, which we can form concerning probability...we ought always to correct the first judgment...by another" would seemingly place us in a sceptical dilemma (T 181–182). And yet, while the argument's general structure seems clear enough at first, a second look at the details shows that it is ambiguously presented—a fact most easily seen by considering two different interpretations of the passage. The first interpretation is similar to the one presented by Robert Fogelin; the second traces its lineage to some unpublished notes on the subject by Jonathan Bennett.⁶

(A) Suppose upon reflection I come to the conclusion P and assign it a probability of 0.8. Nevertheless, I might recall that I have made errors in reasoning in the past, and thus feel a bit uneasy about the reasoning described in the previous sentence. So, I assign a probability of 0.7 to the proposition that my original assignment was right. Again, I recall that my reasoning is not always perfect, and hence assign only a 0.6 probability to the proposition that the assignment made in the last sentence was correct. And so on. If I continue on in the same vein, I will eventually reduce the probability of the original proposition to "nothing"; that is to 0. Assuming that I recognize this fact, I should assign that probability to P straightaway, and hence should not believe that P.

(B) Suppose upon reflection I come to the conclusion P and assign it a probability of 0.8. Nevertheless, I might recall that I have made errors in reasoning in the past, and thus feel a bit uneasy about the reasoning described in the previous sentence. Therefore, I lower the probability of P slightly, say to 0.7. But of course, I realize that I have made errors in reasoning before, so I lower the value of P's probability again, this time to 0.6, and so on. If I continue on in the same vein, I will eventually reduce the probability of the original proposition to "nothing"; that is to 0. Assuming that I recognize this fact, I should assign that probability to P straightaway, and hence should not believe that P.

Each interpretation picks out a different feature of Hume's own presentation of the argument. Interpretation (A) focuses on what Hume calls the "reflexive" nature of the sceptical doubts (T 184), while (B) has the additional

virtue of incorporating in a more direct fashion Hume's assertion that each higher level doubt lowers the probability of the original judgment. Both interpretations, however, are unsound. As Fogelin has noted, a trivial reason for this is that they are both invalid as they stand; both arguments are missing an important step.⁷ In order to work, both versions must rule out the case where the diminutions of probability become progressively smaller and hence reach a finite limit. A premise must be added to the effect that for any arbitrary level of doubt *D*, the diminution of probability at *D* must be greater or equal to the diminution at level *D*-1. The addition of such a premise requires some discussion; but there are more pressing problems to be dealt with first.

According to Fogelin and Hacking, (A) fails because of a confusion of levels. Version (A), unlike (B), holds that the target of one's second-level doubt is *not* one's belief that

(1) the probability of *P* is 0.8,

but the belief that

(2) I am correct in assigning the probability of 0.8 to *P*.

What's the difference? Well, lowering the probability of (2) just by itself won't lower the probability of (1). An admission that I could be wrong in the first assignment (the possibility that (2) is false) does not entail that (1) is false. As Fogelin says: "However certain or uncertain we are about our ability to calculate probabilities, if a proposition has a certain probability, that (tautologically) is the probability it has."⁸

While clearly correct, this point only holds if Hume is concerned with objective, rather than subjective, probability. If our concern is how confident we are in our beliefs, not how probable they are in fact, then a lowering of confidence in (2) *will* result in a lowering of confidence in (1).⁹ If this is Hume's point, then (A) will collapse into (B). And there is good reason to believe that Hume was concerned with confidence levels. Consider his repeated use of the word 'doubt', and the locution 'degrees of assurance' (see, e.g., T 184) as well as his assertion that the argument gives him "less confidence in his opinions" (T 183). These turns of phrase suggest that the target is a more subjective conception of probability. More simply, it is reasonable to think that any argument worthy of being called sceptical would be concerned with undermining confidence and instilling doubt.

Both versions of the argument actually fail for a different reason. There is just as much reason to think that I initially gave *P* "too much" confidence as there is to think I gave it "too little." Errors in reasoning go both ways; sometimes we underestimate, sometimes we overestimate. Barring further evidence, there is no way of telling which I may have done in this situation. So, there is no reason to lower the original probability assignment; thus *P*'s probability will not be reduced to nothing. To put it another way, if one and the same

reason supports both my having undercalculated and my having overcalculated, why should I feel less confident about my original belief? It would seem that I am back to where I started. As Mikael Karlsson has pointed out, this point holds equally well against Morris' statement of the argument, which is essentially (A) cashed out in terms of confidence levels.¹⁰ Morris says,

As I work through the iterated assessments of my probability claim, and recognize that with each step the probability that I've correctly assessed the original proposition diminishes, so should my confidence, or the strength with which I hold the original belief, diminish. As it does, I begin to think that the likelihood that the opposing belief—the negation of that belief—is true increases.¹¹

The assumption lurking here is that once I begin to think I have made a mistake about the original proposition, I must lower the (subjective) probability of that original belief. But this does not strictly follow. While I will indeed lower my confidence in the proposition that the original assignment was right, I could in fact raise my confidence in the original belief. For all I know, the mistake I might have made was one of underestimation of the evidence for P; so being less confident in the proposition that my first assignment was right doesn't necessarily mean that I should be less confident in believing P. Of course, it doesn't show that I should be more confident about P either; what it shows is that we are in something of a stalemate. The mere fact that I could have made a mistake in reasoning doesn't show me which type of mistake I've made. And thus it is hard to see why I should, on the basis of these arguments, lower my confidence in the original belief.

Hence, none of the above interpretations are sound. But the very point which is their undoing points us toward a subtly different, and more successful, reading of the argument. To repeat, Karlsson's point against Morris is that the mere possibility that I'm mistaken in estimating P's probability doesn't show which type of mistake—over- or underestimation—has been made; epistemically speaking, I'm stalemated. Of course, once I've realized this—that is, once I've realized at level 2 that I might have bungled at level 1—then a little reflection should show me that I have no idea how big—and what type—of a bungle I might have committed.

For example, imagine that upon looking throughout the house, I become fairly sure that I left my wallet at a restaurant. Reflection reveals that I have often reasoned poorly about such things in the past, however, and hence I conclude that the degree of confidence I have in my belief is misplaced. I realize that I may have overlooked something, and if so, should feel *less* sure in my belief that my wallet was left at the restaurant. On the other hand (as a frustrated friend might point out) I *have* looked throughout the house, and thus perhaps I should be even more confident in my belief, and call the

restaurant immediately. A little further reflection shows that the reasoning just described may be wrong as well, and so on, *ad infinitum*, until I literally don't know what to believe. More precisely:

(C) Suppose that upon reflection I come to a conclusion, *P*, and assign it a probability of 0.8. Nevertheless, I might recall that I have made errors in reasoning in the past, and thus feel a bit uneasy about the reasoning described in the previous sentence. I realize that I might have overestimated or underestimated the original probability. Thus, at level 2, I should "if I pursue my reason closely," widen the range of *P*'s probability from 0.8; for example, I should conclude that the subjective probability of my level 1 belief—the degree of confidence I have in that belief—is somewhere between 0.7 and 0.9. But of course, at level 3, I realize that I have made errors in reasoning before, so I widen the range of *P*'s probability again, and so on. Assuming that at each level the amount of widening was the same or greater, then continuing on in the same vein will eventually leave me in the position of thinking only that the subjective probability of *P* is somewhere between 0 and 1! Hence, I have no reason for thinking *P* as any more probable than any other belief, (including not-*P*) and thus, assuming that I recognize this, I should not believe *P*—I should withhold belief altogether.

How faithful is this interpretation to Hume? An obvious criticism is that the very point which would allow Hume to sidestep Karlsson's criticism implies that the target—the conclusion of the argument—cannot be a reduction of the original belief's probability, but rather an elimination of any subjective probability at all. For (C) does not result in *P*'s probability being reduced to "nothing"—that is, to zero—but rather in a general state of befuddlement. Our confidence disappears altogether. We are left with no more reason to think that *P* is true than to think that it is false. Thus (C) would seem to be at odds with Hume's talk of a "weakening" of evidence.

This problem is not as serious as it looks at first; (C) is entirely compatible with Hume's putting the point in terms of a reduction or weakening of probability. For recall that Hume is concerned here with subjective probability. The concern is the confidence we have in our beliefs. But that confidence is diminished under (C): specifically, as we go through the argument, what we become less and less confident about is the belief that our initial assignment of subjective probability to *P* is correct. This loss of confidence to the effect that we were right the first time (that we didn't over- or underestimate) is precisely what forces us to widen the probability spread. The more we widen it, the more apparent it becomes that we don't know how much confidence we should have in *P*; which in turn, leads us to not assign *P* any probability at all—we literally don't know what to believe. The belief whose (subjective) probability is reduced to zero is the belief that *P*'s original assignment was correct; and of course, this doesn't entail that *P*'s probability is zero—instead, we should simply withhold from believing anything, whether *P* or not-*P*.

Further, the state of general befuddlement in which (C) leaves us is exactly what Hume maintained was the overall aim of the sceptical argument. For instance, after giving his version of the argument, Hume summarizes what he takes to be the point:

When I reflect on the natural fallibility of my judgment, I have less confidence in my opinions, than when I only consider the objects concerning which I reason; and when I proceed still farther, to turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation I make of my faculties; all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, *and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence.* (T 183; emphasis mine)

With its mention of “diminution,” this passage again reflects Hume’s tying of the argument with a reduction of probability. But most importantly, it offers a construal of the target of the argument: a total extinction of belief and evidence.¹² At many points in fact, Hume talks this way, saying that the argument results in “total uncertainty” (T 184) and “subverts all belief and opinion” (T 183). Thus, (C) has the virtue of being aimed at Hume’s desired conclusion. Given this, and given that it is more plausible, I submit that this interpretation is a serious contender for being what Hume had in mind. It certainly goes farther towards explaining why Hume would put so much stock in the argument in the first place.

Finally, it is worth noting that our new interpretation of the argument reveals a connection between it and more traditional sceptical arguments. Hume was certainly aware of such arguments; although the degree to which he was familiar with them is a matter of contention. Hume himself sometimes encourages the view that he is presenting, in an updated and improved form, the arguments of the ancient sceptics.¹³ Ancient sceptics would indeed, it seems, have been pleasantly disposed toward Hume’s argument in I iv 1. As Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes note,

The ancient sceptics did not [just] attack knowledge: they attacked belief. They argued that, under sceptical pressure, our beliefs turn out to be groundless and that we have no more reason to believe than to disbelieve.¹⁴

The point is that, Hume, like the ancient sceptics, wasn’t content with showing that scepticism undermines knowledge while leaving justified belief intact. Rather, sceptical arguments leave us with no reason to believe anything. As I have been presenting it, this is precisely the goal of Hume’s argument: as I said above, argument (C) results in our having no more reason to believe P than not-P.

Is argument (C) sound? Obviously, we must first determine whether it is valid; and the question here is the aforementioned assumption, which all

three interpretations must make, that at each level, the degree of doubt involved must be equal or greater to the degree involved at previous levels. There is at least one good reason I can think of to make that assumption, and it is that there is no good reason not to make it. Whatever amount of doubt one starts with, no matter how small, there is no principled reason to lower that amount as the argument proceeds. In fact, it seems that if one did do so, then the sceptic would be within her rights to cry foul, for if (she might say) you doubted your reasoning to degree n at level 1, then, given that at level 2 you have no more or less reason to believe you have erred, then for consistency's sake, if for nothing else, you should lower your confidence by a degree of n at level 2 as well. In other words, since one's epistemic situation *vis à vis* one's own reliability does not change during the course of the argument (how could it?) then clearly one should have the same degree of suspicion towards one's reasoning all the way through.

So the argument seems quite plausible. Of course, anyone who draws a sharp distinction between the activity of justifying and the state of being justified may reject the argument. Suppose that one can be justified in believing that P even if one cannot justify that belief. If so, then even if I cannot prove (to myself or others) that my reasoning is correct (i.e., that my calculation of probabilities is correct), it may be correct, and hence, I may be justified. However, this response can be less persuasive against the version of the argument that does not aim at objectively undermining our beliefs, but only at making us doubt those beliefs. Even if I am justified in believing my reasoning to be correct, I won't be able to prove it to myself, and hence a niggling of doubt must remain.¹⁵ The argument would seem to yield a ineliminable degree of doubt about our reasoning.

II

Hume's sceptical argument in I iv 1 has turned out to be surprisingly resistant to criticism. But even if one does end up rejecting Hume's sceptical argument, there remains much that is of interest in I iv 1. I now want to examine two interrelated questions. First, why did Hume believe that reflection on the argument could not cause anyone to lose faith in their reason? Second, given that he didn't believe that the argument could convince anyone of scepticism, what was his purpose in presenting it?

Hume is quick to point out that "neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly [such a total sceptic]" (T 183). This is apparently a matter of physical necessity:

Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel... (T 183)

Thus, humans just naturally reason, and no amount of sceptical argumentation, no matter how compelling in the abstract, will get around that fact. Anyone who follows the sceptical argument just won't lose faith in their reason: they will continue to have beliefs and will continue to take some of these beliefs as more reasonable than others. Indeed, since he takes the sceptical argument as sound, Hume does not *argue* against it at all. Rather, he is interested in explaining why it is that no one "is a complete and total" sceptic. He believes that the explanation for this fact provides evidence for his theory of mind. As he says,

My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments [for scepticism regarding reason] is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning cause and effects, are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.* (T 183)

The "hypothesis" in question, for which the discussion of the sceptical arguments supposedly provides evidence, is actually (as the "and" indicates) two views wrapped into one. The two are both aspects of what we might call his "theory of belief." Unfortunately, the parts in question do not map neatly onto the above conjunction; nonetheless, both are being invoked here, and it is important not to run them together, even if Hume did not distinguish them as carefully as he might have.

The first point Hume is making is that the sceptical argument, together with the obvious fact that we continue to go on trusting our judgments anyway, is evidence for his account of what a belief *is*—for his theory of the *nature* of belief, in other words. A belief, on Hume's account, is distinguished from a mere entertainment of an idea, in that the former is essentially more "vivacious" and forceful. A belief that P is flashier, and sticks around longer than a passing thought that P; without these features, which result from the "sensitive part of our natures," a belief would merely be "a simple act of thought" (T 184). If it were, Hume reasons, then we could not explain why our beliefs withstand the sceptical assault. Rather, Hume claims that a belief is a particular "manner of conception"; and hence, that the argument fails because as we ascend the ladder of the argument, our beliefs which express the sceptical doubts become more and more "faint and obscure" until they finally fade away to nothing (T 185). As Hume put the point

The attention is on the stretch: The posture of the mind is uneasy; and the spirits being diverted from their natural course, are not govern'd in their movements by the same laws, at least not to the same degree, as when they flow in their usual channel. (T 185)

Thus the length, complication, and downright weirdness of the sceptical

argument is what prevents us from believing its conclusion, for by the time we get there, the relevant beliefs which make up the stages of the sceptical argument have lost so much vivacity as not to be beliefs at all. Hume is right that it is psychologically difficult to follow the sceptical argument very far. Further, one can certainly be sympathetic to Hume's claim that this fact is singularly explained by his account of (the nature of) belief. For (i) as we've just seen, his account of belief does at least supply *something* of an explanation, and (ii) as Hume touts (T 623, 627) theories of the nature of belief were not running rampant in the philosophical field of his day—hence one can't really expect him to discuss how other theories of belief might handle the problem. Strictly speaking, however, the fact we can't follow the sceptical argument very far does *not* offer much support for his theory that a belief is an idea associated with a certain feeling. This is because that fact is completely compatible—as far as I can see—with any notion of *what (ontologically)* a belief is. It certainly doesn't imply that a belief must be a *feeling* of some sort. For instance, I see no reason why a behaviorist could not say that folks simply are not disposed to pay attention to such sceptical arguments for very long, and then go on to explain this fact by appealing to certain environmental and social factors.

Further, Hume's actual reason for why we are not persuaded by the sceptic's argument is an empirical claim—even if his analysis of belief itself is not. His claim is that we cannot sustain sceptical argumentation because the ideas involved become less and less vivacious as we do so. Further, he generalizes the point, concluding that “the conviction, which arises from a subtile reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning” (T 186). As I remarked above, none of this is that implausible; but unfortunately, it is also not a question that we can settle today outside of the domain of empirical psychology.¹⁶

Finally, this aspect of Hume's explanation has an interesting consequence. It implies that the sceptical argument always succeeds in lowering our confidence in our beliefs to some degree. For Hume's point is only that the regress of doubt, not every doubt itself, is halted by the mind. To see this, assume that any version of the argument works. Then suppose that you have reached some level of doubt, (say level 10) only to find that, due to the unnatural posture of your mind, the level 10 doubt is drained of all its force. According to Hume, that means that a belief is no longer involved; that is, you don't really believe at this point that your reasoning has been fallible etc. But on any interpretation of the argument, this is not going to eliminate all of your doubts. For instance, according to interpretation (B), where at each level your doubt causes you to knock a bit off the probability of your original belief P, your stopping at level 10 only means that you don't knock off the bit of probability you would have if you hadn't stopped at level 10. Thus, you still think your original belief is less probable (by 9 levels of doubt, we might say)

than when you started.¹⁷

Thus the first point Hume is trying to make, namely that reflection on the sceptical argument provides positive support for his views about the nature of belief, does not fare all that well under scrutiny. His second point fares better. In saying that "all our reasonings concerning cause and effects, are derived from nothing but custom," Hume is saying that our causal reasoning is something that has its origins in human nature. It is something which we find ourselves naturally disposed to do by our primitive or animal nature; and therefore, causal reasoning is not a process which some mysterious faculty called "reason" engages in through acts of "will."¹⁸ This is the point Hume is making when he says that, as we move up the ladder of doubt, we have less and less confidence in the sceptical argument despite the fact that "...the principles of judgment, and the balancing of opposite causes be the same as at the very beginning" (T 185). By "opposite causes" here, Hume apparently means "opposing reasons"; so the point is that we lose faith in the sceptical argument despite the fact that the "perfect rules of reason" tell us that we should not. Since these principles of judgment, these rules, derive from the cogitative aspect of ourselves, and since they obviously fail to generate belief in this case, Hume concludes that our causal reasoning, and the beliefs which are the result of such reasoning, must themselves be ultimately grounded in the "sensitive" aspect of our nature.¹⁹

Note that this is a separate point from the first. The former concerns the nature of any particular belief; the second concerns that in which causal reasoning is ultimately grounded. The two are logically independent; for while Hume may be wrong in thinking that beliefs are vivacious ideas, he is at the very least headed in the right direction when he insists that our reasoning is grounded in our (all too human) nature and not in faculties which operate by perfect and abstract rules. Nonetheless, both points are being made here; and it would be a mistake to ignore either.

These points place me at odds with William Morris—whose work I partially defended in section I of this paper. According to Morris, the sceptical argument in I iv 1 is to be understood as an extended *reductio* of a "prevalent rationalist or intellectualist model of the way the mind works."²⁰ Morris takes it that Part III of the *Treatise* is meant to "demolish the view that our causal expectations are based in any way on reasoning."²¹ It is meant to show that if we adopted the "rationalistic" model of the mind, we would be compelled to be sceptics about causal inference. But Hume is not a sceptic: he instead replaces the mistaken psychological model with his own, naturalistic account of the mind. So given that it was his chief aim to undermine a certain model of the mind, it would be a good strategy on his part to show, in Part IV, that this model's conception of reason crumbles just where we would think it would succeed the most: i.e., in demonstrative reasoning. If this is so, then perhaps we don't need to take Hume as supplying any independent reason for

adopting his theory of belief in I iv 1. Rather, what he is trying to do is remove a final objection to a theory he already takes himself to have explained and defended in Part III.

My resistance to Morris' suggestions arises from two sources. First, and less important, I think that the support for his theory of mind Hume intends to gather from I iv 1 is not purely negative. As I have argued above, Hume apparently takes the fact that we cannot believe the sceptical argument to be *best explained* by his own theory of what a belief *is*. Thus, that his theory accounts for the data is a positive point in its favor. Second, and much more crucially, I am not convinced that Hume is attempting to show that our confidence in our judgment can never be based on reasoning. One problem is that Hume himself takes it (in T III) that algebra and arithmetic are sciences that "preserve a perfect exactness and certainty" (T 71). In these sciences, we can compare ideas and "determine their relations without any possibility of error" (T 71). In other words, Hume takes it that when we perform arithmetic—during which we are surely reasoning—we can and do form judgments in which we are (rightly) confident. Further, he clearly holds that a belief formed when doing arithmetic is subject to critical and rational evaluation: he says in the first sentence of I iv 1 that the rules of logic are "certain and infallible"; it is when we apply these rules that we fall into error. If such judgments weren't the product of some form of reasoning, there would be little sense in saying that some of them could be *false*. Hence, if Morris were right, Hume would have to be speaking in these passages in the voice of the rationalist, but it is at best not clear that this is so. Further, these and other passages suggest that Hume did think that we form judgments based on reason, and further, that there are in fact, right and wrong ways to do so. As I see it, the point is not that beliefs (and our confidence in them) can't result from reasoning; rather, the point is that the nature, ground and limits of reasoning itself must be re-examined.

Another problem for Morris' suggestion is that Hume admits that the sceptical argument can also be run against someone who holds his view of mind as well. After having criticized the notion that a belief cannot be a "simple act of thought," Hume imagines someone objecting in this manner:

But here, perhaps, it may be demanded, how it happens, even upon *my hypothesis*, that these arguments above-explain'd produce not a total suspense of judgment, and after what manner the mind ever retains a degree of assurance in any subject? (T 184; emphasis mine)

On the preceding page, Hume uses the phrase: "my hypothesis" as a name for his theory that belief is "properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures" (T 183). As we've seen above, this hypothesis is actually the sum of two parts: (a) Hume's view that beliefs are vivacious ideas, and (b)

his view that our causal reasoning and beliefs are grounded in our animal nature. Now after raising the above challenge, he goes on to rephrase the sceptical argument again, this time in language more befitting his own theory. His reply to this version is as revealing for what it *doesn't* say as much as for what it *does*. For Hume claims, as we've seen, that one doesn't believe the sceptical arguments because one can't believe them. Further, as we've seen, he takes this fact to be best explained by his "hypothesis"—that is, by (a) and (b). But nowhere does Hume say that his views get us off the sceptical hook, as we would expect if Morris were right. Hume thinks these arguments are sound, period—and not just sound relative to a certain assumed model of the mind. And here he is surely right; the sceptical argument, if sound at all, is sound because—and not in spite of—the nature of reasoning itself. Hume's point is that despite this, we won't believe it, and further, that this fact is best explained by his own views about the mind.

So I am not persuaded that Hume's purpose in section I iv 1 is to provide a *reductio* of a certain conception of the mind. But the disagreement between Morris and myself on this point may be nothing more than a family quarrel, for I think that Morris is right in believing that Hume is neither a radical sceptic nor a dogmatist. Further, he is trying to convince us to let go of a particular conception of reasoning, even if he is not trying to get us to think that no belief can be grounded on reason. This point is made most clearly by Hume during his own summaries of his thinking about our topic. At the beginning of the section after I iv 1, (the far more famous "Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses") Hume sums up his point in regard to reason this way:

Thus the sceptic continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason..." (T 187)

And at the end of that same section:

'Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or our senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. (T 218)

And again at the close of Book I:

...I have already shewn, that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. (T 267–268)

All of these passages purport to summarize the point of the section we have been considering, and all express a common core: that reason cannot defend its own reliability. Any attempt to show why reason is trustworthy—to prove

that reason itself is a guide worthy of following—quickly and decisively undermines itself. We cannot defend reason by reason without “exposing ourselves still further” because, very simply, any attempt to do so is guilty of epistemic circularity.²² When we try to employ the understanding “on its own”—that is, when we try to use only our reason to defend reason—we end up begging the very question being asked. Hence, if we cannot justify our practice of reasoning, then we can only bite the bullet and appeal to what we find “natural and easy” (T 268). As David Pears has said recently: “Reason cannot defend the principles which we need to steer us through our lives, and so nature takes over and engraves them on our minds.”²³ Individual reasons for individual beliefs might be questioned, but reason itself cannot be; we can only say that we will continue to engage in it. But if we can give no reason to trust our reasoning, then why should we? Hume’s answer is that the point is moot. We can’t stop reasoning, and thus the question of whether it is rational or not to engage in reason is an entirely empty one. The question has already been settled, as Hume would say, by Nature.

Finally, this way of looking at things makes it a bit clearer how I iv 1 fits into Hume’s overall project in Part IV. In particular, we can draw a precise parallel between I iv 1 and the following section “On Scepticism with Regard to the Senses.” In the first paragraph of that section, Hume announces that just as the sceptic cannot defend his reason by reason,

...by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho’ he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity....We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but ’tis vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all of our reasonings. (T 187)

Similarly, we can inquire: What causes us to think that reason is reliable? But not: Is reason reliable? It may be, but we will not be able to explain why it is without relying on reason itself. This point is simple and important. It shows us that there is no foundation to which we can appeal in order to justify our use of reason. We simply cannot answer the sceptic’s question. Thus Morris is right in thinking that in I iv 1 Hume is separating himself from a certain tradition. But his point isn’t that reason can’t generate belief—obviously it can. The task is to explain how it can be that we have such beliefs at all. In sum, since according to Hume, reason cannot ground itself, it cannot supply the epistemically secure foundation it was originally thought to provide. It cannot do this because it cannot justify its own reliability. Our reasoning must therefore be grounded in turn on something else—the natural mechanisms of the imagination: Custom and Habit.

Hume's sceptical argument is better—and more threatening—than it appears at first glance. Further, reflection on the sceptical argument encourages us to adopt a more naturalistic standpoint toward the mind and, in particular, toward what we might call our doxastic faculties. It advises us to stop looking for an indubitable ground of those faculties and to get on with the business of finding out how we use them.

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, 1978), 180.

2 For a sampling of the recent literature on I iv 1, see John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1952), 513–516; Ian Hacking, "Hume's Species of Probability," *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978): 30; Fred Wilson, "Hume's Sceptical Argument Against Reason," *Hume Studies* 9.2 (1983): 90–129; Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), and "Hume's Scepticism," *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90–11; William E. Morris, "Hume's Scepticism About Reason," *Hume Studies* 15.1 (1989): 39–60; and Mikael M. Karlsson, "Epistemic Leaks and Epistemic Meltdowns: A Response to William Morris on Scepticism with Regard to Reason," *Hume Studies* 16.2 (1990): 121–130. All but Morris find the argument deeply confused.

3 Morris, Karlsson, and Fogelin (1993) all make this point.

4 For a more detailed presentation of Hume's first argument, see Morris, 40–46. Morris supplies what I see as one of the sharpest discussions to-date on I iv 1. Morris takes what I call "two arguments" to be different premises in one argument aimed at the stronger conclusion noted in the text: namely, as Morris says, that "our use of reason can't even generate belief" (39). No doubt that this was Hume's intention, but it still seems to me that one might acknowledge that no belief is certain without believing that no belief is justified.

5 As far as I can see, "P" could be a place-holder for any proposition. One might think that, since this second argument concerns only beliefs based on probability, the domain in question would be restricted to only those propositions. But recall that Hume, at this point in the section, believes that he has shown that all "knowledge degenerates into probability" and hence, it would seem that the candidates for P are wide open.

6 I refer specifically here to Fogelin, 1985. Fogelin himself refers to Hacking, 30. I wish to thank Bennett for allowing me to cite his work, and for several key discussions of these issues which greatly helped to sharpen my thinking about them.

7 Fogelin, 1985, 17.

8 Fogelin, 1985, 18.

9 Morris, 52, makes a similar point. Notice that I don't say: a lowering of confidence in (2) will result in us lowering the probability of (1) further than 0.8. In recognizing that we could be wrong at level (2) we will be less confident that the probability of P is 0.8. But we might begin to think it is now 0.9! See below for further comment.

10 See Karlsson, 1990, 126.

11 Morris, 50.

12 I take it that when Hume mentions "evidence" here, as in many other parts of the *Treatise*, he means "evidentness"; that is, being evident to the subject.

13 On Hume's familiarity with traditional scepticism see Fogelin, 1985, 173 n2; Barry Stroud, "Hume's Scepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection," *Philosophical Topics* 19.1 (1992); Richard H. Popkin, "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism," in *Hume*, edited by V. C. Chappell (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968); and Passmore, 134-136.

14 Julius Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8.

15 'Niggle' is a technical term for a tiny bit of doubt (Fogelin, 1985).

16 His general point seems particularly vulnerable. Note that if true, then given the complex and subtle reasoning found throughout the *Treatise* (in fact, in this very section!) we could never find ourselves in strong agreement with its author!

17 It is unclear whether Hume was aware of this point. On the one hand, he points out in the beginning of I iv 1 that, "In the man of the best sense and longest experience, this authority [of our confidence] is never entire; since even such-a-one must be conscious of many errors in the past, and must still dread the like for the future" (T 182). On the other hand, he later says that after encountering the sceptical arguments, one still "continues to believe, and think and reason *as usual*" (T 184, emphasis mine).

18 See Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 75ff.

19 Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this passage, and this point, to my attention.

20 Morris, 56.

21 Morris, 55, emphasis mine.

22 I take this term from William Alston's "Epistemic Circularity" in his *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

23 David Pears, *Hume's System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 99.

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