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*Hume Studies* Volume XXIV, Number 1 (April, 1998) 161-170.

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SYMPOSIUM

A version of this paper was presented at the symposium on *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* by Don Garrett, held at the XXIVth International Hume Conference, Monterey, California, July 1997.

## Garrett on the Consistency of Hume's Philosophy

ROBERT J. FOGELIN

Under the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, I have moved through three stages in my attitude toward inconsistency. First I became convinced that inconsistency in a system of beliefs or in a system of rules need not render such a system useless. My reason for thinking this was that paradoxes, for example the Liar Paradox and the Russell Paradox, actually do obtain in our language and yet, for all that, our language serves a wide range of useful purposes. The second stage in the development of my seemingly permissive attitude toward inconsistency was to reject the hermeneutical principle that, in the interest of charity, one should strain every fiber to avoid attributing an inconsistency to a philosopher of stature. It now seems to me that interpretations that avoid attributions of inconsistency at all costs can sometimes be more distorting than interpretations that grant the existence of inconsistency and try to understand its sources. Thirdly, I came to think that it is characteristic of most great philosophic positions to be deeply impregnated with inconsistency or with other forms of incoherence. This is because inconsistency and other forms of incoherence are standing threats to any system of beliefs that is both conceptually rich and self-reflective—features commonly found in important philosophical positions. This strikes me as true of the philosophical positions of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein and some others. Since I also include Hume in this pantheon, it is understandable why I greeted Don Garrett's superb book, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> with mixed

feelings. If Garrett is right, then there is nary an inconsistency—or nary an inconsistency of substance—to be found anywhere in Hume’s philosophical writings. What’s to be done to protect Hume against such a leveling charge? I’m not sure. I’ll take Hume’s essay on miracles as a starting point, because it provides a clear case of a supposed inconsistency that Garrett attempts to resolve which I, in contrast, wish to preserve.

First an exegetical point. There has, as Garrett remarks, been considerable disagreement among commentators concerning what thesis Hume intended to establish in the first part of this essay. This strikes me as an inappropriate way of approaching the text since Hume plainly attempts to establish a number of theses in Part I of the essay. We might, of course, want to ask a different question. What, at least in Hume’s opinion, is the most basic thesis he was attempting to establish? The answer to that question seems to be given by Hume in the following passage:

There must...be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.

Having drawn this conclusion, Hume then goes on to say:

*The plain consequence is* (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), ‘That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish....’ (EHU 115-116, emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>

I have italicized the expression “the plain consequence is” in order to press home the fact that Hume’s thesis concerning the level of support that testimony can give in behalf of the occurrence of a miracle is explicitly stated as a consequence of the thesis that, in every case, there is “a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.” Though the basic theme of the essay on miracles is the evaluation of testimony, the deepest, most fundamental, argument is this “direct and full proof.”

What are we to make of this talk of a “direct and full proof against the existence of any miracle”? It seems to be an objective claim concerning the sorts of events that can occur in the world: in particular, it tells us that miracles cannot. I am inclined, however, to agree with Garrett in treating talk of a proof as a subjective claim concerning how a report of a miracle will strike a suitably wise person who “proportions his belief to the

evidence" (EHU 110). Presented with evidence in support of the occurrence of a miracle, Hume recommends that we follow in the footsteps of Cardinal de Retz who, as Hume tells us, "concluded, like a just reasoner, that such an evidence carried falsehood upon the very face of it, and that a miracle, supported by any human testimony, was more properly a subject of derision than of argument" (EHU 124).

But now a question arises which invariably comes up when I teach this section of the *Enquiry* to undergraduates. Given what seems to be an unmitigated assault on all forms of inductive reasoning in the second part of Section IV of the *Enquiry*, isn't Hume committed to the view that all inductive inferences are on a par in the sense that they are, one and all, no good? If so, how can Hume single out the inductive arguments adduced in favor of the existence of a miracle for special criticism? Of course, all inductive inferences do not seem to be on a par from the perspective of the wise man who, committed to the view that nature is uniform, adjusts his beliefs to evidence, and Hume, of course, presents his views mostly from just this perspective. But the nagging question remains: doesn't Hume's inductive skepticism reveal the hollowness of this perspective? And what about his oft neglected skepticism with regard to reason in T I iv 1?<sup>3</sup> It seems to reveal the hollowness of all reasoning. As a matter of cognitive psychology, it may be true that under certain specifiable conditions people will adopt the perspective of the wise reasoner. But, if we are to believe Hume, it is also a fact of cognitive psychology that under other specifiable conditions people will, with equal commitment, adopt different perspectives incompatible with it.

In his writings Hume describes a variety of cognitive perspectives. There is the perspective of the "many honest gentlemen, who, being always employed in their domestic affairs, or amusing themselves in common recreations, have carried their thoughts very little beyond those objects, which are every day exposed to their senses." These, Hume tells us, he has no wish "to make philosophers" (T 272). There is the standpoint of the "hair-brained enthusiast" (EPM 270), whom Hume despises. There is the standpoint of the wise and cautious inquirer. But there is also the standpoint of the philosopher who, following his sifting humors in an unrestricted way, finds himself in a state of despairing skepticism. At various times, Hume occupies three of these four standpoints and writes (and presumably thinks) with complete commitment to the standpoint he finds himself in. We can call these three standpoints the gentlemanly Hume, the wise Hume and the Pyrrhonian Hume.

What, then, is the relationship between these three Humes? (If we ask, "Will the real Hume please stand up?" who, if anyone, will rise?) The wise Hume, having entered upon the science of man, comes to believe that a very wide range of the gentlemanly Hume's beliefs are either false or

unfounded. Indeed, to the wise Hume, the beliefs of the gentlemanly Hume are massively (thought sometimes beneficially) skewed. The Pyrrhonian Hume emerges from the wise Hume when the wise Hume pursues the science of man in a wholly unrestricted manner. The Pyrrhonian emerges from the wise Hume simply by doing what the wise Hume does, only more so.

The Pyrrhonian Hume reports the results of this intellectual voyage in these words:

The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another.  
(T 268)

Here Hume gives expression to how things ineluctably strike him from the point of view generated by intense reflection, and in this frame of mind, the Pyrrhonian Hume seems to apply the same negative epistemic evaluations to the wise Hume that the wise Hume applied to the gentlemanly Hume.

It seems, then, that Hume's writings exhibit a radical form of epistemological, or better, doxastic perspectivism. What we believe and what we think it appropriate to believe is a function of the level of investigation we are indulging in. Indeed, Hume comes very close to saying just this in the closing paragraph of Book I of the *Treatise*. In the course of explaining his apparent lapses into dogmatic modes of speech, he defends himself by telling us that it is indeed proper "we should yield to that propensity, which inclines us to be positive and certain in particular points, according to the light in which we survey them in any particular instant" (T 273). Indeed, if his own theory of belief formation is correct, we really have no choice in the matter. A few sentences later, he actually seems to acknowledge this when he tell us that his expressions of certainty "were extorted from me by the present view of the object" (T 273). In speaking in this way, Hume seems to adopt a principle of the following kind:

What a person believes and the degree to which he believes it is a function of the light in which he surveys the subject at that particular time.

These commitments will be reflected in the kind of epistemic appraisals he will make:

When we survey something in a particular light, we will think it *fitting and proper* to assign the degree of belief to it that we do.

Notice that this second principle is not itself a principle of epistemic assessment, but rather a principle describing how such epistemic principles are formed.

Now, if Hume really is a radical perspectivist in the ways just indicated, then it becomes very difficult to see how, on his own terms, we can assign beliefs, degrees of belief and epistemic assessments of beliefs to him in an unequivocal, across-the-board, way. The various Humes who inhabit his writings will have different beliefs, assign different degrees of belief and make incompatible epistemic assessments with respect to the selfsame things. For example, the gentlemanly Hume thinks, with others, that he is directly aware of objects external to his mind. The wise Hume, the cognitive psychologist Hume, tells us that "it is universally allowed by philosophers, *and is besides pretty obvious of itself*, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas" (T 67, emphasis added). Examples of such disparities between the wise Hume and the gentlemanly Hume are easily multiplied. Furthermore, the wise Hume and the Pyrrhonian Hume stand in a relationship that parallels the relationship between the gentlemanly Hume and the wise Hume. The wise Hume *sees* the gentlemanly Hume as infected with false and unfounded beliefs; the Pyrrhonian Hume has essentially the same attitude toward the wise Hume. In his turn, the gentlemanly Hume thinks that the wise Hume has carried things more than a bit too far, smells of the wick from excessive study, has been reading too many French philosophers. Somewhat desperately, the wise Hume expresses similar views concerning the Pyrrhonian Hume, whom he mocks when he looks back on the tortured activities that occupied him in his closet (See EHU 159). Presumably, the gentlemanly Hume will view the Pyrrhonian Hume as something close to a hair-brained enthusiast.

It may seem to some that, even if Hume is a radical perspectivist of the kind I am describing, this is not the source of inconsistency. There is nothing contradictory, for example, in pointing out that things strike us differently from different standpoints, indeed, it is a platitude to say so. This, however, misses the point through confounding perspectivism with a different position we might call relationalism—a better word, it seems to me, than relativism. Obviously, the following remarks are not incompatible:

R1: From perspective A, X seems F.

R2: From perspective B, X does not seem F.

Here we have two independent remarks about how things seem from a given perspective. If Jones asserts R1 and Smith asserts R2, they are not disagreeing. Indeed, both Jones and Smith could accept both claims. You do not have to occupy a perspective in order to accept the truth of a claim about how things

seem from that perspective. Contrast this situation with the following:

P1: X is F. (asserted from perspective A)

P2: X is not F. (asserted from perspective B)

Here we have a direct clash in judgments. If Smith asserts P1 and Jones P2, then they are disagreeing with each other. Each describes the world as it presents itself to him from the perspective within which he views it, but neither is speaking about the perspective he occupies. Each thinks what the other is saying is false—perhaps even ridiculously false. This, it seems to me, is the sort of view that Hume is committed to: not simply a relational view, but a strong version of perspectivism.

Let me illustrate what I have in mind by citing a passage from the *Treatise* that illustrates Hume's commitment to perspectivism in a different way. Discussing the supposed unity of objects, he tells us that

the colour, taste, figure, solidity, and other qualities, combined in a peach or melon, are conceived to form one thing; and that on account of their close relation, which makes them affect the thought in the same manner, as if perfectly uncompounded. (T 221)

This, of course, is just how the gentlemanly Hume perceives objects around him. But Hume then goes on to consider what happens when the mind views these objects, as he says, in "another light":

But the mind rests not here. *Whenever it views the object in another light, it finds that all these qualities are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other.* (T 221, emphasis added)

A bit later Hume explains what he means by viewing the object in *another light*:

It is natural for men, in their common and careless way of thinking, to imagine they perceive a connexion betwixt such objects as they have constantly found united together; and because custom has rendered it difficult to separate the ideas, they are apt to fancy such a separation to be in itself impossible and absurd. *But philosophers, who abstract from the effects of custom, and compare the ideas of objects, immediately perceive the falsehood of these vulgar sentiments, and discover that there is no known connexion among objects.* (T 222, emphasis added)

If we read this passage as making a purely relational claim, then, though perhaps it is false, it causes no conceptual problems. Taken relationally, it

would simply present two independent theses in cognitive psychology to the effect that under certain specifiable conditions the qualities of objects appear united, whereas, under certain other specifiable conditions, they strike us as separate and loose. No problems there. The problem is that Hume does not adopt such a relational standpoint. Hume does not simply describe these perspectives; he actually presents his views from within the confines of one of them. In particular, he passes, in his own person, normative epistemic judgments about the rightness and wrongness of substantial claims. In fact, as we saw earlier, he tells us that such judgments are "extorted" from him. The situation, then, looks like this: in pursuing a program of cognitive psychology, Hume finds that his perspective on various topics changes in fundamental ways. In particular, in the process of rising from the gentlemanly Hume to the wise Hume, he comes to see, among other things, that many of our (hence his) beliefs are not founded on reliable methods of empirical inquiry. This recognition leads him to formulate and approve of a set of "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" (T I iii 15). This presents the picture of an inquiry steadily advancing, correcting its procedures as it goes—well-grounded rules generating well-grounded facts, whose discovery lends further support to the rules that led to their discovery. This is the picture that Garrett elaborates with great insight. And an attractive picture it is, for it seems to provide a stable, self-supporting platform for empirical inquiry.

Except for those bothersome sifting humors. What Hume saw in the *Treatise* was that the project of introducing the experimental method into moral subjects (what Garrett calls Hume's cognitive psychology), when pursued relentlessly, ends up in a morass of skeptical doubt. He ends up there, and I think that this is crucially important, because he comes to see that the mechanisms that ultimately fix our beliefs are mere makeshifts not worthy of our epistemic approval from the very perspective he has come to occupy. This is precisely the situation in which Hume finds himself, not only with respect to reason but also with respect to the senses:

I begun this subject with premising that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this would be the conclusion I should draw from the whole of my reasoning. But to be ingenuous, I feel myself at present of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclined to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence. I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. (T 217)

Here Hume both describes our perceptual faculties and epistemically evaluates them from the perspective he has now attained.

I take it that the central thesis of Garrett's book is that the results of Hume's pursuit of a science of man stand in stable—indeed, in mutually supportive—relationships to one another. This activity is guided by a set of rules governing inductive reasoning. These rules generate successful predictions which, in their turn, supply inductive support for these rules themselves. Toward the end of his book, Garrett puts it like this:

Hume's "rules for judging of causes and effects"...are specific rules of reasoning that are themselves produced and supported by reasoning. That is, inductive reason concerning the particular circumstances of past successes and past failures of inductive reasoning leads to the conclusion that reasoning in accordance with these rules will tend to be more successful than reasoning that is not in accordance with them. (CCHP 231)

This, it seems to me, is an accurate picture of the state of play at the end of Part III of Book I of the *Treatise*. But Hume did go on to write Part IV and with it a new prospect appeared: that of the Pyrrhonian Hume who tells us that "all the rules of logic" require a "total extinction of belief and evidence." Garrett attempts to blunt the force of this passage by telling us that it is a "conclusion of cognitive psychology rather than a conclusion of epistemic evaluation" (CCHP 227). But it seems to me that this contrast will not do. The recognition of this fact of cognitive psychology naturally carries with it an irresistible drive to form radically strong negative epistemic assessments to the effect we "can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another" (T 268). This, in the words of the first *Enquiry*, is a skepticism "consequent to science and enquiry" (EHU 150). This claim that no opinion is more probable or likely than another can only be taken as an epistemic evaluation. Hume not only describes the circumstances under which one is led to render such an evaluation, when in those circumstances, having been led there in pursuit of his science of man, he renders it himself. His writings are simultaneously descriptive and normative—the normativity reflecting the scene that progressively unfolds as the investigation develops.

Elsewhere I have argued that much of the fourth part of the first book of the *Treatise* can be read as his natural history of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> It offers an account of the way in which various philosophical positions arise in natural sequence in the course of human reflection on philosophical topics. Since Hume included his own reflections in this activity, he can also be credited with presenting the first phenomenology of mind—an account of how a sequence of philosophical perspectives unfolds within oneself when pursuing philosophy in an unrestricted manner.

Back to miracles. I began by noting the seemingly naive complaint that Hume cannot coherently deny the rational basis of the principle that nature

is uniform and then, at the same time, go on to employ this very principle in challenging those who accept the testimony for miracles. Here is what Garrett says in response to this complaint:

Hume is...not guilty of inconsistency in opposing belief in miracles, even though he holds that the thesis of the uniformity of nature cannot be defended by any argument that does not presuppose it. [In] accepting the thesis of the uniformity of nature and performing inductive inferences from experience he is consistently instantiating his own theory of human cognitive psychology. In seeking to govern his inferences "wisely," by proportioning his belief to the evidence in accordance with philosophical rules for judging causes and effects, he is seeking to be the kind of person whom he can epistemically and morally approve. (CCHP 159)

I think that this is a correct description of how the wise Hume views himself. There is, however, more to Hume than the wise Hume, and in this, I think, much of his originality, greatness and redeeming inner-conflict lies.

## NOTES

1 Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Abbreviated "CCHP," with page numbers inserted parenthetically in text.

2 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). Abbreviated "EHU" and "EPM," respectively, with page numbers inserted parenthetically in text.

3 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Abbreviated "T," with page numbers inserted parenthetically in text.

4 Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985). See Chapter Seven, "Hume's Natural History of Philosophy."

*Received August 1997*