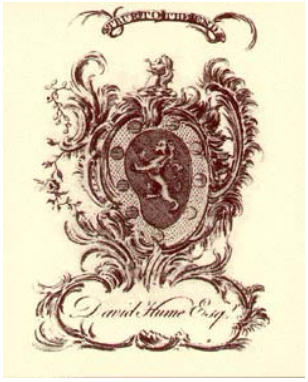

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Nature Breaks Down: Hume's Problematic Naturalism in *Treatise* I iv

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1. Readers of Hume, even those who call attention to the depth and variety of his skeptical excursions,[1] now happily admit that Hume is, in crucial respects, a "naturalist." A naturalist is, broadly, someone who emphasizes the natural (as opposed on the one hand to the abstractly rational, and on the other hand to the supernatural) sources of our beliefs, attitudes, and practices; and Hume surely is *at least* this kind of naturalist. But understanding Hume's naturalism to include *only* this general explanatory commitment obscures as much as it reveals, I will argue, about the text of *Treatise* I iv, where Hume examines (and seems to fall prey to) various skeptical "systems of philosophy." [2] To understand that part of the *Treatise* (and to understand Hume better overall), we must, I will argue, understand Hume's shifting allegiances to *different kinds* of naturalism.[3]

Space for seeing different kinds of naturalism in Hume opens up when we notice that, while naturalism in general is a neutral and descriptive enterprise, Hume's talk of nature and its role in our cognition often takes a celebratory and normative turn. For instance, when introducing his discussion of the belief in body, Hume writes that, though the skeptic cannot justify holding this belief, "[n]ature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations" (T 187). Here Hume does not merely announce that he will employ an empirical causal method to explain our beliefs; he suggests that nature's role in producing our belief merits our *approval*, for nature guides us

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reliably with respect to important matters, while abstract reason would make us lose our way. Thus Hume goes beyond neutral naturalism to embrace what I will call *strong naturalism*.

Strong naturalism not only celebrates the smooth functioning of our natural mechanisms of belief-formation, it also takes that smooth functioning to set the standard for beliefs. That is, according to strong naturalism we should praise beliefs formed by the smooth natural process, and criticize those formed by some other process. (Thus the strong naturalist, unlike the neutral naturalist, must find some way to distinguish between what is truly natural in the normative sense and what is "natural" merely strictly and formally—a distinction that Hume indeed famously makes on T 226, by comparing what is natural in the sense that health is natural for us, with what is natural in the same formal sense in which a "malady" is natural.) This kind of naturalist is well positioned to attack rationalism: reasoning (or anyway abstract solipsistic "rationalist" reasoning), a process that differs from the healthy natural cognitive process, is not how we do, should, or even can (durably) operate. This kind of naturalist is also positioned, or perhaps even required, to construe the alternative to rationalism wholly optimistically. No belief has to meet the impossible standards set by rationalistic reason in order to be well warranted; instead, naturalness confers warrant.[4]

On my view, Hume is often a strong naturalist. However, many of Hume's recent interpreters and partisans have read him as being this kind of naturalist, a philosopher bent on destroying rationalism and elaborating a wholly constructive naturalistic alternative, all of the time.[5] But this exclusively strong naturalistic reading portrays a Hume who is altogether too sunny and single-minded to fit the full range of texts. There are parts of the *Treatise* where Hume's naturalism is troubled and troubling, precisely because the natural process of belief-formation itself operates haltingly or unreliably, with nature itself subverting its own deepest and most regular principles, or disappointing our most modest cognitive hopes.[6] That is to say, whatever constructive naturalistic hopes motivate Hume at the start, there are times in his writings where on his own honest view of things nature breaks down, in such a way that this breakdown itself provokes a skeptical episode (rather than serving as the common-sense cure to a rationalistically induced skepticism). Remarkably, perhaps, Hume remains committed to naturalism in spite of the shortcomings he himself reveals in nature; but his continuing commitment now must be to a *problematic* naturalism, a naturalism that concedes nature's power but cannot univocally assert nature's normativity.

This paper sketches reasons for interpreting Hume as subscribing (most likely without either premeditation or glee) to problematic naturalism at crucial points in *Treatise* I iv. In section 2 of the paper, I describe the interpretation of Hume as a strong naturalist throughout. In section 3, I review some of the texts that create problems for that interpretation, and support the view

that Hume is a problematic naturalist. In section 4, I differentiate the interpretation I am offering from two other interpretations, according to which Hume is both a naturalist and a skeptic (Fogelin) or is merely a failed naturalist (Pears). In section 5, I discuss some overall interpretive advantages of viewing Hume as a problematic naturalist. Finally, in section 6, I speculate about the possible philosophical uses of the position of problematic naturalism, beyond its uses in characterizing Hume.

2. The interpretation of Hume as a constructive naturalist throughout his work, even where he seems at his most skeptical, dates back to the work of Norman Kemp Smith, and is deeply in vogue again, especially as worked out by Annette Baier and Don Garrett.[7] Among the recommendations of this strong naturalist interpretation are that it fits with Hume's optimistic and ambitious account of his own project in the "Introduction" of the *Treatise* (where he tells us that an empirically based science of human nature is the key to unlock all the treasures of the intellectual world),[8] and that it arguably fits well with Hume's apparent attacks on religious belief (where, at least on the most likely reading, he urges us to prefer the natural to the supernatural). Yet any interpretation of Hume as a thoroughly constructive or unproblematic naturalist must confront the fact that Hume makes arguments that he himself calls skeptical, arguments that on the surface tell against the coherence and correctness of nature's deliverances.

For the most part, the debate has raged over Hume's account of causation. Those who see some important and problematic skeptical side to Hume interpret him as arguing that we have no more reason to hold one causal belief than to hold any other.[9] The strong naturalists, on the other hand, take Hume's fundamental point to be that we do not generate or justify our causal beliefs by any rational process, but do so only by means of a non-rational natural process. But *Treatise* I iii, the discussion of causation, is probably the wrong part of the text of the *Treatise* to serve as the acid test for the strong naturalist thesis. It is unclear how far Hume thought of himself, in the *Treatise*, as making a full-scale skeptical point (as opposed to a deflationary point only) about causation.[10] It *is* clear, however, that Hume entertains fully skeptical arguments in *Treatise* I iv: the arguments there impugn our reasoning, our belief in body, and our belief in an enduring self, famously leading Hume to a moment of apparent skeptical despair in I iv 7.

Yet, even while he is exploring the "sceptical systems," Hume takes care to celebrate nature's power over us and our beliefs; and such celebration is the first line of defense for the strong naturalist interpretation. When Hume discovers in I iv 1 that reason left to itself undermines itself, by means of its iterated self-scrutiny, he notes that nature rescues us, because "[n]ature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity, has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel . . ." (T 183). When he begins his investigation of our belief

in body in I iv 2, he famously announces that he is searching not for a justification of that belief, but simply for the belief's causes. The search for a justification would be otiose because no lack of justification can budge us from such a fundamental belief; for (to recall a passage cited in section 1 above) "[n]ature has not left us this choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations" (T 187). If we focus on such passages alone, then the point of the skepticisms Hume investigates in I iv might plausibly seem to be simply that airy reason has little power or influence in our lives (if it did, we would all be skeptics, which we are not), and that rock-solid nature plays the role that too many previous philosophers had incautiously assigned to reason.

There is little point in denying that denigrating reason and exalting nature is one of Hume's programmatic aims. But between a philosopher's program and a philosopher's results stand that philosopher's curiosity and conscience. Hume might have stuck unfailingly to celebrating nature's power at reason's expense. Instead, he details the oddities of nature's activities, and finds those activities wanting according to the most basic and widely accepted rational standards. Nature leads us into a "manifest contradiction" when it produces beliefs that are "equally natural and necessary" but "directly contrary" to each other (T 266). Nature proceeds by confounding distinct ideas, by conflating resembling ideas, by ignoring inconvenient facts. Long before the infamous skeptical crisis of I iv 7,[11] Hume finds himself asking about nature and its activities: "What can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falsehood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?"[12]

At this juncture, one strong naturalist resource is to attribute subtlety and indirection to Hume. He does not, in passages like the one just quoted, truly condemn the operation of nature *in propria persona*. He instead masquerades, for dialectical reasons, as a rationalist, making manifest rationalism's skepticism-generating tendencies: its solipsistic method of investigation, and its reluctance to accept our "mere" nature as a legitimate point of departure. When the mask finally falls, at the end of Book I of the *Treatise*, the triumph of nature is all the more thorough for having been postponed and resisted. Baier writes: "I take the sentiments expressed at T. 218 about sceptical doubt to be part of a lengthy, controlled, and dialectical stretch of thought about sceptical thought, one that reaches a reasonably steady conclusion only on the last pages of Book One."[13] Hume's thorough and apparently engaged exploration of skeptical despair is thus all self-consciously directed at showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.

A related strong naturalist resource, viewing Hume more as scientist than as dramatist, involves counting all of Hume's despairing skeptical episodes in *Treatise* I iv as pure descriptions of his own states of mind, an exercise in descriptive cognitive psychology. Again, Hume's apparently condemnatory

language does not really signal a condemnation of nature and its operations; it is instead only a report of how things seemed to him at one time, a report without true evaluative significance.[14] So, considering the skeptical sentiments Hume voices when he reflects that we cannot discover real necessary connections, Garrett writes: "Although Hume . . . reports the initial sentiments produced by an investigation of the first principles of the human understanding, he again pointedly refrains from offering any epistemic evaluation of those sentiments or any recommendations concerning the rejection or suspension of beliefs in the future."[15] As Garrett sees it, these skeptical episodes have no evaluative epistemic weight at all until the Conclusion of *Treatise* Book I, and Hume's modest but optimistic commitment to continue philosophizing.

Such strong naturalist strategies are attractive, especially because they provide a way to pay attention to the many voices and the numerous twists and turns of the narrative in *Treatise* I iv, while still seeing that part of the *Treatise* as unified and constructive. On such readings Hume turns out to be a consistent philosopher, maintaining throughout (though often only implicitly, or craftily) his stance that nature triumphs over all, and that this triumph is an unalloyed good. But, however appealing such a reading might be philosophically, it must also pass interpretive muster. Is this account of a thoroughly constructive Hume straightforwardly derived from Hume's own deep plan and consistent efforts, or is it instead a much-enhanced version of Hume's unplanned and inconsistent campaign to rescue his constructive aims from his own philosophical honesty? Does Hume carefully reserve all genuine epistemic evaluation for the last few pages of *Treatise* Book I, as Garrett says, or do fragmentary, tentative, and often worrisome epistemic evaluations proliferate throughout the text? Is Hume's examination of skeptical arguments a carefully "controlled" assault on rationalism, as Baier says, or is it in some measure a desperate effort *to* control nature's self-subversion? To add weight to my interpretive scruples, and to move the questions I have asked beyond the realm of the rhetorical, we need to survey some relevant messy texts.

3. On the strong naturalist reading of Hume, reason's defeat is nature's triumph; and the outbreak of skepticism always signals the defeat of rationalism. The systematic problem that *Treatise* I iv creates for this reading is that, again and again, nature seems to fail in its own terms—that is, not measured against the standards of an abstract reason that is natural only strictly and formally, but instead measured against those deeply natural principles that the strong naturalist counts as normative.[16] In this section I give an overview of these failures, especially nature's spectacular failure with respect to our belief in body.

In I iv, Hume argues for skepticism about reason, about "the senses"—that is, about our belief in body, and about personal identity. He also puts the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which at some level he

surely subscribes to, into conflict with the belief in body, which again at some level he surely subscribes to; and he undergoes and emerges from a skeptical crisis, apparently as the cumulative effect of raising so many unanswerable skeptical doubts about his own fundamental commitments.[17] These skeptical episodes, far from reducing rationalism to absurdity, seem to bring the naturalistically oriented Hume to the brink of despair.

(a) In I iv 1, Hume argues for skepticism concerning reason. This section seems, by its very title, to be grist for the strong naturalist mill;[18] but, when we come to cases, we see that the reason Hume produces skepticism about is a natural power of thought, and that what saves us from being full-fledged skeptics about the simplest pieces of our reasoning is simply that nature is divided against itself.

As Hume tells the story, our "faculties" (and what are they but an aspect of human nature?) are fallible; recognizing that fallibility is easy and inevitable; and, almost fatally for us, our nature is such that even a few iterated reflections on our own fallibility bereave us of belief. Yet we do not have it in us to engage in such reflections often or in a sustained way; that is why we retain belief. Here fallibility and our recognition of it, a tendency to reflect, and an inability to retain one's original belief in the face of sustained reflection about one's fallibility (simply because one has a limited supply of "vivacity" to go around), *all of them important aspects of our nature rather than shallow rationalistic artifices*, conspire to destroy belief. (It is noteworthy that, in his recapitulation of this argument in I iv 7, on T 267, Hume says that the argument shows the self-destructive propensities of "the understanding, that is . . . the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination." With "the imagination" standing in for "nature," this phrase seems to direct our attention to a re-defined reason that is grounded in the best activities of nature, rather than to an abstract rationalist reason that is only formally part of nature. Yet this naturalistically favored reason gets into trouble in I iv 1.) All that saves us from skepticism about even simple mathematics is an arbitrary—or, to refer again to the recapitulation in I iv 7, on T 268, a "seemingly trivial"—property of our nature, our inability to reflect on our fallibility either deeply or for long. Hence, though nature rescues us from skepticism, nature has also produced the skeptical threat in the first place; and the deeper natural principles seem to be the source of the trouble, with a more trivial aspect of nature serving as the rescuer. If this is right, then from early in I iv Hume casts nature in an equivocal and troublesome role.

(b) In I iv 2, Hume examines our belief in body, aiming (as noted before) to explain rather than to justify this belief. In the end, though, his explanation of the belief *undermines* it, because of the confusions and contortions involved in causing the thought that objects continue to exist unperceived, and exist independent of us. It is all very well to detail the natural causes of a belief; but when those natural causes take the form of a Rube Goldberg machine, can the

belief escape unscathed? Or, more pointedly, can our sense of our own dignity escape unscathed when we acknowledge that this disreputably caused belief has us in its grip?

In more particular terms: Hume notes that the belief that objects have a "continu'd and distinct existence" cannot arise from either the senses or from reason. The senses do not, by themselves, tell us that the objects of the senses exist when not perceived by the senses, or have a manner of existing independent of perception.[19] As for reason, the belief in body cannot depend on any complex chain of reasoning unknown to, say, small children. Besides, reasoning inevitably leads us to distinguish between perceptions and bodies, whereas "the vulgar" believe in straightforward fashion that they perceive bodies.[20]

So far, things are going well enough for the strong naturalist interpretation; imagination, Hume's catch-all term for the mind's non-rational, non-sensory activities, has the causal field all to itself. The problem for the strong naturalist interpretation arises, however, when Hume details exactly how the imagination causes the belief in body that the senses and reason fail to cause. For the imagination proceeds by confusing, conflating, and obscuring; by inertia; by ignoring plain facts, and inventing handy fictions.

Identity begins the parade of fictions. To conceive of the continued existence of anything, we have to conceive of identity over time. But this idea of identity over time is a fiction, and a bit of a muddled fiction at that. A thing can be the same as itself at any one time, or it can be related to some other existent at another time; but the passage of time itself puts an end to strict sameness. (Hume writes that "time, in a strict sense, implies succession, and . . . when we apply its idea to any unchangeable object, 'tis only by a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos'd to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects, and in particular that of our perceptions.") So the idea of identity illicitly splits the difference between timeless unity, and multiplicity over time (T 200–201).

But this first confusion is far from the only confusion required to produce the idea of, and belief in, body. We must also mistake an interrupted sequence of closely similar perceptions for an uninterrupted sequence of exactly similar perceptions, so that we can mis-attribute constancy to the sequence. (In fact, I see the table before me, I look away for a moment, and I look again at "the table" from a slightly different angle. In my fancy, it is as if I stared unblinkingly at something absolutely immutable, which is what would be required for genuine constancy of perceptions.) Moreover, when we cannot deny the interruption of the sequence of perceptions, and so must retreat from constancy to the weaker relation of coherence, we arbitrarily enhance this coherence among our perceptions by positing an unperceived existence to connect our closely similar perceptions. (I see the table before me. I leave for a day. I return and see a slightly dustier table. I connect my perceptions by supposing that the table

has continued to exist unperceived, gathering dust.[21]) Finally, this whole process of self-deception is abetted by an illicit projection: because the act of the mind in contemplating a (pseudo-)constant sequence of perceptions feels so much like the act of the mind in contemplating a momentary unchanging perception, we conflate the sequence with the singleton.[22]

This much is enough to yield the ordinary belief in body, which Hume several times characterizes as "false" (see T 209, 213, and 218). There is a further philosophical "fiction" to be dealt with, a fiction of double existence: that each of our perceptions represents some other, independently existing thing. But for Hume the philosophical fiction is nothing more than a failed reflective attempt to remove the discomfort of subscribing to the ordinary, indispensable, false, and disreputably produced belief.

(c) Hume sets out in *Treatise* I iv 6 to attack the Cartesian understanding of the self, and to give a genetic account of our idea of and belief in personal identity. There is (as far as we can see) no invariable and truly identical self over time; there is instead a sequence of perceptions, more or less closely related to one another by resemblance and causation. This bit of observationally-grounded ontology tells us about what could or could not count both as the genuine content of our belief, and as its genuine explanation.[23] Since no such item as an unchanging soul (or, in more deflationary terms, an unchanging impression) is ever present to us, our belief in personal identity is not to be causally explained in terms of such an item, and is not really a belief in such an item. Relations among the sequence of perceptions must then explain how we come to conceive of personal identity, how we come to believe in it, and what that belief really amounts to, underneath any confusions that might grip us. Once the confusions are cleared away, we see that our belief in personal identity is belief in a fiction—but a serviceable, indeed indispensable, fiction.

The story so far combines neutral naturalistic explanation with the strong naturalist's delight in undermining rationalist and supernaturalist theories. Hume might well simply have stopped at that point, congratulating himself on his explosion of a non-naturalistic notion of the self.[24] In fact, in the text of *Treatise* Book I, that is just what he does. However, sometime before the publication of *Treatise* Book III, Hume had second thoughts about his account of personal identity. In an infamous passage in the "Appendix" to the *Treatise*, Hume admits that he is "sensible, that my account is very defective" (T 635), and that he has here run into a problem "too hard for my understanding" (T 636).[25] There is unending debate about exactly what apparently insuperable problem Hume is pointing to in the "Appendix" passage. My general sense is that Hume is saying that the "glue" that connects our various experiences is too weak even to account for a workable fiction of personal identity. Perhaps this means that his neutral explanatory naturalism has failed; or perhaps, though he has produced an explanation of belief in personal identity, the explanation is such as to render that indispensable belief ridiculous, thus

falling afoul of strong naturalism's requirements. But, in any case, and despite his expressed hope that some day a successful naturalistic account might be forthcoming (T 636), Hume explicitly says that somehow things go badly *for his own naturalistic account of the self;*[26] and things seem to go badly not by the standards of some competing rationalist or supernaturalist account, but by Hume's own naturalistic standards.

(d) In I iv 4, Hume returns to considering the concept of body, extending the problematic character of nature's operations so as to yield, as he puts it in his recapitulation in I iv 7, a "manifest contradiction" between two "equally natural and necessary beliefs" (T 266). He notes that good causal thinking leads us to distinguish between primary qualities and secondary qualities. (Roughly speaking, he reproduces and endorses Lockean arguments to the effect that, since perceptions of color, texture, and taste vary with the situation of the perceiver, these perceptions cannot bear "any resemblance to the qualities of the objects" (T 226).[27] Whether or not this claim is true, the important point here is that Hume endorses it as a deliverance of our nature.) However, Hume goes on to argue, in Berkeleyan fashion, that if we discount the reality of secondary qualities, we lose track of the very idea of body. (Here, roughly speaking, the claim is that the ideas of all of the primary qualities depend on the idea of solidity; but we can only get the idea of solidity by thinking of two bodies pushing against each other; and this thought presupposes a way of distinguishing the two bodies from one another, say because their colors differ. Ah, but colors have already been "excluded from any real existence" (228), says Hume; and so, for want of the so-called "secondary" qualities conceived of as "real" qualities of body, it is impossible to form ideas of any of the primary qualities, and so impossible to form the idea of body at all.)

In terms of the history of philosophy, Hume is saying that both Locke and Berkeley seem right, yet they directly contradict one another. But, more to the present purpose, in terms of naturalism, Hume is saying that nature, operating in its best and most regular way, contradicts *itself.* He draws the conclusion that nature breaks down in I iv 7, where reference to the argument from I iv 4 plays a large role in precipitating Hume's skeptical crisis:

> No wonder a principle so inconstant and fallacious [as the imagination, which Hume has just been discussing] shou'd lead us into errors, when implicitely follow'd (as it must be) in all its variations. 'Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes and effects; and 'tis the same principle, which convinces us of the continu'd existence of external objects when absent from the senses. But 'tho these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind, yet in some circumstances they are directly contrary, nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu'd existence of matter. How then shall we

> adjust those principles together? Which of them shall we prefer? Or in case we prefer neither of them, but successively assent to both, as is usual among philosophers, with what confidence can we afterwards usurp that glorious title, when we thus knowingly embrace a manifest contradiction? (T 265-6)

Fogelin sums up this situation nicely: "Thus the imagination, even when behaving properly, can lead us into the abyss of skepticism."[28] Skepticism in I iv appears to be not (or, at least, not only) the *reductio* of rationalistic premises, but the nemesis of strong naturalistic ambitions.

4. Interpretations of Hume have always abounded, and still do abound. So, of course, the strong naturalist interpretation faces lively opposition: perhaps most notably recently from Robert Fogelin, who emphasizes Hume's skeptical elements, and from David Pears, who argues that Hume's naturalistic accounts of body and of personal identity are utter failures. But neither of these interpretations, I think, captures the idea of problematic naturalism that I am putting forward. Fogelin is too prone to say that Hume's naturalism and skepticism support each other (thus halfway buying into the strong naturalist interpretation);[29] and Pears defends the claim that Hume's naturalism fails because it is the wrong sort of naturalism, thus giving short shrift to the abstract but intriguing possibility that even the best naturalism might reveal nature to be problematic.

(a) Late in *Hume's Skepticism*, Fogelin announces: "The central theme of this work is that Hume's naturalism and skepticism are mutually supportive."[30] He goes on to specify that he means Hume's *radical or Pyrrhonian* skepticism (not his moderate, mitigated, or Academic skepticism) is consistent with his naturalism. The problem with this claim, from my perspective, is that it attributes to Hume both problematic and unproblematic naturalism, as if subscribing to both simultaneously were a coherent strategy rather than a muddle. That naturalism at least sometimes supports, or leads to, skepticism is precisely what the problematic naturalist interpretation asserts. But that skepticism supports, or leads to, naturalism is suggestive of a ground-clearing skepticism that makes the cognitive world safe for naturalism, and an unproblematic naturalism that is in no way vitiated by its traffic with skepticism. But is it coherent to think that the *very same* skepticism both clears the ground for naturalism, and follows from it? I contend instead that Hume uses ground-clearing skeptical arguments to prepare the way for unproblematic naturalistic moments, but then finds that naturalism itself sometimes becomes problematic, leading to a new and deeper skepticism.

(b) Pears is even more relentless than Fogelin in tracing the ways in which Humean nature collapses in on itself in the accounts of body and of personal identity. He clearly sees Humean naturalism as problematic, or even as failed,

rather than as successful. As for Hume's optimistic pronouncements about nature's role even in the midst of such debacles, Pears sees such pronouncements as bravado:

> He [Hume] alternates between two quite different attitudes to this part of his theory of the imagination. One attitude is a complacency which he could have expressed like this: 'I told you so: our belief in the existence of body is forced on us by nature, and if nature can succeed by such transparent intellectual tricks, that only goes to show that the force that she exerts on us is irresistible.' His other attitude is dismay.[31]

And why *shouldn't* Hume's attitude be dismay? He has, after all, managed to "describe what the imagination does in a way that makes it look positively silly."[32]

How, then, does problematic naturalism differ from the interpretation that Pears offers? Perhaps in being more circumspect, and more philosophically open. For, as I hinted above, Pears sees Hume's naturalism not simply as problematic, but as a thorough failure; and he believes he sees why it has failed. Humean naturalism is solipsistic and mentalistic; a successful naturalism, Pears avers, must be more Wittgensteinian, content to begin with our lives together and with public talk of physical objects and embodied persons.[33] But seeing Hume as a problematic naturalist does not entail that there is some different naturalism that succeeds where Hume's fails. (Nor does it entail that there is, say, a Kantian non-naturalistic success to be had, or that there is *not* such a success to be had.) Insofar as problematic naturalism sticks circumspectly to the reading of Hume, its idea is that our cognitive best might not be very good at all, but is still our cognitive best. Insofar as problematic naturalism is philosophically open, it is an invitation to explore an uncomfortable possibility: suppose that neither non-naturalism nor modified naturalism can truly succeed where Hume's naturalism "fails" (that is, turns problematic). What then?

Section 5 sums up the interpretive advantages of problematic naturalism. Section 6 considers the philosophical invitation that this interpretation issues.

5. Hume knows well enough that, since nature is responsible for all of our beliefs, we cannot endorse nature wholesale without making a mockery of the concept of endorsement. Thus, as I noted in section 1 of this paper, he distinguishes between a merely descriptive sense of natural, and a normative sense of that term. At least sometimes, to speak of a belief as natural is consistent with derogating that belief, when the relevant belief is natural "in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, 'tho it be contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of man" (T 226).

But how broad is the scope of this derogatory sense of "nature"? How broad is the scope of the laudatory sense of the same term? How are we to determine the difference between these two, in particular cases? Presumably, we must observe how nature operates in each case, and see whether its operations are smooth or rough, self-consistent or self-contradictory, reflectively satisfactory or reflectively unsatisfactory. This case-by-case method, depending on particular investigation, is the method Hume follows in I iv. Perhaps he does manage to show in that part of the *Treatise* that unaided reason fares badly as a source of solid or satisfactory beliefs. But the broader, non-rationalist powers of nature often fare badly as well. An attack on rationalism simply does not preclude a negative assessment of the natural means of belief-production. (True, we cannot do better than to have our beliefs produced by nature; but we can worry that this means we simply cannot do very well, or we can judge that in particular cases we have demonstrably done badly.)[34]

Nothing I have said suggests that Hume departs from the view that nature, rather than a nature-transcending rationality or divinity, is the source of our beliefs. Nor do I require, or believe, that he had any kind of problematic naturalism in mind from the start of his project. My suggestion is only that, upon investigation, Hume discovers that nature is a permanently problematic source of beliefs, so that he cannot rightly treat his philosophical discoveries as purely welcome. Unlike the strong naturalist, I do not believe that Hume has a subtle grand strategy that he executes flawlessly; rather, I believe that his initial strategy breaks down, and that much of what is interesting and puzzling and admirable about Hume is the way he deals with the refractory materials in his own philosophy.

That the materials of Hume's philosophy are refractory, and various, is a central point—and, I believe, the great strength—of the problematic naturalistic interpretation. On my view, those who read Hume as a constructive naturalist are right, some of the time. Those who read him as a destructive skeptic are also right some of the time, though his *intent* to be destructive is plausibly thought of as selective, especially aimed at substantive religious beliefs and the metaphysics that support or are embedded in such beliefs,[35] and his broader destructive tendencies can be understood to be independent of his intentions, except his intention to give a full philosophical account of the various ways things seem to him at various times. But those who see Hume's skepticism and his naturalism as bound together, and both quite robust (to distinguish this view from those who believe in a mere "ground-clearing skepticism" directed at the rationalists) are also importantly right. (Perhaps you are wondering here, "how many different interpretations of Hume can plausibly be partly right?" Many, I think. Strawson speaks of Hume as the "ironist" of philosophy,[36] and Hume is that, as the next section of this paper emphasizes; but perhaps even more strikingly he is the empath of philosophy. He takes up or works his way into now one position, now another; whatever you might think, somewhere

in his writings he arguably feels the force of your argument, if perhaps only momentarily.[37]) However, it seems to me that from all these different perspectives, there has been insufficient attention to the possibility I am elaborating: that Hume at times puts forward a form of problematic naturalism, a naturalism that itself calls attention *both* to the animal inevitability of belief *and* to our enormous and ineradicable cognitive shortcomings.

For Hume in *Treatise* I iv, as I am reading him, nature, where the saving power is, also always contains the danger; as problematic naturalists we can laugh at, live with, and inquire in spite of our cognitive infirmities, but we cannot stipulate them away. From the standpoint of a scientist of human nature, explaining how our beliefs are generated, Hume argues that we must recognize the infirmities of our reason. (Nature or "the imagination," rather than reason or "the understanding," is the source of our ideas and our beliefs.) From the standpoint of a philosopher, reflecting on the justification of our beliefs, Hume argues that (in Descartes's phrase, but to a degree that Descartes never dreamed of) "we must recognize the infirmities of our nature."[38]

6. I have been arguing throughout that the strong naturalist interpretation oversimplifies Hume, that it tidies up what is messy in his philosophy. But the motivation for this excessive tidiness is honorable: the urge is to make something philosophically useful for ourselves out of Hume, to interpret him in such a way that our interest in him can be more than antiquarian. Can the problematic naturalist interpretation rise to this challenge, or does it consign Hume to the dust-bin of philosophical history?

I suggest that, in portraying a simultaneous irony and engagement, Hume's problematic naturalism presents a philosophically rare combination that merits our attention. The old skeptical interpretation saw Hume as a purely ironic spirit; the strong naturalist interpretation sees him as fully approving of, and fully engaged with, natural human cognitive practices; but the real interest of Hume is that he strives to maintain his engagement in spite of his irony, and his irony in spite of his engagement.[39]

What does this simultaneous irony and engagement in Hume really amount to? At a first approximation, we might cash out the notion in this way: Hume's approach renders us vulnerable to bouts of skepticism, as a price we must pay for a certain sort of reflection. (Thus his naturalism and skepticism are, not mutually supportive as Fogelin says, but rather causally bound together.) Sometimes, in the course of our naturalistic investigations, we will realize anew that our fundamental everyday beliefs and practices depend on the activities of nature-as-Rube-Goldberg-machine. At such moments we will be likely to feel some combination of self-loathing, a sense of futility, and an inability to go on.[40] However, we *will* go on; depend on it; nature will *force* us to go on. Nature will also force cheerfulness and hopefulness on us. Yet that we can be thus coerced into good spirits and action, quite contrary to a clear-

headed reflective appreciation of our situation, is arguably matter to feed the next moment of skeptical dejection. (Indeed, the possibility of such a cycle of reflective disgust and relatively unreflective cheerfulness emphasizes the tragic aspect of nature's workings: Reflective hubris meets its nemesis in natural good cheer, and hubristic good cheer meets its nemesis in renewed skeptical reflection.) Insofar as this first approximation pushes us past irony about our situation and into despair, it is a poor combination of irony and engagement.

But, as I believe Hume himself wants us to see our circumstances, despair is not the *only* reflective response to our circumstances (although it is a powerful and perhaps recurring reflective response). Naturalism, after all, cuts many ways; or, better, different naturalisms cut different ways. Arguably, the naturalistic account of causation, while it is deflationary (in its assault on the idea of necessary connection), is not ruinous or shameful.[41] Naturalistic opposition to religious belief rescues us, on Hume's view, from baleful superstition and from arrogant enthusiasm. Moreover, even where a form or application of naturalism does fail spectacularly, why can't wry amusement compete with dejection in the space of rational response?[42] After all, the intellectual writhings that Hume describes have their comical aspect; and, leaving aside the fatal wounding of human pride, what harm does naturalistic knowledge of these writhings do? Is it any harm that our engaged inquiring is tempered by ironic appreciation of our cognitive quirkiness?

A well-known passage from the first *Enquiry* is worth citing here (in spite of the fact that throughout this paper my focus has been on the *Treatise*). Hume says that the skeptic, "when he awakes from his dream," "will be the first to join in the laugh against himself."[43] This passage might seem to lend support to the strong naturalist, who understands Hume to be no skeptic, but instead a relentlessly naturalistic critic of both skepticism and rationalism. But why does the awakened skeptic laugh? Is this the laughter of the now-enlightened one who has been saved from his folly, or the laughter of the wise fool who recognizes that his folly is inescapable? In the same text from the *Enquiry*, Hume goes on to say that the laughing skeptic realizes that the sole tendency of his skeptical reflections is to show "the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe" in spite of the infirmities the skeptic has uncovered. This suggests that the skeptic is laughing at himself not insofar as he is a skeptic, but insofar as he is a person; the human condition, not the skeptical condition, is "whimsical." The human condition is supposed to be whimsical precisely because we must rely on our nature, but our nature is problematic.

Are we all really "whimsical"? I would not like to find myself forced, at the end of the day, to admit that we are. But the virtue of Hume's problematic naturalism is that it forces the question on us, and gives us some rudimentary tools for reflecting on it, and even for considering what would follow if in fact our nature is whimsical.

NOTES

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1 Especially Barry Stroud, in *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); and Robert Fogelin, in (a) "The Tendency of Hume's Skepticism," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 397-412, (b) *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), and (c) "Hume's Scepticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90-116.

2 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed.. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd. ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Page references in the text and the notes are to this edition of the *Treatise*, indicated as T.

3 A companion claim is that, rather than arguing over whether Hume was or was not a skeptic, or over which one kind of a skeptic Hume might have been, we need to attend carefully to Hume's shifting allegiances to (and uses of) different kinds of skepticism. Fogelin, in *Hume's Skepticism*, pursues this point with admirable clarity, providing a useful typology of Hume's skepticisms. Different typologies are possible. For instance, I am inclined to pick out, as the most important varieties, Hume's ground-clearing skepticism (which is relentlessly directed at rationalist accounts), his Pyrrhonian or extreme skeptical moments (where, sometimes to his own horror, Hume finds skepticism to be getting out of hand), and his Academic or mitigated skepticism (which is somehow founded on extreme skepticism, but which Hume is happy to subscribe to). The question "was Hume a skeptic?" will need to be answered differently in these different cases, and the question "what does Hume's skepticism amount to?" ought to include discussion of all three cases.

4 That normative notions like "warrant" and "reasonableness" need not be construed rationalistically, but can at the end of the Humean day be given legitimate naturalistic content, is a crucial strong naturalistic claim, and it animates the writings of interpreters of Hume like Annette Baier and Don Garrett. See Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's* Treatise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). I think it is right to see Hume as often claiming that nature confers warrant, and struggling to clarify what this warrant amounts to; thus I agree with the strong naturalist interpreters that Hume does not stick to neutral naturalism, does not say that all normative notions must be counted as rationalistic delusions. (Could *anyone* consistently say that, given the normative character of the term "delusion"?) As I argue in the sequel in the text, though, I disagree with the strong naturalist interpreters on the question of whether Hume himself always believes that the best and most indispensable activities of nature meet the standards that nature itself has set.

5 Most notably Baier, in *A Progress of Sentiments*, and Garrett, in *Cognition and Commitment*. Baier's strong naturalist reading of Hume is perhaps more wholehearted than Garrett's reading, for Garrett concludes that Hume does wish to con-

vey to us a clear sense of the "weakness of our underlying cognitive mechanisms," and to leave us with a "chastened," though still intact, capacity for cognitive commitment (Garrett, 241). These remarks, anyway, are not too far from the kinds of things I want to say about problematic naturalism; but, compared to Garrett's reading, my reading of Hume offers much more scope for the notion of the weakness of our cognitive mechanisms, and builds much more ambiguity into the notion of overall epistemic evaluation.

6 In "Hume's Skepticism about Causal Inferences," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): 3–18, Janet Broughton argues in favor of a principled distinction between *Treatise* I iii, where nature operates reliably, and *Treatise* I iv, where nature generates "manifest contradictions."

7 See Norman Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume," *Mind* 14 (1905): 149–73, 335–47; and Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941), especially 126–132; Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*; and Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment.*

8 See especially T xv–xvi.

9 See Stroud, *Hume*, 42–67.

10 As I mentioned in note 6 above, Janet Broughton argues that Hume is merely deflationary in *Treatise* I iii, and that he turns full-scale skeptic only in I iv. Similarly, David Pears argues that Hume's naturalistic program fares well when he discusses causation, and fares disastrously when he discusses body and personal identity; see *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of his* Treatise (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

11 I discuss this skeptical crisis in detail in "Hume's Extreme Skepticism in *Treatise* I iv 7," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1995): 595–622.

12 T 218. Some would suggest that the key to understanding this passage is the reference to justification. Hume began I iv 2 by renouncing any justificatory ambitions; therefore, the failure of justification at the end of I iv 2 is no true difficulty. But it is at least as plausible to see Hume as driven to acknowledge, by the end of I iv 2, that certain minimal justificatory ambitions are unavoidable, so that the failure to justify our belief in body in even this minimal sense—in the sense of being a coherent product of the activity of a sensible nature—is indeed a problem.

13 Baier, 107; see also 120 for a discussion of the role of solipsism in skepticism.

14 Compare Fogelin's account in *Hume's Skepticism*, according to which Hume's reports of his skeptical states of mind have both descriptive and evaluative force: Hume reports on his *philosophical* progress, and though no one philosophical state of mind by itself gives a definitive theoretical assessment of our cognition, all are relevant to the question of overall evaluation.

15 *Cognition and Commitment*, 222.

16 Yielding a "manifest contradiction," as Hume supposes that nature does, is indeed a failure of reason; but it is not a failure of some special, rationalist reason. It seems rather to be a failure of the bare minimum of reason, that reason that must count as naturally normative if the notion of the normative is to have any application.

17 Along the way in I iv, Hume denounces the "fictions of the antient philosophy, concerning substances, and substantial forms, and accidents, and occult qualities" (T 219); and he denounces the doctrine of the immateriality of the soul. These instances of skepticism must, I think, be interpreted as entirely to Hume's liking and entirely consistent with the strong naturalistic program. Hume was not, on my interpretation, a perpetually problematic naturalist; I only want to claim that his naturalism turns problematic from time to time, but at crucial points.

18 Here, in addition to Baier's discussion in her book, see William Edward Morris, "Hume's Scepticism about Reason," *Hume Studies* 15 (1989): 39–60.

19 As Hume puts it on T 189: "That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*, is evident; because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond." (The emphases are Hume's.)

20 Hume makes the case against reason being the source of our belief in body in a single paragraph (T 193). This brevity itself seems to tell against the claim that rationalism is Hume's primary adversary in this section.

21 And what is wrong with this merger of causal reasoning with the belief in body? From one perspective, this is an inference to the best explanation of the similarity of our perceptions. But in Hume's discussion on T 197-198, as I read it, he suggests that this merger involves a sort of circularity: for a causal claim must be based on connections among perceptions, and yet our imaginations manage to posit unperceived existents on the grounds that this would strengthen the relevant causal claims. Thus we *manufacture* the ontological evidence that strengthens our causal beliefs.

22 See T 204: "An easy transition or passage of the imagination, along the ideas of these different and interrupted perceptions, is almost the same disposition of mind as that in which we consider one constant and uninterrupted perception. 'Tis therefore very natural for us to mistake the one for the other." It is telling that this is a natural *mistake*.

23 This is a common pattern in Hume. For instance, in explaining our idea of necessary connection, Hume relies on ontological exploration to reveal that the explanation can have nothing to do with genuine relations of necessity "out there," since there are (as far as we can observe, anyway) no such things, and to steer us toward an indisputably existing inner feeling of determination as the proper source of our idea.

24 See Terence Penelhum, "Hume on Personal Identity," in *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966), 213–39. This article suggests that Hume's failing in I iv 6 was that he thought he had dissolved personal identity, while to Penelhum Hume seems simply to have *explained* personal identity. On this reading, Hume would have been all right if he had simply declared victory rather than admitting defeat.

25 Since the problematic naturalist element in Hume's treatment of personal identity does not appear in *Treatise* I iv proper, I am taking a bit of a liberty by discussing this element here. However, the "Appendix" does represent Hume's nearly contemporaneous rethinking of an important issue from *Treatise* I iv; and the trajectory of that rethinking, such that a naturalistic account Hume thought of as

satisfactory (and intended to be satisfactory) gets undermined by further naturalistic reflections, supports my general take on what does sometimes happen within the text of I iv proper.

26 Baier argues that, if we look at I iv 6 in the context of the *Treatise* overall, we will see that the apparently skeptical account is part of a subtle *reductio* of rationalism: "Book Two's turn (or continuation of the turn) from solitary reason to sociable passions answers Book One's despairing questions, and makes light of the intellectual puzzles found in the 'Appendix'" (Baier, 141). But that Hume makes untroubled use of the idea of a social self in Books II and III of the *Treatise* does not show that he thinks he has a solution to the metaphysical problem that he himself insists on in the "Appendix"; it could just be a matter of changing the subject, or bracketing insoluble difficulties. Moreover, if Hume had in hand what seemed to him like a solution of his difficulties over the genesis of our belief in personal identity, a solution that fed into his account of morality, one would have expected him to discuss that solution in either the first or the second *Enquiry*. Instead, personal identity suffers the fate that Hume reserves for all the especially problematic issues in the *Treatise*: it is shelved.

27 In Locke, the relevant arguments are found in *Essay* II viii 8-26, and famously include the observation that a person who simultaneously plunges one warm hand and one cold hand into the same basin of water will perceive the water to be both cold and warm (which it could not, in itself, be), while in contrast a single object will never feel like a globe to one hand and a square to another. See *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 139. So one way of distinguishing between primary and secondary qualities, and of *arguing* for a distinction between them, is to maintain that the ideas of secondary qualities vary with the situation of the perceiver, while the ideas of primary qualities do not do so. (On the other hand—so to speak—one way of arguing *against* the distinction is to draw attention, as Berkeley relentlessly does, to instances where ideas of the so-called primary qualities in fact do vary with the perceiver's situation.)

28 *Hume's Skepticism*, 91.

29 There are indications that, more recently, Fogelin has reconsidered this relatively optimistic view of Hume. For instance, on 94 of the essay "Hume's Scepticism," Fogelin says of nature's victory over Pyrrhonism: "The irony is that the ways of nature, when revealed, hardly fill us with confidence or with a sense of human dignity."

30 *Hume's Skepticism*, 146.

31 Pears, 183.

32 Pears, 187.

33 It is worth noting that Pears offers a mirror image of Baier here. Pears argues that Humean naturalism fails because it is solipsistic and mentalistic; Baier argues that Humean naturalism puts paid to solipsism and mentalism, by means of a subtle extended *reductio*.

34 Compare Hume's famous "splenetic" judgment, in I iv 7, that we have "no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all" (T 268). Also compare the equivocal attitude toward nature evinced in the *Dialogues*, parts 10 and 11: for

every bounty of nature that we might cite, there is a matching stinginess; and sometimes, depending on one's point of view, the very same aspect of nature (say, the intricacy of the eye) can seem to manifest bounty (how wonderful sight is!) or stinginess (how vulnerable sight is!).

35 See Paul Russell, "Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's *Treatise*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988): 247–65; and "'Atheism' and the Title-Page of Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies*, 14 (1988): 408–23.

36 Strawson, P. F., *Individuals* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963), xiii.

37 See for instance Hume's exercises in empathy with "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

38 *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), 2: 62.

39 I do not want to claim, of course, that this philosophical trope is unique to Hume. Other examples that spring to mind include Locke's attempt to have his scientifically grounded account of primary qualities, and his ultimate metaphysical mystery about substance too; Kant's attempt to rescue knowledge of the empirical by denying us knowledge of the transcendental; and Colin McGinn's claim that we know *that* consciousness arises from the physical, but are constitutionally incapable of understanding *how* it does so. For McGinn's argument, see "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?", in *The Problem of Consciousness* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991).

40 Such a skeptical reflective denouement is part of what makes it, to some, literally incredible that Hume could simultaneously laud nature's power and malign its activities and results, both *in propria persona*.

41 Witness the enshrinement of Hume's theory in the "regularity theory of causation," widely thought of as helpful and metaphysically modest, rather than as ruinous. Witness also Hume's own development, in *Treatise* I iii 15, of "rules by which to judge of cause and effect." (Broughton, in "Hume's Skepticism about Causal Inferences," and Pears, in *Hume's System*, both emphasize the significance of these rules in arguing that Hume's skepticism about causation is deflationary rather than Pyrrhonian.)

42 Cf. Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" (in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*), where among the characteristics of the good aesthetic judge Hume lists the ability to see things from a variety of perspectives, and the ability to maintain a proper sense of proportion. These virtues of the aesthetic judge are cognitive virtues; they have to do with forming a proper estimate of situations; therefore, they could have direct application to the practice of philosophical self-understanding.

43 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd. ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 160.