



### **Humean Reason and the Problem of Warrant**

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A Symposium on David Owen, *Hume's Reason*

## Humean Reason and the Problem of Warrant

WILLIAM EDWARD MORRIS

David Owen's new book invites us to take a fresh look at three major modern philosophers: Descartes, Locke, and Hume.<sup>1</sup> Although Leibniz invented the familiar conception of proof as a formal relationship among sentences,<sup>2</sup> reasoning for these three philosophers was a very different animal: they thought of it as a matter, not of *form*, but of *content*. They regarded proof—demonstration or demonstrative reasoning—as a process of stringing together chains of relations between ideas.<sup>3</sup> That process appeals to the *content* of the ideas involved, and is thus a radically non-formal conception of reasoning, one that has as little to do with the syllogisms of Aristotle and the Scholastics as it does with the post-Fregean notion of deductive validity dominant today.

In *Hume's Reason*, Owen argues that until we understand the conception of reasoning these philosophers employed, we are doomed to misunderstand them. All three, for instance, sometimes refer to demonstration as "deduction," and as Owen stresses, "if, when we read [them], we think of deduction in the modern sense, we will fail to understand what is being said" (HR 6), which will aversely affect our reading of their central arguments. *Hume's Reason* is thus a welcome corrective to our tendency to misread these important figures. It should be required reading, not just for Hume scholars, but for any student of early modern philosophy.

The core of *Hume's Reason*, however, is Owen's discussion of Hume's views about reasoning, to which he devotes his final five chapters. Rightly so, for as he states in his "Introduction,"

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many of the most famous problems that Hume discusses, and the positions he advocates, are expressed in terms of reason: whether probable reasoning or causal inference is founded on reason, scepticism with regard to reason, reason and the passions, whether moral distinctions are based on reason. To understand what Hume has to say about these issues, we must understand what his account of reason and reasoning is. (HR 1)

In developing Hume's account of "reason and reasoning," Owen restricts himself to the first two problems he mentions, but those whose primary interests are Hume's views on the passions and morals will nonetheless find much helpful material here. I wish I could discuss all the facets of the issues Owen chooses to discuss, but I'll focus here on his approach to what he calls "the problem of warrant." Even this self-imposed limit, however, may take us well into "the neighboring fields" before we're done. The necessity for doing so is an unavoidable consequence of the close connections among the elements of Hume's thought, of which Owen is always keenly cognizant and which he handles with clarity and economy in *Hume's Reason*. I will offer an alternative to Owen's treatment—perhaps even to his understanding—of this problem. But I do so with acute awareness that, without the benefit of Owen's constructive criticism of my own work, and without our innumerable informal discussions on Humean topics over the years, I probably wouldn't have a view of my own to present as an alternative.

## I. The Problem of Warrant

One of the central aims of *Hume's Reason* is to clarify what Owen sees as Hume's belated concern, in part iv of Book I of the *Treatise*, with the way questions of warrant and justification arise for the positive view of the nature of reasoning he has developed in part iii. Owen calls this concern "the problem of warrant"; he introduces it this way:

I try to locate where in fact Hume does face the issue of warrant and to explain how he deals with it. I argue that, although Hume was not primarily concerned with issues of warrant and justification, he does, in Part 4 of Book I of the *Treatise*, began to face the issue of just why we prefer the results of reason to those of other belief-forming mechanisms, such as superstition. (HR 11; see also 209)

Owen thinks that the problem of warrant is raised for Hume as he completes his account of belief-formation in part iii, although he doesn't confront the problem or even acknowledge its presence there. Hume also doesn't seem to be aware of it in the first section of part iv, "Of scepticism with regard to

reason," where we might expect to find at least the beginnings of a discussion of the problem. According to Owen, "Hume does not [in I iv 1] even raise the question of why we should prefer reason to other, natural influences." "It is," he explains, only "in I. 4. 2. ('Of scepticism with regard to the senses') that Hume begins to see the problem with which he is faced" (HR 209).

But once the problem rears its ugly head, Owen argues that it dominates Hume's concerns in the rest of part iv. Here is Owen's account of how this happens:

Hume starts by showing great confidence in his ability to account for our belief in bodies at the beginning of I. 4. 2. . . . [W]e will expect Hume to account both for the idea (the existence of body) and for what accounts for the extra force and vivacity that turns this idea into a belief that bodies exist. . . . [T]he issue is not one of justification but of explanation. Nature has esteemed the issue of such beliefs 'an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations.' But in this section Hume finally realized the depth of the problem that has been facing him for some time. He will explain why it is that we believe 'the principle concerning the existence of body,' while at the same time recognizing that we 'cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity.' But what then is the status of these beliefs? To believe them is to assent to them as true. But as Hume proceeds through this section, this becomes more and more problematic. (HR 209)

Hume's confidence begins to erode, Owen believes, as he becomes increasingly aware of the severity of the problem of warrant. By the end of I iv 2, his earlier confidence appears to be completely gone:

I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou'd be the conclusion, I shou'd draw from the whole of my reasoning. But to be ingenuous, I feel myself at present of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence.<sup>4</sup>

Owen supports his reading of this passage by noting Hume's subsequent talk of "gross illusion" and "absurdity," closely followed by these concluding questions:

What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary questions but error and falsity? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them? (T 218)

Hume's worries, on Owen's account, don't cease when I iv 2 ends. They continue to mount through section 4—where Hume concludes that “there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses” (T 231)—only to reach their nadir in the purple prose of the final section of part iv. There Hume seems faced with what he terms “a very dangerous dilemma,” one that apparently demands he choose “betwixt a false reason and none at all.” Owen observes that

A good deal of the “Conclusion of this book” appears to be a confession of melancholy and despair brought on by Hume's now almost obsessive awareness of the problems faced by his account of reason, memory, and the senses in terms of the properties of the imagination. (HR 211)

Hume's overblown language in this section suggests to Owen, as it has to almost every other reader, that Hume is describing a personal crisis, one that is somehow intimately related to the extended argument of I iv 2 through I iv 4. Hume certainly makes the connection explicit when he cites I iv 4 as one of three sources of his “dangerous dilemma.”<sup>5</sup> But despite Hume's heated prose, we need to ask whether the worry he describes so vividly is really *his*. And is the problem that gives rise to all this perturbation really the problem Owen calls “the problem of warrant”?

## II. Hume's “Crisis” and the Problem of Warrant

The answer to both questions just raised is “No.” For all Hume's apparent personalization of the crisis of I iv 7, the problems he describes concern neither himself nor his “system,” and the problem that provokes the crisis is *not* the problem of warrant.

I think that a close look at the text supports these answers. In the first place, for someone whose confidence has been so seriously eroded as a result of his failure to answer an important question he has only lately realized his view must confront, Hume seems strangely sanguine. As he proceeds to the conclusion of Book I, he notes that he selected “the several topics” of part iv because they “either illustrate or confirm some preceding part of this discourse or prepare the way for our following opinions.” Hume boasts that the “miscellaneous way of reasoning” he has employed in part iv has “fully explain'd the nature of our judgment and understanding.” He is now ready “to return to a more close examination of our subject, and proceed in the accurate anatomy of human nature” (T 263).

These remarks hardly sound like the confessions of someone whose confidence has been undermined by his own reflections. Granted, he moves

immediately to the disturbing thoughts that lead to the “dangerous dilemma.” But has *Hume’s* optimism really turned so quickly to despair?

One thing seems clear: while it is *possible* that Hume’s reflections at the beginning of I iv 7 led him to lose confidence in his system, this view doesn’t sit well with the claim that it has been an increasingly downhill slide for him since I iv 2. Surely Hume didn’t temporarily *forget* the problem that has allegedly plagued him throughout part iv when he comes to summarize his progress there, only to have it resurface in the very next paragraph. This is a *Treatise*, after all, not a *diary*.

While the argument of I iv 2 has been subjected to a great deal of detailed analysis, most of it has been concerned with the *minutiae* of Hume’s dense and convoluted account of identity. For our purposes, however, it will be more productive to step back and look at the overall structure of Hume’s argument. We then will be in a better position to see what Hume was up to, and whether he succeeds in realizing his objectives. Only then will we be able to assess accurately whether I iv 2 can plausibly be regarded as the beginning of a crisis of confidence in his own opinions.

Hume has several related objectives in I iv 2. He needs to account for how ordinary people form beliefs about objects, and how they regard the beliefs they form. He needs to show how easy it is to see what is wrong with their beliefs, and how one might be tempted to offer theoretical explanation as a philosophical corrective. He needs to spell out what is wrong with this attempted philosophical explanation. Finally, he needs to give his own account of how we actually come to have ideas about objects.

Ordinary people take their perceptions to be objects. Hume thinks it is fairly easy, even within ordinary life, to come to see that this view is mistaken. But when we do, we are troubled to find that we have no legitimate basis for regarding our beliefs about objects to be about things that are “continuing and distinct,” so we naturally look for a way to legitimize them. Doing so leads to philosophy. We explain what we cannot find in experience by postulating theoretical entities designed to fill the gaps in our experience. The result, Hume thinks, is worse than the view it was introduced to correct.

Hume spends much of I iv 2 arguing that this is exactly what the “philosophical” account of objects does. The leading philosophical contender—the “double existence” theory—is not only “liable” to the same difficulties that plagued the “popular” or ordinary “system,” but also it

is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition. Philosophers deny our resembling perceptions to be identically the same, and uninterrupted; and yet have so great a propensity to believe them such, that they arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions, to which they attribute these qualities. (T 218)

Hume has sketched his own account in I iv 2 of how we come to our beliefs in "continuing and distinct" objects, and deliberately contrasts himself with the systems of "philosophers," from whom he typically dissociates himself. So when he sums up the problems the "philosophical system" involves, he is not describing his own position but one he explicitly rejects. It is the *philosophical* system that he thinks is riddled with "groundless and extraordinary opinions," *not* his own. The passage Owen cites as evidence of Hume's worry about warrant—"And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we place in them?"—is directed at the systems of the philosophers. They are not *Hume's* concerns.

Hume retains this same stance as he continues his extended argument, which progresses all the way to the end of I iv 4. Given the connections between I iv 2 and I iv 4, I iv 3, "Of the antient philosophy," might appear to be an irrelevant digression. But a closer look dispels this view. Hume is using the device of exposing the errors of the "peripatetics" as a way of softening up his readers for his parallel critique of the moderns. The patent, even ludicrous errors in the ancients' theories prepare the way for Hume's expose of the similar errors of the modern philosophers. And as he prepares us, Hume gives us a glimpse of his overall strategy:

In considering this subject we may observe a gradation of three opinions, that rise above each other, according as the persons, who form them, acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge. These opinions are those of a false philosophy, and that of the true . . . (T 223)

An inattentive reader might assume that the "false philosophy" is that of the ancients, while the "true philosophy" is that of the moderns. But, as we saw, Hume argued in I iv 2 that the modern philosophers' explanatory account of objects, although they purport to correct and improve the views of "the vulgar," actually confirm the vulgar view, even while they contain additional errors the vulgar view doesn't. Besides, Hume goes on to say that the "true philosophy approaches nearer the sentiments of the vulgar, than those of a mistaken knowledge" (T 223). We also know from I iv 2 that Hume doesn't consider himself a "modern philosopher." He explicitly dissociates himself from, and is sharply critical of, the moderns. If his own view "approaches nearer the sentiments of the vulgar," as he maintains in I iv 2 that it does, then he intends that we regard *it* as "the true philosophy," while the views of both ancients and moderns are false philosophies. This further dissociates him from the moderns. So we should not also take his criticisms of the moderns in I iv 4 as self-criticisms. Exposing the errors of the moderns may encourage pessimism and even scepticism about modern philosophy's worth and fate, but this doesn't mean that Hume regards his own view with the same pessimism and scepticism. Hume has made it clear that he is no modern philosopher.

In I iv 3, Hume ridicules the ancient philosophy for feigning “something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same through all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls a *substance*” (T 220). Comparing this feeble attempt at explanation with childrens’ and poets’ personifications of nature, Hume connects his discussion to that of I iv 2. The “philosophical” approach to the problem of accounting for the continuing and distinct character of objects involved a parallel “feigning”—the postulation of a theoretical entity—in its equally feeble attempt at explanation. As he continues to berate the unfortunate ancients, he links his discussion to what he will argue in I iv 4:

Among all the instances, wherein the Peripatetics have shewn they were guided by *every trivial propensity of the imagination*, no one is more remarkable than their sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum. (T 224; my emphasis)

He argued in I iv 2 that the moderns make the same explanatory mistake, so it is plausible to conclude that he thinks that, despite their “pretensions to reason,” they are also “guided by every trivial propensity of the imagination.” But Hume is hardly so crude as to labor the point as I have. Instead, in a remarkable turn of irony, he begins I iv 4 with an objection someone might raise against “his own account”:

But here it may be objected, that the imagination, according to my own confession, being the ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy, I am unjust in blaming the antient philosophers for making use of that faculty, and allowing themselves to be entirely guided by it in their reasonings. In order to justify myself, I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects . . . And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of. The former are the foundations of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ’d only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. For this reason, the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected . . .

The opinions of the antient philosophers . . . are deriv’d from principles, which, however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable

in human nature. The *modern philosophy* pretends to be entirely free from this defect, and to arise only from the solid, permanent, and consistent principles of the imagination. Upon what grounds this pretension is founded must now be the subject of our enquiry. (T 225–6)

Readers of this passage generally assume that in the second sentence Hume begins to reply to the objection stated in the first. If that were correct, then the distinction between the permanent and trivial qualities of the imagination, put there as a requirement on what would count as an adequate response to the objection, is a distinction Hume himself endorses. But there are three things that are odd about the assumption that Hume begins to speak for himself at this point. First, he supposedly does so in the middle of a paragraph. It is more plausible to think that it is the statement of the objection that continues at least through the paragraph, and not an abrupt, unannounced shift to Hume's response to that objection.

Second, with the permanent/trivial distinction in place, it is said that "the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected." But as we've just seen, when Hume speaks of "philosophy" or "philosophers," he almost never has his own position in mind. He is referring to the philosophical establishment or orthodoxy—here the moderns—with whom he disagrees. If Hume were speaking for himself here, he would be endorsing the views of the moderns, which he criticized in I iv 2, parodied in I iv 3, and which he will immediately proceed to criticize further.

Finally, if we assume that Hume's response begins in the first paragraph, then it is an odd response indeed. The paragraph ends without anything that can be taken as a response to the objection, and the next paragraph turns to examine the moderns' "pretensions" to avoid such problems. Hume never responds to the objection supposedly raised against him, but the moderns come in for some trenchant criticism in what follows.

Hume begins his critique of the moderns by stating "the fundamental principle" of their philosophy:

Colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold [are] nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv'd from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the object. (T 226)

He adds that from "this principle, all of [the moderns'] other doctrines seem to flow" (T 227). The most important consequence is that once we conclude that secondary qualities aren't "independent existences," then the primary qualities are the only real qualities "of which we have any adequate notion." Hume suggests that there are "many objections" to the moderns' view, but chooses to concentrate on one "very decisive" argument, designed to show

how their system fails as an explanation of continued independent existence. He argues that there are no coherent ideas of external objects apart from secondary qualities, so that the moderns' explanation not only fails, but also asks us to conceive of the inconceivable. Their "pretence" of an explanation is not merely false, it is incoherent. "Instead of explaining the operations of external objects, [the moderns] utterly annihilate all these objects, and reduce [themselves] to the most extravagant scepticism concerning them" (T 227–228).

All this is bad enough, but the moderns' situation is actually far worse, as Hume is quick to note:

If colours, sounds, tastes, and smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive is possess'd of a real, continu'd, and independent existence; not even motion, extension, and solidity, which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on. (T 228)

This is a doubly miserable failure, for "the idea of motion depends on that of extension, and the idea of extension on that of solidity." Making the idea of solidity depend on either extension or motion would be viciously circular. "Our modern philosophy, therefore, leaves us with neither a just nor satisfactory idea of solidity; nor consequently of matter" (T 229).

Hume sums up his critique of the moderns in the final paragraph of I iv 4:

Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body. When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude that neither colour, sound, taste, nor smell have a continu'd and independent existence. When we exclude those sensible qualities there remains nothing in the universe, which has such an existence. (T 231)

By now it should be clear that Hume's pessimistic and skeptical tone is an expression of his indictment of the modern philosophy, not a worry about his own system. And although I can't present the argument here, I've argued in my recent paper, "Hume's Conclusion,"<sup>6</sup> that we should treat Hume's despairing remarks in I iv 7 in a similar fashion.

If my reading is correct, Hume suffers no crisis of confidence in the extended argument of I iv 2 through I iv 4, and he does not address "the problem of warrant," as Owen understands it. Still, the problem Owen raises remains. Why prefer the deliverances of "Humean reason" to those provided by prejudice, superstition, or "education"? And if Hume didn't address this problem in part iv, did he *ever* consider it?

### III. Hume's Treatment of "the Problem of Warrant"

I believe that Hume provides sufficient materials in part iii for a satisfactory answer to "the problem of warrant." If he does, then it is not surprising that he didn't address this question again in part iv, which, I have argued, is concerned with other things.

Our look at I iv 4 revealed that Hume does not there treat the demand to distinguish between "permanent" and "trivial" properties of the imagination as a requirement that his system must satisfy. If we look closely at his discussion of a virtually identical distinction in part iii, we not only see that Hume does *not* endorse the distinction, but also that he explicitly says that "nothing could be more contrary to true philosophy:"

In general we may observe, that as our assent to all probable reasonings is founded on the vivacity of ideas, it resembles many of those whimsies and prejudices, which are rejected under the opprobrious character of being the offspring of the imagination. By this expression it appears that the word, imagination, is commonly us'd in two different senses; and tho' nothing be more contrary to true philosophy, than this inaccuracy, yet in the following reasonings I have often been oblig'd to fall into it. When I oppose the imagination to the memory, I mean the faculty, by which we form our fainter ideas. When I oppose it to reason, I mean the same faculty, excluding only our demonstrative and probable reasonings. When I oppose it to neither, 'tis indifferent whether it be taken in the larger or more limited sense, or at least the context will sufficiently explain the meaning. (T 117–118, note 1)

I take Hume to be saying that, although philosophers assume they can make the distinction, in some principled manner, between reasoning that results in "whimsies and prejudices" and that which produces beliefs based on the (proper?) probable reasoning of which we approve, they haven't succeeded in doing so. The philosophers may *need* the distinction, but they can't just help themselves to it.

As Owen notes, Hume offers extensive discussion, at several places in part iii, of beliefs that are the result of *education*, a term Hume almost always uses as a pejorative. The philosophers use it that way as well. They reject beliefs that are the products of education in favor of (approved) causal inferences because "education is an artificial and not a natural cause" and because "its maxims are frequently contrary to reason, and even to themselves at various times and places" (T 117). So the philosophers try to find a principled basis to reject beliefs that are the result of education, and that will systematically distinguish those (bad) beliefs from the (good) beliefs based on proper causal inference.

Hume doesn't think we can make such a distinction. After all, beliefs based on education include

All those opinions and notions of things, to which we have been accustom'd from our infancy, [and as such they] take such deep root, that 'tis impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them; and this habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many occasions prevails over that which arises from the constant and inseparable union of causes and effects. (T 116)

Far from having a distinctly different "foundation," as the philosophers require, these beliefs are "built upon almost . . . the same foundation of custom and repetition as our reasonings from causes and effects" (T 117). This is just the theme Hume generalizes in the note from T 117–118 quoted above.

Hume's discussion of "unphilosophical probabilities" in I iii 13 reinforces this theme. In the two preceding sections, he considered "the probabilities of chances" (I iii 11) and "the probabilities of causes" (I iii 12). Now he observes that:

All these kinds of probability are receiv'd by philosophers, and allow'd to be reasonable foundations of belief and opinion. But there are others, that are deriv'd from the same principles, tho' they have not had the good fortune to obtain the same sanction. (T 143)

Hume's irony in these remarks seems to have been easy to miss. The philosophers, he thinks, haven't done a good job either of employing or accounting for probable reasoning, most likely because they think it must proceed from the same "principles" as demonstrative reasoning. For these philosophers, the principles of demonstration are the only "reasonable foundations" available. For probable reasonings to be "reasonable foundations of belief and opinion," then they must proceed from these same "principles" or "foundations." In their efforts to "rationalize" probable reasoning, the philosophers have missed or ignored their actual sources; otherwise, they would have seen that the same principles are also the sources of beliefs they consider illegitimate. Hume calls them "unphilosophical probabilities."

In T I iii 13, Hume distinguishes four varieties, or "species," of unphilosophical probability. The fourth variety consists of those beliefs that are "deriv'd from *general rules*, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call Prejudice" (T 146). Hume's discussion of this species of unphilosophical probability explicitly addresses our current topic. We can't distinguish "rashly" formed general rules, he argues, from general rules that aren't so "rash" in any principled manner, for both sorts of rules spring from the same source—our natural tendency to overgeneralize. In the

first *Enquiry*, Hume accounts for these tendencies with a proto-Darwinian characterization of their survival value, but in the *Treatise* he simply stresses the common source of “good” and “bad” general rules:

Shou’d it be demanded why men form general rules, and allow them to influence their judgment, even contrary to present observation and experience, I shou’d reply, that . . . it proceeds from those very principles, on which all judgments concerning cause and effect depend. Our judgments concerning cause and effect are deriv’d from habit and experience; and when we have been accustom’d to see one object united to another, our imagination passes from the first to the second, by a natural transition which precedes reflection, and which cannot be prevented by it. (T 147)

Philosophers who object to Hume’s account of general rules would most likely see the rashly formed general rules that reflect prejudices as the result of “trivial” deliverances of the fancy, while they would consider our more judiciously formed general rules as the result of the “more solid” operations of reason. Presumably, they would consider the opposition of the two sorts of general rules as a classic example of *imagination* pitted against *judgment*.

Hume, more than slightly perversely, encourages us to look at the case in just this way:

But why need we seek for other instances, while the present subject of [unphilosophical] probabilities offers us so obvious an one, in the opposition betwixt the judgment and the imagination arising from these effects of custom? (T 149)

He very quickly insists, however, that this is a mistaken and misleading picture, but it is a consequence of the theories the philosophers accept, which he has already argued don’t work. On his own “system,” however,

All reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by inlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object. It may be . . . concluded, that our judgment and imagination can never be contrary, and that custom cannot operate on the latter faculty after such a manner, as to render it opposite to the former. (T 149)

Hume realizes that he must also explain how the opposition between these kinds of general rules can *appear* to be a clash between judgment and imagination. He points out that, on his own theory, varied and numerous

experiences give rise to more or less systematic ways of refining our causal beliefs—of making them more fine-grained. Using these “principles,”

We learn to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes; and when we find that an effect can be produc'd without the concurrence of any particular circumstance, we conclude that that circumstance makes not a part of the efficacious cause, however frequently conjoin'd with it. But as this frequent conjunction necessarily makes it have some effect on the imagination, in spite of the opposite conclusion from general rules, the opposition of these two principles produces a contrariety in our thoughts, and causes us to ascribe the one inference to our judgment, and the other to our imagination. The general rule is attributed to our judgment; as being more extensive and constant. The exception to the imagination; as being more capricious and uncertain. (T 149)

So Hume offers a causal explanation of what the philosophers think they are doing rationally. This shows they lack the principled basis they need for attributing the seemingly differently produced beliefs to different faculties. Hume makes the point explicit when he concludes his discussion with this irony-laden observation:

Mean while the sceptics may here have the pleasure of observing a new and signal contradiction in our reason, and of seeing all philosophy ready to be subverted by a principle of human nature, and again sav'd by a new direction of the very same principle. (T 150)

Hume is saying that the “same principle of human nature” is the operative causal factor in producing both the beliefs that “subvert” philosophy as well as those that “save” it. But if he is correct, then the philosophers’ attempts to provide an absolute means of partitioning off the legitimate principles of belief-formation from those that are illegitimate are doomed to failure. Simply to *declare* that legitimate beliefs are products of the general and authentic operations of the understanding while illegitimate beliefs have their source in the trivial properties of the imagination patently begs the question. And if Hume is right in maintaining that both sorts of beliefs have the same source, the question is begged regardless of whether we consider judgment to be a separate faculty or whether we regard it as a sub-faculty of the imagination. We can and do “correct” some general rules by the “influence” of other general rules, but doing so is just another application of an unphilosophical probability, *not* an application of a superior “principle” whose source is in another, superior faculty:

The following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of probability; and yet 'tis only by following them that we can correct this, and all other unphilosophical probabilities. (T 150)

#### IV. Hume's Solution to the Problem of Warrant

To return—at last—to Owen's original question about "the problem of warrant": does this conclusion mean that Hume in fact has no solution to that problem?

I think not. In I iii 15, Hume offers some "Rules by which to judge of causes and effects" (T 173). On his account, they are general rules:

Since therefore 'tis possible for all objects to become causes or effects to each other, it may be proper to fix some general rules, by which we may know when they really are so. (T 173)

As general rules, they are overgeneralizations of the sort that count as unphilosophical probabilities. But Hume offers them as "general rules, by which we *ought* to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects" (T 149; my emphasis). Coupled with the long note in section 9 of the first *Enquiry*, we can sketch how we are able to refine our causal expectations in the light of experience. Gradually systematized—"methodized and corrected"—our expectations become at first practical wisdom and, eventually, the basis for a Humean science. Our tendency to overgeneralize, useful as it is to survival, is not likely to fare that well when it is submitted to the tribunal of ever more fine-grained experience. But applying Hume's rules, we should note, need not require a conscious process. It may simply be an application of what "is supply'd by the natural principles of our understanding" (T 175). Since this is "all the Logic I think proper to employ in my reasoning," Hume seems to think that nothing more is required for a gradual refining of our causal expectations, and eventually of the rules themselves. This process, we should also remember, is not something we do by ourselves. Our range of "observations and experiences" is widened considerably, just as it was during our acculturation, by our cooperative, collaborative, and collective endeavors in everyday practical matters, and—eventually, for those whose talents run in that direction—in a scientific community. The results of that process are, in a very real sense, a social construction!

But, natural as this process may seem in the beginning, it is ultimately not a simple one, as our causal beliefs become more refined and complex. Hume is very much aware of how quickly complexity arises. He attempts to accommodate this complexity, not to escape it artificially:

All the rules of this nature are very easy in their invention, but extremely difficult in their application; and even experimental philosophy, which seems to be the most natural and simple of any, requires the utmost stretch of human judgment. There is no phenomenon in nature, but what is compounded and modify'd by so many different circumstances, that in order to arrive at the decisive point, we must carefully separate whatever is superfluous, and enquire by new experiments, if every particular circumstance of the first experiment was essential to it. These new experiments are liable to a discussion of the same kind; so that the utmost constancy is requir'd to make us persevere in our enquiry, and the utmost sagacity to choose the right way among so many that present themselves. (T 175)

The causal expectations that survive this process will be the ones we retain, not because they meet the requirements of some philosophical theory or because they satisfy some abstract dictates of reason, but because they yield beliefs that we think are more likely to be true than others that don't pass these tests. This process has an admittedly pragmatic component, but it is not pragmatism. The causal expectations that survive these tests will be more successful in promoting our practical and scientific interests, and will thus be more useful and agreeable to ourselves and to others. In practice, of course, we will rarely have to appeal directly to that general standard. Appeal to the standards of our practical and scientific practices will generally do. Satisfying these standards, fallible and dynamic as they are, will provide whatever warrant they may be thought to require. Prejudices, whimsies, and superstitions, to say nothing of the results of "education," may die hard, but their lack of warrant—in the sense just described—will be apparent in the ways they fail to meet these standards.

If my account is correct, then there aren't two separate questions, one about "right reason" in Hume and another about his approach to "the problem of warrant." Since scientific and superstitious expectations are both the result of the same sorts of processes, they stand or fall by the same standards. Hume has attempted to provide us with a set of standards by which superstition fails and science succeeds. If he is correct, there is no separate "problem of warrant."

## V. Conclusion

While my sketch of an alternative to Owen's approach to "the problem of warrant" is too bare to consider it a genuine rival to the account he develops so elegantly in his book, I do think that it is one that meshes nicely with other central themes in *Hume's Reason*. In particular—though I've gotten there by a very different route—my view of the ultimate justification (if we can call it

that) for following the rules for modifying and refining our causal expectations is the same as Owen's. These rules provide the best standards we know of if we wish to achieve the best lives to which we aspire.

There is much more to say on these topics than I have time for today. But my conversations with David Owen will continue, as they have for a long time. I look forward to his reactions, for I'm certain that his criticisms of the alternative I've just offered will be—as always—my best instruction.

## NOTES

A version of this paper was presented at a symposium on David Owen's *Hume's Reason* at the 27th Hume Conference, Williamsburg, Virginia, July 2000. I am grateful to David Owen, Don Garrett, Tito Magri, and to the members of the audience in Williamsburg for their helpful questions and comments. I was helped in preparing this paper by the participants in an informal seminar on *Hume's Reason* in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati: Arthur Morton, Matt Woodruff, Zac Cogley, Mike Sontag, and Mike Cundall. My extensive discussions on Humean topics in general with Arthur Morton have been particularly helpful. I am also indebted to Charlotte Brown for her constructive criticisms of earlier drafts as well as for her comments on this final version.

1 David Owen, *Hume's Reason*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Subsequent references to *Hume's Reason* ("HR") will be placed parenthetically in the text.

2 For discussion, see Ian Hacking, "Leibniz and Descartes: Proof and Eternal Truths," in *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Idealism: British Academy Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 47–60.

3 Locke and Hume extended this conception, *mutatis mutandis*, to probable reasoning. Owen's discussion of Locke's account of probable reasoning (chapter 3) is especially helpful. Descartes, who wrote just before the emergence of the modern conception of probability, obviously didn't have that notion to work with. See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), for an account of the conceptual shifts that made possible, around 1650, the emergence of our concept of probability.

4 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd. ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 217. Subsequent references abbreviated as "T" with page numbers inserted parenthetically in the text.

5 The other two passages Hume cites, presumably as *sources* for his "dangerous dilemma," are I iv 1 ("Of scepticism with regard to reason") and I iii 14 ("Of the idea of necessary connexion"). While I argue here that the "crisis" of I iv 7 is not Hume's, I do believe that the argument Hume is mounting begins, appropriately, in I iv 1. I offer an account of I iv 1 in William Edward Morris, "Hume's Scepticism about Reason," *Hume Studies* 15 (1989): 39–60. Owen gives a very different account of I iv 1 in chapter 8, "Reason, Belief, and Scepticism." However, he offers no expla-

nation of why Hume cites I iv 1 as a source of his "dangerous dilemma" *if* Hume's crisis in I iv 7 concerns "the problem of warrant" and *if* Owen is right that Hume seems unaware of that problem in I iv 1. I think that more discussion of I iv 1 and its place in part iv (and in Book I in general) is called for, and I look forward to continuing that discussion.

6 William Edward Morris, "Hume's Conclusion," *Philosophical Studies* 99 (2000): 89–110.

7 My argument in this section is largely drawn from my "Naturalism and Normativity in Hume's Philosophy," presented at the annual meetings of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, Atlanta, Georgia, April 2000.