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Hume, Kant, and the Sea of Illusion

PETER THIELKE

Given Hume's seemingly ambivalent—and often cryptic—claims about the limits of human knowledge, it is no surprise that a skeptical and a naturalistic reading compete as the proper interpretation of the *Treatise*. Although Hume was traditionally viewed as a skeptic, more recently the “naturalized” view of the *Treatise* has been in the ascendancy.¹ On this view, while Hume deploys various skeptical arguments, they are mainly in the service of revealing the essentially naturalistic structure of human cognition.² In other words, Hume is taken to be engaged in a type of philosophical psychology, and the results of this project are taken to accord with generally naturalized claims about the mind.

In this paper, however, I want to take issue with this “naturalized” version of Hume, and instead try to show not only that Hume's skepticism is an ineliminable feature of his view, but that in fact Hume's skepticism in the *Treatise* is *complicit* with his naturalism.³ I propose to do this by enlisting help from what might initially seem to be an unlikely quarter: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and specifically the doctrine of illusion found in the Transcendental Dialectic.⁴ Both Kant and Hume, I will argue, come to realize that human reason is fraught with illusion—and, in fact, that this illusion is in an important sense *natural*. Moreover, both Kant and Hume distinguish between the natural illusions that characterize human reason and the *errors* that follow from succumbing to these illusions. But where Kant's transcendental idealism claims to find a corrective to these errors, Hume, I will argue, finds

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no such safe haven. For this reason he remains—in the *Treatise*, at least—unable to avoid skeptical worries. And, more importantly, this skepticism *follows* from a “natural” feature of the mind.⁵

I. The Island of Truth: Transcendental Illusion in the *Critique*

At the start of the section on “Phenomena and Noumena,” Kant offers one of the rare metaphors in the *Critique*. The territory of pure understanding, he notes,

is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands, and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end.⁶

Much of the work of the *Critique* can be seen as providing an accurate map of this “land of truth.” As Kant’s surveying reveals, the domain of the pure understanding is fundamentally limited: the possibility of experience traces the coastline of the island of the pure understanding, beyond which we find only stormy metaphysical seas.⁷

Given this description of the dangers of speculative metaphysics, it seems rather odd that Kant suggests that the turbulent ocean must be explored. The philosophical seafarer is inexorably drawn to the sea of illusion, to the “adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end.” It is just this enterprise that provides the focus of the Transcendental Dialectic, which examines the transcendental illusions that Kant claims attend *any* attempt to find sure ground apart from the island of the pure understanding.

An illusion, Kant holds, arises from the illegitimate use of a cognitive faculty, either by the exercise of some undue influence upon it, or by the extension of its principles beyond their purview. Illusion is *transcendental*, Kant notes, when it concerns the demands of *reason*, which illegitimately transform what are merely subjectively necessary connections into objective claims about things in themselves. The drive of reason, in other words, seduces us into extending the categories of the pure understanding beyond their appropriate empirical employment, and deceives us into applying these categories to transcendent objects such as God, the rational soul, and the world as a whole—topics that not coincidentally preoccupied traditional metaphysics.

Given that the application of the categories to things in themselves is viewed as deceptive and illusory, it comes as something of a surprise that Kant also argues that this transcendental illusion is *inevitable*. There exists, Kant claims, “a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason . . . so that even after we have exposed the mirage, it will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes, continually propelling it into momentary aberrations that always need to be removed” (A298/B355). Even the recognition that transcendental illusion is deceptive does not remove the illusion: just as the astronomer who knows that the size of the moon is constant nevertheless sees it as bigger when it is close to the horizon, so too the recognition of transcendental illusion does not dispel the effect.

Yet while transcendental illusion is inevitable, it is also in an important sense remediable: we can correct for its ill effects even if the illusion itself never disappears. Here the example of the perceived size of the moon is again illuminating: there is a crucial difference between the *illusion* that the moon is larger at the horizon than at its apex, and the *error* that would occur in judging that the difference in perceived size is the result of a change in the moon itself. While the former illusion is inevitable, the error that follows from “objectifying” this illusion can be avoided by recognizing that the illusion has its seat not in the object but in the way in which we perceive it.

The central task of the Transcendental Dialectic can then be cast in terms of separating the natural and inevitable illusions that attend our cognitive situation from the pernicious—yet avoidable—errors that often follow from these illusions. The very possibility of this distinction between illusion and error turns on the nature of reason, which Kant characterizes as the faculty of principles (A300/B356). As Kant notes, “‘cognition from principles’ [is] that cognition in which I cognize the particular in the universal through concepts” (A300/B357)—principles are presented as synthetic knowledge based on concepts alone. Reason is the faculty of “the unity of the rules of the understanding under principles” (A302/B359); as such, reason does not apply directly to the experience of objects (which always requires an intuitive element), but only to the relations between concepts of the understanding.

In its logical employment, reason plays this role by searching for the common elements of various concepts, or, in Kant’s terms, by seeking the “condition of the conditioned.” The merely *logical* maxim of reason then is “to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed” (A307/B364). If we ask, for example, what conditions govern the fact that water boils at 100° C, we logically employ reason to determine the various connections between the relevant concepts, and to order these concepts in a series of conditions. Reason in turn transforms

this merely logical maxim into a *principle* by assuming that for any *given* conditioned element, the whole series of conditions must likewise be given. If the boiling point of water is a given fact, then the entire series of conditions—the chemical makeup of water, the structure of molecules, the laws of physics, the ultimate constitution of the universe—is likewise taken to be given, in order to explain the simple fact that water boils at 100°. From *any* given condition, then, we finally end up with the world as a totality. In other words, reason in its transcendental guise hypostatizes, or objectifies, the unconditioned series.

This unconditioned series, of course, goes beyond the limits of possible experience, since we can never experience the *totality* of conditions that leads up to the fact that water boils at 100° C. In this sense, Kant claims, the unconditioned is transcendent. Yet it is precisely this transcendence that produces difficulties, since the “objectification” of the unconditioned leads to the problematic metaphysical claim that there is in fact an “unconditioned object” that—while not itself an object of experience—can nevertheless be investigated using reason alone. The transcendental *illusion* of a series of conditions becomes a metaphysical *error* when reason hypostatizes its transcendent object. In other words, difficulties arise when reason goes beyond the simply logical task of seeking further conditions.

The Dialectic as a whole presents an analysis of the various errors that follow from the “objectification” of the unconditioned. So, for example, the Paralogisms examine the errors that follow from treating the soul as an object, the Antinomies address the problems that attend taking the world as a given whole, and the Ideal investigates the idea of a supreme being. In each of these cases, Kant claims, reason’s natural drive to seek the unconditioned is undermined by the notion that the unconditioned stands as an *object* of rational inquiry. The soul, the world, and God—as mere *ideas* that go beyond possible experience—might in a certain sense be ineliminable features of reason, but we *can* avoid the errors of treating these as objects of rational inquiry: traditional metaphysics, however, dives right in, and soon finds itself drowning in the sea of illusion.

Much more could be said about Kant’s account of illusion, but two related claims about the nature of Kant’s argument need to be noted before proceeding to an examination of Hume. First, Kant emphasizes the seductive nature of transcendental illusion, and the ubiquity of the errors that generally follow from it. In fact, the Dialectic largely stands as a critique of *all* previous philosophical systems, for, as Kant claims, all have fallen prey to one or another metaphysical error based upon such an illusion. The reason for this can be traced to the second key point: the errors that follow from transcendental illusion can be avoided, Kant argues, only by embracing

transcendental idealism, and in particular the view that objects of experience are not things in themselves but only appearances structured by our a priori forms of intuition and thought.

The pivotal role played by transcendental idealism emerges most clearly in Kant's treatment of the Antinomies. If one is a transcendental realist—if, that is, one takes empirical objects to be things in themselves existing wholly independently of our forms of representation—then one is inexorably led to assume that the world as a whole exists as an unconditioned object. But, as Kant seeks to show, such an assumption leads to incorrigible antinomial conclusions, since the unconditioned world can be shown to be both eternal and temporal, both limited and unlimited. The only way to avoid such antinomies, Kant argues, is to abandon the assumption that objects of experience are things in themselves. Both sides of the antinomy assume that the world is a whole existing by itself—the transcendental realist position—but Kant claims to have shown that it is “false that the world (the sum total of all appearances) is a whole existing in itself. From which it follows that appearances in general are nothing outside our representations, which is just what we mean by their transcendental ideality” (A507/B535). Objects of experience, in other words, are appearances structured by the a priori forms of intuition—space and time—rather than things in themselves. And this, of course, is the central feature of Kant's transcendental idealism.

Kant offers his idealism as a corrective to the mistakes of all previous metaphysical systems, and in this sense the Dialectic—in addition to exposing the errors that often attend transcendental illusion—also reinforces the results Kant reached in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* and *Analytic*. The “island of truth” can be discovered only by keeping Kant's idealism firmly in view—to extend the metaphor, this idealism stands as the pole star of his system. In the *Treatise*, Hume, as I will try to show, recognizes the same relation between natural illusion and error as does Kant, but unlike Kant, he either fails to see this pole star, or, perhaps, would deny that it in fact points toward a safe harbor.

II. Illusion in the *Treatise*

Despite the obvious terminological differences between the *Treatise* and the *Critique*, much of Hume's argument in 1.4 exhibits a surprisingly Kantian tone. Like Kant, Hume seems at pains to expose the pitfalls of traditional dogmatic metaphysics, and the problems he identifies are remarkably similar to those Kant brings to light. The clues to this interpretation are found in the concluding section of Book I, where Hume sums up his skepticism. I will

begin there, and then work backward to show how this reading helps make sense of Hume's controversial and obscure claims about reason and the senses.

It is serendipitous that in 1.4.7, Hume begins his summary of the results of his investigations into human knowledge with a maritime trope even more extended than Kant's. "Methinks I am a man," he writes,

who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd ship-wreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous circumstances. My memory of past errors and perplexities, makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture upon that boundless ocean, which runs into immensity (T 1.4.7.1; SBN 263–4).

I propose that this metaphor serves as a key to understanding the role that Hume's skepticism plays in the latter parts of Book I of the *Treatise*. From the vantage of the Humean seafarer, reason is fraught with illusion and error: to borrow Kant's image, it too often mistakes a distant cloudbank or ocean swell for solid land. Given this situation, Hume cannot help but be skeptical about the prospects for discovering safe ground—but, paradoxically perhaps, he also cannot give up the search.

In order to make sense of this claim, let us put aside the nautical metaphors in favor of the arguments Hume offers in 1.4.7. In so doing, we shall see the role that necessary illusion plays in Hume's system, and how this is comparable to the use Kant makes of transcendental illusion.

As Hume notes, "memory, the senses, and understanding are . . . all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas" (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265). The imagination, however, while lying at the foundation of the various mental faculties, is nonetheless often pernicious: "No wonder a principle so inconstant and fallacious shou'd lead us into errors, when implicitly follow'd (as it must be) in all its variations" (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 265–6). The imagination, for example, provides the ground of causal reasoning, but it also convinces us of the continued existence of external unperceived objects, and while the fact that both operations are "equally natural and necessary . . . in some circumstances they are directly contrary" (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 266). Yet the

imagination *must* be followed, as is made clear by the claim that the principles of the imagination are “natural and necessary.”

Despite these natural and necessary features of the imagination, however, Hume characterizes its products as illusions. The attempt to find an ultimate principle for a causal connection, for example, “proceeds merely from an illusion of the imagination; and the question is, how far we ought to yield to these illusions” (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267). Determining our proper response to these illusions, Hume continues,

is very difficult, and reduces us to a very dangerous dilemma, whichever way we answer it. For if we assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy . . . they lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become ashamed of our credibility. Nothing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasion of more mistakes among philosophers . . . But on the other hand, if the consideration of these instances makes us take a resolution to reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding, that is, to the general and more established properties of the imagination; even this resolution, if steadily executed, would be dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences. For I have already shown, that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself (T 1.4.7.6–7; SBN 267).

Here, I think, we see the kernel of Hume’s skepticism: the illusions of the imagination give rise to errors and absurdities, yet the attempt to *avoid* these errors gets us nowhere. The proper response to the fact that the imagination traffics in necessary illusions is simply to be skeptical about the prospects of reaching any kind of sure or certain conclusions about the world. Instead, we must remain modest or diffident about the prospects for human knowledge.

By itself, of course, this does not suffice to connect the Humean account of the tensions in thought with the Kantian notion of transcendental illusion. Two further Humean claims, however, underscore the similarities between the two positions. As we saw above, Kantian illusion involves two crucial features: (i) it is an inevitable or necessary feature of human cognition, *and* (ii) it is based upon the demands of reason to discover the “unconditioned.” Both of these features are also present in Hume’s account. We have already seen that the imagination, in its connection to the reasoning about cause and effect and the existence of unperceived objects, is “natural

and necessary”—it is in some sense inevitable. With regard to the *goal* of the imagination, Hume notes that

Nothing is more curiously enquir'd after by the mind of man, than the causes of every phenomenon; nor are we content with knowing the immediate causes, but push on our enquiries, till we arrive at the original and ultimate principle (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266).

This passage is presaged by Hume's earlier claims in the section on skepticism with regard to the senses that “the imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse” (T 1.4.2.22; SBN 198). When set in motion, the machinery of the imagination seeks out what we can think of as the unconditioned, the ultimate principle of the connection of various perceptions—the imagination, as we shall see, carries us beyond the senses, just as for Kant reason carries us beyond possible experience.⁸ For Kant, the unconditioned reflects the fact that reason always seeks a further explanation of a given proposition, and in this sense Hume's account of the imagination mirrors this claim: through it we seek the “original and ultimate principle” of phenomena. Moreover, as for Kant, Hume claims that this drive proceeds “even when its object fails it,” since the search for the ultimate principle follows its course even if its goal is never attained.⁹

Hume, of course, does not use the term “unconditioned” to describe the goal of the imagination, and one might argue that the distinctly Kantian sense of the term is absent from Hume's position. Despite this difference, however, I think that the similarities between the two positions are actually rather strong, especially given Hume's emphasis on the search for the “original and ultimate principle” of phenomena. Here, it seems, the very notion of ultimacy requires something analogous to Kant's “unconditioned,” since in both cases the conditions at issue are taken to be both causally explanatory (since they are taken to provide the explanations of consequent effects) and hierarchically ordered. As such, the series of such conditions can end only with an ultimate condition—which is just what Kant means by the unconditioned. By its very definition, then, it seems that Hume's notion of an “ultimate and original principle” must involve something akin to Kant's unconditioned.

In the Dialectic, as we have seen, Kant draws a distinction between the transcendental illusion that arises from reason's drive for the unconditioned, and the *errors* that can follow from such illusions: while the former is inevitable, the latter can be avoided. A similar distinction is also at work in Hume's discussion in 1.4, which concerns not simply the role played by illusion, but

also the dogmatic errors that arise when the illusory nature of thought is not properly recognized.¹⁰ The title of 1.4—“Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy”—gives a hint of this purpose: Hume will present an account not simply of skepticism, but also an indictment of the dogmatism of other systems that fail to acknowledge the illusory nature of “extra-sensuous” knowledge. Illusions, according to Hume, might be inevitable, but at the very least we can recognize them *as* illusions.

What does this dogmatism involve? It is telling that Hume ends Book I with a promise that his uses of terms such as “certain,” “evident,” and “undeniable” “imply no dogmatical spirit” (T 1.4.7.15; SBN 274). If Hume’s own diffident skepticism stands in contrast to this dogmatical spirit, then dogmatism can be characterized as a view that advances its claims as certain or evident. In 1.4, dogmatism arises in the contexts of discussions of reason, independent objects, and the soul: in short, dogmatism is concerned with traditionally “metaphysical” issues. For Hume, however, dogmatism is understood not as a particular metaphysical doctrine, but rather in *methodological* terms. Any attempt to reach “certain” or “undeniable” truths about reason, the world, and the soul—regardless of the specific conclusions—can be characterized, it seems, as dogmatic. Here too, Hume’s views resemble Kant’s, since both delimit the realm of dogmatists in terms of shared methodological assumptions and errors. For Kant, the errors of dogmatism can be traced to a failure to recognize the illusory nature of certain metaphysical claims; the same, I think, is true for Hume. Dogmatism, according to Hume, is seduced by the illusions of the imagination into thinking that these illusions warrant substantive and certain metaphysical claims—dogmatism thus takes illusion for fact.

The recognition that our experience is fraught with illusion, however, ultimately provides little consolation, since, as Hume claims, it at best warrants a type of skepticism about the prospects for philosophical knowledge. In this respect, the relation between Hume’s naturalism and skepticism is far more complicated than might initially be assumed. As we have seen, at the heart of Hume’s skepticism lies the natural and necessary function of the imagination to seek the unconditioned, to go beyond the immediate evidence of the senses: in other words, it is precisely the “naturalistic” account of the imagination that drives the skeptical conclusions that culminate in 1.4.7. Hume’s naturalism is not a response to his skeptical worries; rather, the naturalism seems *complicit* with the skepticism.

Before turning to an examination of the role of illusion in the earlier sections of 1.4, several potential worries need to be addressed. At least two objections might threaten to undermine the reading I am proposing. First, it

seems clear that Hume is concerned not with reason but with the imagination; as such, his account might appear to differ markedly from Kant's, which focuses solely on the transcendent use of reason, and not on the illusions of the imagination (what Kant would classify as optical illusions and the like). Second, for Kant transcendental illusion arises *not* in the empirical realm, but only in the rarefied arena of unbounded reason. Transcendental illusion, that is, doesn't infect our everyday knowledge. Hume, by contrast, places illusion at the heart of our *empirical* dealings with the world, which again might suggest that the connection I have been drawing between the Kantian and Humean senses of illusion is merely homonymic.

In spite of the seemingly Procrustean nature of my interpretation, I think that both of these objections can be met, or at least ameliorated. Hume's use of "imagination"—while certainly not the equivalent of Kant's use of "reason"—nevertheless bears some key similarities to the relevant features of Kant's system. Hume, for example, speaks of the understanding in terms of "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 267). And, while reason and imagination are distinguished in the *Treatise*, Hume does not present a view of the mind in terms of strict demarcations between faculties.¹¹

More generally, the problem of mapping Kant onto Hume is perhaps not as worrisome as it might initially seem. I am not suggesting that Hume *anticipated* Kant's position in the Dialectic, but rather that the argumentative structure concerning illusion and error in each is very similar. As such, Hume's use of the imagination (and not reason) as the faculty of the unconditioned need not in itself be a damning objection; instead, the point is simply that the drive for the unconditioned, whatever its source, leads to necessary illusions.

This claim also helps in formulating an answer to the second objection, which concerns the arena of illusion. Given that Kant's discussions in the Dialectic center on the necessity of transcendental *idealism* for avoiding the errors of illusion, and that these claims rest upon the idiosyncratically Kantian notion of a distinction between empirical and transcendental levels of explanation, it is no surprise that Hume's account of illusion permeates what Kant would call the realm of the understanding. Hume's skepticism, that is, follows directly from his inability to explain how the illusions that infect our thought can be held at bay.¹² Hume recognizes the problem faced by "realist" dogmatism, but fails to see—or, perhaps better, would not countenance—Kant's idealist solution.¹³ It is for just this reason that Hume's skepticism remains an *empirical* problem.

III. Dogmatism and Skepticism: A Reading of *Treatise* 1.4.1–2

We can now turn to the ways in which illusion operates in the discussion of “sceptical and other systems of philosophy” in 1.4. Hume addresses four broad types of skeptical problems—with regard to reason, the senses, the soul and personal identity—and each, I think, turns on the notion of a necessary illusion. Just as Kant addresses the errors of previous metaphysical systems in the Dialectic, so too does Hume attempt to expose the fallacies and errors of dogmatic systems of philosophies. Hume here examines the attempt to go beyond impressions—what seem in the *Treatise* to play a role similar to Kantian “possible experience”—and exposes the dogmatist’s errors in hoping to secure a certain, evident, *transcendent* knowledge of reason, objects, or immaterial souls.¹⁴

A. A Humean Antinomy

Book 1.4 begins with the notorious discussion of “Skepticism with Regard to Reason,” in which Hume attempts to show that *all* reasoning—even the supposedly certain claims of mathematics—is susceptible to fallibilistic worries, and as such descends into mere probability.¹⁵ Behind this attack on reason lies what might be described as Hume’s anti-dogmatism, and in particular his suspicions about the view that rational inquiry can reach a type of certainty about any claims to knowledge. This dogmatic position is reflected in the proposition that “in all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error” (T 1.4.1.1; SBN 180). For the dogmatist, reason provides a sure and certain ground, which can be reached by somehow cleansing our thought of mistakes, which are the product of the “irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers” (T 1.4.1.1; SBN 180). The dogmatic position, in other words, seems to advance a type of rationalism, in which the truths of reason are concealed by the inadequacies of our mental capacities. Reason is here presented as a transcendent “kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect,” and which is thwarted in its application. Yet it is just this rationalistic account of a sure and independent reason that Hume attacks as indefensibly dogmatic.

The argument for this turns on our propensity to err, which the dogmatist acknowledges has to be overcome by acceding only to something like clear and distinct ideas. Yet given that we have made errors in the past, we must recognize that any claim we now make might be false. As such, it seems that even propositions which we are entirely sure are true must be regarded as at least *possibly* false. The correction and regulation of our propositions, however, is

itself subject to the same considerations: we now must take into account that our first correction might also be in error. This process, of course, can continue indefinitely, and, as Hume notes, each step serves to decrease the certainty of the initial proposition. As a result, “all rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence” (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 183). Hume’s argument seems a remarkably dangerous one, since it threatens to extinguish *any* ostensibly rational claim—even, as it turns out, itself.

I will not here pursue the question of whether Hume’s argument in the section about reason in fact succeeds. We might ask, however, about Hume’s claim that every proposition requires a further justification: why can the process not simply end after a step or two? The answer can be found, I think, in the role played by the “unconditioned” in Hume’s system. As we saw above, for Hume the mind seeks the conditions that govern propositions, and this seems precisely the mechanism that leads to reason undermining itself. The doubt that arises from the recognition that our claims to certainty themselves can be called into question “immediately occurs to us, and of which, if we would closely pursue our reason, we cannot avoid giving a decision. But this decision, tho’ it shou’d be favourable to our preceding judgment, being founded only on a probability, must weaken still further our first evidence” (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 182). Moreover, this process continues *in infinitum*, and it is here that I think the drive for the unconditioned plays its role, for the process can proceed to infinity, it seems, only because it is driven by the drive for something like the unconditioned. In other words, we seek the conditions that govern our judgment, and reason is not satisfied until it reaches the ultimate condition—which, Hume claims, ends up with reason subverting itself.¹⁶

What is Hume’s real target in this attack upon reason? His intention, he claims, is simply to “make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv’d from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures” (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 183). Hume’s opponents here are presumably those who would claim a special role for reason—those, in other words, who would be dogmatists about the use of our rational capacities. Their *error* lies in assuming that reason can somehow transcend the limitations of impressions, and secure a type of certainty in reflection. As Hume claims to have shown, however, this standard of reason is not something that reflection can ever approach; rather, against the dogmatists, he has demonstrated that rational inquiry in fact takes us farther away from any certainty or infallibility. The dogmatist is led to hypostatize the realm of reason as the standard of knowledge, when in fact this remains utterly inaccessible. The search for further conditions leads only to the collapse of

certainty: the principles of rational reflection, “when carry’d further, and apply’d to every new reflex judgment, must, by continually diminishing the original evidence, at last reduce it to nothing, and utterly subvert all belief and opinion” (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 184).

But where the dogmatic rationalist illegitimately separates the ideal of reason from its practical embodiment, his skeptical opponent (whom we might think of as the Pyrrhonist) falls prey to a similar error in ignoring the way in which nature counteracts the destructive tendencies of reason. The thoroughgoing skeptic is on this point as dogmatic as the rationalist, although with an obviously different conclusion in mind. The common error each makes, it seems, is to elevate reason above its common employment, to ask about solving a question—whether certainty in our reasoning is attainable, or a valid goal of thought—whose answer would take us beyond the realm of possible experience.

That the relation between dogmatism and skepticism is a key to this section is underscored by Hume’s discussion at the end of 1.4.1. After considering a standard objection to the skeptic—that if his claims are weak they do not damage reason, and if they are strong they must appeal to reason—Hume dismisses this line of argument. Instead, he notes that skepticism and dogmatism are locked in a kind of constant clench:

The skeptical and the dogmatical reasons are of the same kind, tho’ contrary in their operation and tendency; so that where the latter is strong, it has an enemy of equal force in the former to encounter; and as their forces were at first equal, they still continue so, as long as either of them subsists, nor does one of them lose any force in the contest, without taking as much from its antagonist (T 1.4.1.12; SBN 187).

Hume here is offering, I think, a type of antinomy. For Kant, antinomies present equally compelling yet mutually exclusive arguments about the world taken as a whole: whether, for example, the world has a beginning in time or a limit in size. The antinomies are perplexing because they purport to reveal a deep inconsistency at the heart of metaphysics, which no amount of argumentation on either side of the question can resolve: each side seems to have a valid argument, yet both cannot be true. Kant claims that the correct response to the antinomies is to expose and reject the common assumption shared by both sides, for only in such a way can the entire problem be avoided. The same structure, I think, characterizes Hume’s suspicions about dogmatism and skepticism, both of which seem to stand in just such an antinomial relation. Neither side can gain the upper hand, yet both cannot be true at the

same time. Hume's solution, like Kant's, seems to lie in a rejection of a common assumption shared by each—namely, that reason attempts to reach a realm of certainty beyond the evidence of the senses.

B. The Identity of Objects

Reason then does not fare well in Hume's hands—what of objects? Hume's treatment of the nature of independent objects is long and dense, and the interests of space preclude a detailed account of all of its twists and turns. Nevertheless, the notion of illusion again figures very prominently in Hume's argument, and, if this role is recognized, it sheds light on the nature of Hume's skepticism about the senses. As in the case of reason, I will claim that Hume's aim in the section about objects is to expose how a natural illusion of the imagination is erroneously hypostatized into a metaphysical claim, which offers a dogmatical view about the existence of independent objects—illusion again seduces us into error.

Hume begins by asking about the causes that lead us to believe in the existence of bodies. Here he poses two questions: why do we attribute a continued existence to objects when they are unperceived, and why do we suppose that objects exist independently of the mind? In particular, Hume seeks to discover which faculty—the senses, reason, or the imagination—produces the belief in independent objects.

That the senses do not provide the source of this belief emerges from the fact that sensation is not referential in the requisite manner. The senses “convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some inference either of the reason or imagination” (T 1.4.2.4; SBN 189). Perceptions are singular mental entities: they do not refer to anything beyond themselves, but merely appear to the mind. As such, they cannot by themselves serve as the cause of our idea that objects exist independently of our minds.

But if the senses alone prove incapable of serving as the cause of our idea of the independent existence of objects, reason is equally useless. Reason, here in the guise of philosophy, “informs us that every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind; whereas the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see” (T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193). Yet neither of these views shows that reason is the source of our belief in independent objects. If, with the vulgar, we *identify* perceptions and objects, then there is no need for an inference of reason to move us from one to the other; but if, with the philosopher, we *distinguish* perceptions

and objects, “we are still incapable of reasoning from the existence of one to that of the other: So that upon the whole our reason neither does, nor is it possible it ever shou’d, upon any supposition, give us an assurance of the continu’d and distinct existence of body” (T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193). Instead, Hume argues, the belief is entirely the product of the imagination.

Hume’s lengthy and dense investigation of the imagination turns on the role played by custom and habit in providing us with the idea of the coherence and constancy of certain impressions. From the orderliness and regularity of our perceptions we *assume* that the objects to which they refer continue to exist even when unperceived, and this in turn gives rise to the idea that bodies exist independently of being perceived. The coherence of our perceptions, however, can only take us so far. Unlike the notion of cause and effect, which Hume defines simply in terms of regular relations *between* impressions, the belief in the continued existence of bodies requires an inference taking us *beyond* observed regularity: any degree of regularity in our perceptions “can never be a foundation for us to infer a greater degree of regularity in some objects, which are not perceiv’d; since this supposes a contradiction, *viz.* a habit acquir’d by what was never present to the mind” (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 197). The belief in the continued existence of objects—unlike the “causal regularity” thesis—takes us beyond possible experience; as Hume notes, in this respect the two beliefs are “at the bottom considerably different from one another” (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 197). And while this assumption of the continued existence of bodies is perhaps necessary and inevitable, it is nonetheless illusory.

The difference between the belief in causal connections and the belief in the continued existence of objects is important because it points, I think, to the need for something like the unconditioned in Hume’s account of persistence. Custom, Hume claims, can only take us so far in the explanation of objects, since the “extending of custom and reasoning beyond the perceptions can never be the direct and natural effect of the constant repetitions and connexion, but must arise from the co-operation of some other principles” (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 198). And, it seems, the notion of a necessary and natural illusion sketched above provides just this missing element.

Immediately after presenting the demand for “some other principles” Hume introduces what I have called the notion of the unconditioned. As Hume notes, in its mathematical employment the imagination is like a galle that, once put into motion, “carries on its course without any new impulse” (T 1.4.2.22; SBN 198). The process by which we reach the idea of the continued existence of bodies follows the same path:

Objects have a certain coherence even as they appear to our senses; but this coherence is much greater and more uniform, if we suppose the objects to have a continu'd existence; and as the mind is once in the train of observing an uniformity among objects, it naturally continues, till it renders the uniformity as compleat as possible. (T 1.4.2.22; SBN 198)

The drive for completeness here again plays a key role, since it guides the imagination in seeking a complete uniformity of the “conditioned” perceptions—the unconditioned then would stand as a wholly independent object. As Hume recognizes, however, this complete uniformity is an illusion: we must “give a reason, why the resemblance of our broken and interrupted perceptions induces us to attribute an identity to them [and, must further] account for that propensity, which this *illusion* gives, to unite these broken appearances by a continu'd existence” (T 1.4.2.25; SBN 200; emphasis added).

We can make further sense of Hume's position if we take into account the nature of the illusion of the imagination. Given a set of resembling perceptions, the imagination naturally tries to group them together in the most *complete* fashion, and it does so by introducing the illusory notion of identity. To this extent the operations of the imagination follow what Hume calls the “propension to consider...interrupted perceptions as the same” (T 1.4.2.42; SBN 208). But, while it might be simply a fact that the imagination naturally works in this fashion, it does not serve as an answer to the question concerning “the manner in which the conclusion is form'd, and principles from which it is deriv'd” (T 1.4.2.38; SBN 206). Here, Hume seems to distinguish between the natural illusion that as a matter of fact is unavoidable, and the philosophical explanation of this matter of fact. As such, the error of the vulgar *system* comes in drawing a metaphysical conclusion from the wholly natural illusion. As Hume notes,

there is an intimate connexion betwixt those two principles, of a *continu'd* and of a *distinct* or *independent* existence, and that we no sooner establish the one than the other follows, as a necessary consequence. 'Tis the opinion of a continu'd existence, which first takes place, and without much study or reflection draws the other along with it, wherever the mind follows its first and most natural tendency. But when we compare experiments, and reason a little upon them, we quickly perceive, that the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience. This leads us backward upon our footsteps to perceive our error in attributing a continu'd existence to our perceptions (T 1.4.2.44; SBN 210).

As this passage suggests, the error lies *not* in the illusion of the imagination, but in the conclusion we are apt to draw from it, a conclusion that runs counter to “plainest experience.” The evidence of the imagination, in other words, does not warrant the erroneous metaphysical conclusion drawn by the vulgar system about the independent existence of objects. Certainly we cannot help but take objects to exist independently of us, and to persist when unperceived—as Hume notes, all of us operate with this assumption through almost all of the courses of our lives—but this natural propensity can be distinguished from the error of endorsing this belief as a fact about the world.¹⁷

It must be noted that such a reading rests on taking Hume’s account of the beliefs of the vulgar to comprise a kind of tacit philosophical system, one that does not simply reflect our everyday practices but rather is taken to be an *explanation* of them.¹⁸ The vulgar system, in other words, is treated by Hume as a *theory* that aims to explain—in philosophical terms—the nature of the objects of perception. While this account of Hume’s might be contentious, I think that the claims of 1.4.2 support the position that when “the vulgar” are invoked, Hume is not endorsing such a stance towards objects. He is rather revealing that our unreflective practices with regard to objects of the senses—practices which, I take it, should *not* be identified with the vulgar system—do not license or underwrite the claims made by the metaphysical position that objects do in fact persist when unperceived. The vulgar’s conflation of perceptions and objects is, Hume notes, “entirely unreasonable” (T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193), and the rejection of the vulgar opinions leads to the “search for some other hypothesis” to explain the belief that objects enjoy a distinct and continued existence (T 1.4.2.17; SBN 194). Later, Hume distinguishes between the philosophical and vulgar systems (T 1.4.2.46; SBN 211).¹⁹ This vulgar system is, I suggest, to be distinguished from the “*common opinion*” that proceeds “on the supposition, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue to exist even when they are not perceiv’d. Tho’ this opinion be false, ’tis the most natural of any, and has alone any primary recommendation to fancy” (T 1.4.2.48; SBN 213).

The question remains, however, whether one can in fact distinguish between our everyday or “common” practices with regard to objects and the philosophical theory that such objects have a continued and distinct existence. Here, I propose, Hume’s notion of dogmatism becomes important. Certainly Hume does not claim that we ought to assume that objects go out of existence when we don’t perceive them—in fact, almost all of our practices depend upon the supposition that objects do in fact continue to exist unperceived. But such a practical assumption cannot be given any kind of philosophical support; we can have no compelling *theory* that can serve to explain our natural suppositions about objects. It is just for this reason, it seems,

that there is a natural illusion surrounding our experience of objects—yet the vulgar system fails to recognize this illusion when it claims that not only do we believe that objects continue to exist when unperceived, but that objects in fact *do* exist in such a way. In this respect, the vulgar system stands as a species of dogmatism, for it seeks to invest our practices with a kind of spurious certainty—yet this vulgar dogmatism fails to recognize that these practices are based upon an illusion, however natural and necessary this might be.

The vulgar system then becomes problematic because it engages in dogmatic metaphysical speculation—it transforms the natural illusion of the imagination into a philosophical principle. The philosopher’s response, however, only deepens the problem, for instead of recognizing that no metaphysical conclusions follow from an illusion of the imagination, the philosopher introduces a *further* metaphysical distinction between perceptions and objects. On this position, while perceptions are interrupted and only resemble each other, objects exist independently of perceptions, and retain an identity across time. Yet, as Hume notes, this marks no advance, since this philosophical system is “only a palliative remedy . . . that contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself” (T 1.4.2.46; SBN 211). The distinction between perceptions and objects only exacerbates the problem, for we have no access to the supposedly identical and independent objects that lie behind perceptions: since only perceptions are present to the mind, it follows that “we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects” (T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212).

The relation between the vulgar and the philosophical system mirrors, I suggest, the “antinomial” connection between skepticism and dogmatism that arose in the discussion of skepticism with regard to reason.²⁰ The vulgar view, which takes perceptions to be identical to objects, and the philosophical view, which proposes a distinction between objects and perceptions, cannot refute the other, yet obviously both cannot be true at the same time. As with skepticism and dogmatism with regard to reason, the strengths of the vulgar and philosophical systems ebb and flow in relation to each other. The antinomial nature of this relation is reflected in the philosophical system, which, Hume notes, “is the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embrac’d by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other” (T 1.4.2.52; SBN 215).

In the face of an antinomy, Kant recommends searching for the common suspect premise shared by both sides, and this is what Hume does at the end of the section on skepticism with regard to the senses. While the vulgar and the philosophical systems differ with regard to their respective views

about the nature of perceptions, both begin with the assumption that the supposed identity of perceptions can be used to draw conclusions about the nature of objects. Hume summarizes the shared error of the vulgar and philosophical systems at the end of 1.4.2:

'Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and 'tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions are uninterrupted, and are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses. This is the case with our popular system. As to our philosophical one, 'tis liable to the same difficulties; and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217–18).

Several things are important to note here. First, Hume presents the illusion of identity as distinct from the popular system that attributes a continued existence to objects. Second, given the failure of both the popular and philosophical accounts, the only recourse seems to be a type of skepticism about the prospects for a metaphysical explanation of objects: it is impossible, Hume notes, for any system “to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them further when we endeavor to justify them in that manner” (T 1.4.2.57; SBN 218). Metaphysical systems fly in the face of experience, and the only philosophical option is to recognize the “skeptical malady” that follows from this.²¹ If in his treatment of skepticism with regard to reason Hume showed that the rationalist project falls prey to skeptical doubts about the efficacy of reason, his analysis of skepticism with regard to the senses demonstrates that the Lockean empiricist project fares no better.²²

IV. Skepticism, Naturalism, and Idealism

As we have seen in tracing the arguments of 1.4.1–2, Hume presents an account of illusion and error that reflects Kant's view of transcendental illusion in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While Hume concedes that illusion might be an unavoidable feature of the imagination, this need not seduce us into the errors of dogmatic metaphysics: we cannot use the illusions and fictions of the imagination as a warrant for claims about reason or the world. In their own particular ways, then, both Kant's and Hume's projects are decidedly anti-dogmatic, since both demonstrate the mistakes that follow from assuming that what are in fact illusions reveals something about an independent, “real” world.

If both Kant and Hume recognize the problems with dogmatism—and, more importantly, if both diagnose these problems as the result of being seduced by illusions—they sharply differ on the issue of how to address this situation. Kant holds that the correct response to dogmatism (which, I take it, is committed to a type of transcendental realism) is transcendental idealism: only such a stance, he claims, allows for a solution to the antinomies that beset dogmatic metaphysics. For Hume, however, no such clear answer emerges from the ashes of dogmatism: while the errors of traditional metaphysics can be exposed when we recognize the role played by necessary illusions, the only response Hume offers is his own “mitigated skepticism.”

This mitigated skepticism is commonly understood as simply a kind of prescription for philosophical modesty, and a recognition that all of our claims are defeasible. On this view, mitigated skepticism is taken to be the first step toward Hume’s own naturalism about the mind; it is viewed less as a variety of skepticism, and more as a recommendation that we should not engage in idle philosophical speculation about topics that go beyond the limits of experimental inquiries.

Certainly the final pages of 1.4.7 suggest such a view. But, if we take seriously the role played by illusion in 1.4, Hume’s mitigated skepticism cannot simply be an anodyne suggestion that we should be modest in our philosophical and scientific aspirations—even if Hume’s own recommendations at times suggest such a stance.²³ Rather, I have suggested that this mitigated skepticism reflects a deep, and unresolved, tension in Hume’s thought, one that concerns the notion of a *necessary* illusion. In particular, the relation between Hume’s skepticism and naturalism is far more complex than might be assumed, since the naturalism about the mind—especially regarding the natural tendencies of the imagination—is precisely what gives rise to skeptical concerns.²⁴

If this is the case, what exactly “mitigates” Hume’s skepticism? If I am right about the ubiquity of the illusions of the imagination, it might seem that there is precious little to separate Hume’s position from a thoroughgoing, Pyrrhonian skepticism. Yet surely this runs counter to Hume’s express intention in the Introduction, where he claims that his work will present “a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security. And as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science must be laid on experience and observation” (T Intro. 6–7; SBN xvi). Experience, in other words, will be the touchstone of the naturalist account of mind, presumably independent of the illusions that beset the imagination.

But as Hume comes to realize, experience does not stand in contrast to illusion, but *is* itself ineliminably illusory. As we have seen, reason cannot

reach certainty in its claims, and the evidence of the senses is ultimately antinomial. The mitigation is then found, I suggest, only in the fact that the exposure of the illusions that beset the imagination can itself provide a bit of solace. As Hume notes shortly after his description of his project, “nothing is more certain, than that despair has almost the same effect upon us with enjoyment, and that we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes.” And, he continues, “the writer may derive a more delicate satisfaction from the free confession of his ignorance, and from his prudence in avoiding that error, into which so many have fallen, of imposing their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles” (T Intro. 9; SBN xviii). The mitigation that Hume seeks, in other words, is found not in a modification of the skeptical position, but rather in the practical effects—in particular the “superior...utility” (T Intro. 10; SBN xix)—that follow from the recognition that certainty is beyond our ken.

As such, it seems that Hume’s naturalism does not serve as an antidote to his skepticism, nor does it remove the taint of skeptical conclusions from his thought. In fact, Hume’s naturalism and skepticism seem inextricably linked to each other. The philosophical seascape, in other words, offers no refuge: we have, Hume claims, “no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all” (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268). In every direction lie only further illusions and philosophical dangers. At the very least, then, it seems clear that in Book 1 of the *Treatise*, skepticism is not something that Hume ever really escapes—and the role played by necessary illusion guarantees this situation.

NOTES

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1 The general trend toward a “naturalized Hume” can be traced to Norman Kemp Smith’s *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1941), and continues in varying degrees in, among others, Barry Stroud’s *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977); Annette Baier’s *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991); and H.O. Mounce’s *Hume’s Naturalism* (London: Routledge, 1999). This is not to say, however, that there is a clear consensus about the correct interpretation of Hume’s naturalism, but only that there is a general move toward treating Hume as a naturalist. A minority, perhaps best represented by Robert Fogelin’s *Hume’s Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 1985), keeps alive the flame of a “skeptical Hume.”

Quotations from the *Treatise* are from David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) cited throughout the paper as “T,” followed by book, part, section, and paragraph number. I also provide page references to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), cited as “SBN.”

2 Following Mounce, I will treat Hume’s naturalism as *epistemological*, concerned with revealing the “natural beliefs” of the human mind (8). This is to be contrasted with a more metaphysical understanding of naturalism, which can be taken to advance a “scientific” view about the nature of objects.

3 A similar view has recently been offered by Ira Singer, who argues that Hume is committed to a “*problematic* naturalism, a naturalism that concedes nature’s power but cannot univocally assert nature’s normativity” (“Nature Breaks Down: Hume’s Problematic Naturalism in Treatise I iv,” *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 225–43; 226). I agree with Singer’s central claim that in 1.4 Hume “casts nature in an equivocal and troublesome role” (230), and that according to Hume “nature, operating in its best and most regular way, contradicts itself” (233). It is in just this sense that nature breaks down. But while Singer makes a very strong case *that* Humean naturalism and skepticism are integrally related, I take the view offered below—which focuses on the role played by natural illusions—to present a means of explaining *how* this actually occurs.

4 Although appealing to Kant’s Transcendental Dialectic to help make sense of Hume might seem an odd project, it is not unprecedented—for example, in several articles, Manfred Kuehn has claimed that Hume presents what can be best described as a type of “Antinomy” that purports to show that there is “a fundamental class of contradictions . . . [that are] essential characteristics of the human mind” (“Hume’s Antinomies,” *Hume Studies* 9 (1983): 25–45; 26). Although I generally agree with Kuehn’s position, I will claim that his account fails to appreciate the central notion of illusion that drives both Kant’s Dialectic, as well as Hume’s skepticism. Likewise, Dorothy Coleman in “Hume’s ‘Dialectic’ ” argues that Hume’s “treatment of contradiction is strongly analogous to the Kantian model of dialectic” (*Hume Studies* 10 (1984): 139). Yet while I also agree with Coleman’s general claims about the structure of both Kant’s and Hume’s arguments, I think that she fails to appreciate the sense in which Hume fails to solve the dialectic that he uncovers. In particular, I will take issue with Coleman’s claim that “Hume’s ‘dialectic’ is . . . a method for resolving, rather than generating, scepticism” (139).

5 The precise target of Hume’s skepticism is a bit unclear. Certainly given the way Hume denigrates Pyrrhonism, it is clear that he is not a complete skeptic. As I will claim below, I think that Hume’s skepticism is essentially anti-dogmatic, and in particular directed against philosophical systems that lay claim to any type of certainty. On this point, see Coleman’s “Hume’s ‘Dialectic’ ” and Singer’s “Nature Breaks Down.”

6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A236/B295. Further references to the *Critique* will be cited in the text, with reference to the A and B edition pagination.

7 The following account of transcendental illusion owes much to Michelle Grier's *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

8 Although it is merely a suspicion on my part, support for the role of the "unconditioned" in the *Treatise* can perhaps also be found in what might be called Hume's "apostate rationalism." By this I mean that Hume appropriates the epistemological standards set by rationalism, while rejecting positive rationalist positions about the prospects for knowledge. So, in this context, the role played by the drive for the unconditioned can be viewed as similar to the use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, although here Hume employs it in the service of his account of illusion.

9 Given Hume's "associationist" view of ideas, to talk about the imagination's drive for the unconditioned might again seem overly rationalistic, but this need not be the case, if we keep in mind the broad range of activities Hume attributes to the imagination. On this score, see David Owen's claims that reason for Hume is "a set of properties of the imagination" (*Hume's Reason* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 199).

10 Hume makes just this point, I think, in the Introduction, where he notes that "tho' we must endeavor to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, 'tis still certain we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate and original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and pompous" (T Intro. 8; SBN xvii).

11 Here, I am extending Stroud's assertions that in 1.4.2 the contrast between the imaginative and "cogitative" parts of our nature "seems to be forgotten . . . The 'acts of mind' that are said to occur in the imagination to produce the belief in continued existence have a very strong 'intellectual' or 'cognitive' flavour" (*Hume*, 108). Owen's account in *Hume's Reason* is also very helpful on this point (see especially 199–205).

12 In "Hume's Antinomies," Kuehn makes a similar point, although he does not cast the issue in terms of the natural illusions (and the errors that follow from them) that I think are of central concern to both Kant and Hume. While I agree with Kuehn's claim that "Because Hume's naturalistic theory of the workings of the human mind has brought to light inevitable contradictions Hume can feel justified in adopting skeptical conclusions" (39), I think that Kuehn fails to account for the role that illusion plays in Hume's system. On the view I am advancing, the "natural pitfalls" of the mind are for Hume not contradictions, but rather illusions—Hume's skeptical conclusions then arise from his inability to see how such illusions could be avoided, rather than from the contradictions that stem from failing to recognize the illusory tendencies of the mind.

13 In "Hume's 'Dialectic'" Dorothy Coleman *does* recognize the difference between an illusion and a contradiction, but she fails to appreciate, I think, both the depth of Hume's skepticism as well as the centrality of transcendental idealism in

Kant's proposed solution to the problem of natural illusion. On Coleman's view, the Kantian dialectic "resolves scepticism by showing that contradictions are the result of confusing two distinct operations of the human reason, of which only one has an objectively valid employment" (145). But this seems to underestimate the force of Kant's position: the "Transcendental Dialectic" is not simply an anti-skeptical argument, but also an "anti-transcendental realist" argument. The only way to avoid the results of the dialectic, in other words, is to embrace transcendental idealism—and not simply to reject one of two mental operations. And is for this reason, I think, that while Hume recognizes the problems with realism (and not merely Pyrrhonian skepticism), he does not provide a compelling solution to this precarious position.

14 It is for this reason, I suspect, that Hume's discussion of causality is not included in the concluding part of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, for the account of causality Hume endorses is ultimately not skeptical, but rather "deflationist." There is an illusion at work in our drive to seek the unconditioned or ultimate principle of causal connections, but this illusion need not result in skepticism, since we can define causality without needing to invoke some unperceived experiential standard. As Hume notes, as "no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions; it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects" (T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212). Causality, in other words, can be explained simply in terms of the constant conjunction of impressions—there is no need to transcend possible experience to justify causal connections. By contrast, the topics of reason, unperceived objects and the soul do take us *beyond* the possible experience of perceptions—the correct response to illusion is here to remain skeptical about the prospects for knowledge, since there is nothing to which these topics can be "deflated."

15 Given that there is no clear sense among commentators of even the structure of Hume's argument, I do not presume to give a definitive reading of this section, nor do I want to claim that my account is exhaustive of the points Hume makes. I hope, however, that it helps shed some light on a potentially helpful way of making sense of at least part of Hume's intentions, if not the success of his argument. For further discussion of this issue, see David Owen's "Reason, Reflection and *Reductios*" *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 195–210.

16 Whether or not Hume is even concerned with the issue of justification is a contentious issue; both W.E. Morris and David Owen have recently argued that in the section on "Scepticism with regard to reason," Hume is in fact interested not in how our claims can be justified but rather with how their presence can be explained (see Morris's "Hume's Skepticism About Reason," *Hume Studies* 15 (1989): 39–60, Morris's "Humean Reason and the Problem of Warrant," *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 305–21, and Owen's *Hume's Reason*, especially chapter 8). While I think that Hume is at least in part concerned with justification and warrant, the point perhaps need not be of great concern here, since I am not sure that either Morris's or Owen's views are incompatible with the interpretation of illusion I am advancing. Even if Hume is offering an account simply of the provenance of our ideas, the *mechanisms* by which these ideas might be rational seems to involve the notion of warrant, and

it is here that illusion plays its part. In other words, even if Hume is simply describing the way in which beliefs can be retained in the face of skeptical arguments, the procedures through which this skepticism occurs seem to depend upon the illusions (and the consequent “antinomy” between dogmatism and skepticism) presented here.

17 On this point, see Saul Traiger’s “Impressions, Ideas, and Fictions,” *Hume Studies* 13 (1987): 381–99.

18 Here I am suggesting something similar to Baier’s claim that “‘Our popular system,’ whose illusions are being exposed, is a system that a single ‘vulgar’ thinker could build up, unaided by her fellows, just as ‘our philosophical system’ has Cartesian solipsistic foundations” (*A Progress of Sentiments*, 120). (Baier, of course, draws a rather different conclusion from this emphasis on the “systematicity” of the vulgar view.)

19 In Book I, Hume frequently contrasts vulgar and philosophical explanations (see, for example, T 1.3.12.1, SBN 130; T 1.3.12.6–7, SBN 132; T 1.3.14.4, SBN 157; T 1.3.14.7, SBN 158), which suggests that when Hume invokes the vulgar system, he is referring to what we might take to be “common-sense” philosophical explanations of the world. In the section on the probability of causes, for example, Hume notes that “however philosophers and the vulgar may differ in their *explication* of the contrariety of events, their inferences from it are always of the same kind” (T 1.3.12.7; SBN 132; emphasis added).

20 This stands in contrast to the interpretation—offered by, among others, Kemp Smith—that Hume defends the vulgar view (*The Philosophy of David Hume*, 453; see also W. E. Morris’s “Humean Reason and the Problem of Warrant”). As I see it, for Hume the vulgar view is as suspect as the philosophical; this is brought out most clearly at the end of 1.4.2, where Hume confesses that a survey of both the vulgar and philosophical systems inclines him “to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence” (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217).

21 The exact nature of Hume’s suggested treatment of this malady marks, I think, the greatest difference between my interpretation and Coleman’s. Coleman argues that the proper solution to the “dialectic” is found in Hume’s notion of a “true philosophy,” whose practitioners recognize the illusions of the imagination, yet “free themselves from the psychological opposition between natural beliefs by mitigating their scepticism when engaged in practical activity” (150). Such an interpretation, however, both ignores the despair that characterizes 1.4.7, as well as overstates the force of the presumed solution. As Hume puts the matter at the end of the section on skepticism with regard to the senses, his proposed solution seems not a philosophical position at all, but rather simply an abdication of the problem—it is “impossible upon *any system* to defend either our understanding or our senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner” (T 1.4.2.57; SBN 218; emphasis added). So, while Coleman sees him as solving the dialectic, I hold that Hume recognizes the problem, but fails to find a satisfactory solution. In this respect, Coleman’s claim that “Hume’s solution is just as non-sceptical as Kant’s” (151) seems to miss the mark.

22 Hume's discussion of ancient and modern skepticism seems of a piece with the general view of his skepticism I have presented. In particular, the arguments Hume offers regarding substance in 1.4.3 and primary qualities in 1.4.4 have the same structure as the case against independent objects: each attacks a metaphysical claim illegitimately drawn from an illusion of the imagination. In the case of substance, the imagination naturally feigns "an unknown something, or original substance and matter, as a principle of union and cohesion among [diverse] qualities," (T 1.4.3.5; SBN 221) but from this illusion the vulgar and the philosopher draw an illegitimate metaphysical conclusion about the existence of some substance (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223). The same argument is made regarding primary qualities when Hume turns to the modern systems of philosophy.

23 In this respect, the *Treatise* seems a bit of a schizophrenic work—the results of Book 1 are rather hard to square with the positions advanced in Books 2 and 3. I do not think, however, that this need be a significant problem for the view I am advancing, especially if we follow Kemp Smith's claim that Book 3 of the *Treatise* was in fact conceived first (See chapters 1 and 2 of *The Philosophy of David Hume*). If this is in fact the case, then the despair that Hume confronts at the end of Book I (as well as the "careless" remedy he suggests) can be seen as a central lesson of the *Treatise*.

24 While it is obviously significant that the notion of illusion—necessary or otherwise—is almost entirely absent from the *Enquiry*, it is hard to determine what we ought to make of this fact. (As far as I know Hume never discusses why this is the case, so he is not of much help here. The few instances of "illusion" in the *Enquiry*, including the famous prescription that ends Section 12, are almost all pejoratively tied to "sophistry"—the notion of an inevitable "natural illusion" does not appear at all.) One position would be to argue that Hume abandons the issue of illusion because it stands as a bit of suspect philosophy; on this view, the skepticism of the *Treatise* recedes in the *Enquiry*, to be replaced by a more thoroughgoing naturalism. I am inclined to think, however, that the reason has more to do with the intractable problems illusion seems to raise than with a recognition that the argument (rather than the presentation) of the *Treatise* was faulty. Hume, of course, famously disavowed the *Treatise* as the result of being carried away "by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately . . . I have repented my Haste a hundred, & a hundred times" (*The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932], 1: 158), and offered the *Enquiry* as a clarification of the project, while claiming that the "philosophical Principles are the same in both" (*Letters*, 1: 158). But while perhaps Hume does not treat the issue of a "natural illusion" in the *Enquiry* because he felt that it was a product of a misguided "youthful heat," an equally good case can be made, I think, for the claim that the topic of illusion simply posed too many problems for a work intended as the popularized version of the *Treatise*. In fact, in my view the *Enquiry* suffers because it does not address illusion: it is something Hume ignores rather than solves in his later work. In any event, if we are to take the *Treatise* seriously, then I think that we cannot avoid coming to terms with the role that illusion plays in it, regardless of whether or not Hume himself saw it as a problem in the later works.