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Hume's Conception of Proper Reflection

LISA IEVERS

Abstract: The concept of reflection plays an equivocal role in the *Treatise*. It is identified as both the key to the formation of more accurate beliefs and the means to the destruction of belief altogether. I attempt to resolve this apparent paradox by showing that there are two distinct kinds of reflection in Book 1: legitimate, or "proper," reflection and illegitimate reflection. Despite evidence to the contrary—including Hume's own claim that he cannot establish that excessive reflections (one variant of illegitimate reflection) should not affect our beliefs—I argue that Hume can justifiably draw a distinction between proper and illegitimate reflection based on epistemological grounds available to him that he does not recognize.

The concept of reflection plays an equivocal role in the *Treatise*. On the one hand, Hume recognizes the value of—and need for—reflection in achieving greater accuracy in judgment. He claims that "we must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief" (T 1.4.1.1; SBN 180);[1] he cites reflection as a corrective measure that allows us to "return to a more accurate method of thinking" (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 254); and he criticizes beliefs formed on such unreflective bases as credulity ("a too easy faith in the testimony of others" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 112)) and prejudice ("rashly form[ed]" erroneous judgments) (T 1.3.13.7; SBN 146). On the other hand, Hume blames reflection for leading him epistemically astray, as, for example, when he says, "every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning" (T 1.4.7.2; SBN 265). Hume's wariness of reflection finally intensifies to the point of finding that,

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in its "refin'd and metaphysical" forms, reflection leaves him "ready to reject all belief and reasoning" (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 268). Thus, seemingly paradoxically, reflection functions as both the means to the formation of more accurate beliefs and the means to the destruction of belief altogether.

We might attempt to resolve this apparent paradox by arguing that, although Hume does not explicitly say so, there are two distinct kinds of reflection—legitimate, or "proper," reflection and illegitimate reflection—and that Hume only endorses the former. Proper reflection would consist in those forms of reflection that lead to more accurate beliefs, while illegitimate reflection would consist in the failure to reflect properly, where such failure is the result of either insufficient or excessive forms of reflection (that is, not reflecting enough or, by contrast, reflecting too much). Excessive reflection would be proper reflection taken to an illegitimate extreme, leaving in its wake the skeptical despair and epistemic nihilism showcased in Hume's dramatic account of his readiness to reject belief altogether in the final pages of Book 1.

Although this attempted resolution of reflection's equivocal role in the *Treatise* holds promise, it requires Hume to have grounds for drawing such a distinction between proper and illegitimate reflection. And this, I claim, is by no means clear. Hume's ability to draw this distinction appears to be hindered by the main methodological principle of his project in the *Treatise*, namely, a restriction to the evidence of experience and observation. As a basis for inquiry, experience and observation seem to offer insight only into how reflective we are, or happen to be, and not on how we might go about reflecting "properly." For this reason, some commentators have interpreted Hume's project in Book 1 as an exercise in cognitive psychology, as opposed to normative epistemology. According to this view, Hume's discussions of the processes of belief formation and belief retention in Book 1, including his discussion of the role of reflection in such processes, offer descriptions of these thought processes without subsequent epistemic evaluation of them.[2] A major challenge confronting such interpretations is accounting for the instances of undeniably normative language appearing in *Treatise* 1.3. Hume refers to "just reasoning" (T 1.3.12.13; SBN 135), considers the requirements for a "just inference" from cause to effect (T 1.3.6.7; SBN 89), offers "rules" by which we "ought" to regulate our judgments about causes and effects (T 1.3.13.11; SBN 149), and presents a "logic" that he thinks "proper to employ" in his reasoning (T 1.3.15.11; SBN 175). As Louis Loeb remarks, "commentators who think that Hume is not making normative claims in Part iii must explain away the contrary evidence."[3]

In this paper, I am particularly concerned with Hume's implicit commitment to a distinction between proper and illegitimate reflection. Although, as noted above, Hume's methodological restriction to experience and observation seems to preclude his drawing this distinction, I argue that this methodological principle is, in fact, the basis for Hume's criticism of cases of insufficient reflection. As for

excessive reflection, I argue that its illegitimacy can be established on both epistemological and practical grounds available to Hume, the former deriving from Hume's novel account of belief and the latter from a consideration of what good can come of excessive reflection. In this way, I seek to explain what makes both extremes of the reflective spectrum illegitimate with an eye toward delimiting the scope of Hume's conception of proper reflection.

1. Hume's Conception of Reflection

A necessary preliminary step in this endeavor is to clarify what "reflection" is for Hume.[4] This is by no means a straightforward task, since the word "reflexion," or a variant of it, appears over one hundred times in *Treatise*, Book 1 alone.[5] Although Hume never explicitly defines reflection, a perusal of the numerous occurrences of the word in Book 1 suggests two main conceptions of it, one rather generic and the other more helpfully specific.

At times Hume simply means by reflection an observation, thought, or consideration, as when he writes, "I shall conclude this subject with two reflections, which may deserve our attention" (T 1.3.12.23; SBN 140) and, elsewhere, "tho' I have condemn'd that question as utterly unintelligible, yet I cannot forbear proposing some farther reflections concerning it" (T 1.4.5.17; SBN 240). This generic sense of reflection as a thought or an observation is not the sense that concerns me in this paper. Other passages indicate a more specific sense of reflection as a mode of thinking that is to be contrasted with "a kind of instinct or natural impulse," the latter being a natural mode of thinking in the sense that it requires no mental effort (T 1.4.2.51; SBN 214). Specifically, Hume appears to understand reflection as second-order thinking about the doxastic products of instinct or natural impulse, as when he writes, "This is our natural and most familiar way of thinking; . . . which we shall learn to correct by a little reflection" (T 1.2.5.11; SBN 57). To the extent that reflection requires a deliberate mental effort, it is—unlike instinct—an unnatural, unfamiliar way of thinking.

As for its main characteristics, reflection is identified as a means to proper understanding and more accurate thinking. Hume repeatedly recognizes the corrective influence of reflection on our beliefs throughout Book 1, such as when, "a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion" (T 1.4.2.44; SBN 210) and "we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking" (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 254).[6] Another important feature of reflection is that it ranges by degrees, from "very little" to "profound and intense" (T 1.4.2.44, 1.4.2.57; SBN 210, 218). On the whole, Hume more frequently intends reflection in the latter sense. Finally, reflection refers to second-order thinking not only about our own thoughts and ideas but also about past experience. This is shown in Hume's appeals to cases in which "we

reason with knowledge and reflection from a contariety of past experiments" (T 1.3.12.13; SBN 135) as well as in his discussions of when it is appropriate to "reflect on any past experience" (T 1.3.6.14; SBN 93). Thus, reflection includes reviewing both the contents of one's mind and the contents of experience. Equipped with this understanding of Hume's conception of reflection, I proceed to consider what a proper (and improper) engagement in this important activity consists in.

2. Illegitimate Reflection

Having as my overarching aim an articulation of Hume's conception of proper reflection, I begin by considering cases of illegitimate reflection. The purpose of proceeding in this way is to hem in the target, proper reflection, on both sides, inasmuch as I claim that illegitimate reflection assumes two basic forms: either one does not reflect enough or one abuses the limited value of reflection and reflects too much. In this section, I give substance to these crude notions of "not reflecting enough" and "reflecting too much."

2.1. Insufficient Reflection

In the Introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume cites experience and observation as the "only solid foundation" for his project of a science of human nature (T Intro 7; SBN xvi). He later declares that he will collect evidence for his various claims "from a cautious observation of human life" (T Intro 10; SBN xix). By "experience" Hume means, specifically, experiences or memories of causally related events (objects or events conjoined with other objects or events "in a regular order of contiguity and succession"), including memories of past subjective experiences like pleasures and pains, such that when I either perceive or remember an instance of object or event *A*, I expect an instance of object or event *B*, "supply'd in conformity to [my] past experience" (T 1.3.6.2; SBN 87). More than being simply a foundation for, or basis of, inquiry, experience and observation also represent a constraint in that "'tis still certain we cannot go beyond experience" (T Intro 8; SBN xvii). Thus, in a sense, experience and observation serve as both the ground and the ceiling of the intellectual edifice known as Hume's science of human nature.

What the preceding passages do not bring out, and what I would like to emphasize at this stage, is the sense in which Hume does not treat "experience" as a merely descriptive term. At the end of the introduction, Hume characterizes experience as the "authority" on which any principles must be founded (T Intro 10; SBN xviii); later, experience is identified as the "true standard" of all causal judgments, by which we "seldom regulate ourselves entirely" in forming beliefs (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113). In characterizing experience as an authority, Hume implies that it is something to which our beliefs or claims must answer; in identifying it

as the true standard of all causal judgments, he suggests that it is something by which such judgments must be measured. Together, these characterizations suggest that "experience" is not just a descriptive term for Hume.

In interpreting Hume's conception of experience in this way, I follow Norman Kemp Smith: "It is experience—and custom only in so far as it conforms to and is the outcome of experience—which is, and ought to be, the ultimate court of appeal. . . . Experience in this *normative* sense is the experience which [Hume] has set himself to define and delimit."[7] This suggests that in order to respect Hume's methodological restriction to experience and observation, we must remain attuned to the evidence of experience in forming beliefs while simultaneously restricting ourselves to its realm. This point will prove important in recognizing the source of the illegitimacy of insufficient reflection.

Hume's discussions of beliefs based on "credulity" and "prejudice" offer helpful case studies of insufficient reflection. Singled out as the most "universal and conspicuous" weakness of human nature, Hume defines credulity as "a too easy faith in the testimony of others" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 112). There are three major elements involved in credulity: another's words (that is, the "testimony"), the ideas in another's mind that are verbally expressed in the form of testimony, and the facts or events that the ideas represent. To a credulous individual (in Hume's sense), particular events or facts represent a "cause," whose effect is the ideas in the mind of the testifier. Hume condemns the connection between the testifier's ideas and the facts as "generally much over-rated," commanding our assent "beyond what experience will justify" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113). Indeed, Hume notes that we display a "remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113).

Hume's brief discussion of credulity in the *Treatise* is, of course, further developed in his discussion of miracles in section 10 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. While a proper analysis of that discussion and its relevance to Hume's attitude toward the epistemological role of testimony is beyond the scope of this paper,[8] it is worth noting that Hume does not object to testimony in general as a source of belief,[9] for "there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators" (EHU 10.5; SBN 111–12).[10] According to Hume, our assurance in the ordinary beliefs we acquire on the basis of such everyday testimony is primarily based on our experience of some general features of human nature, including an inclination to truth, a sense of probity, and a sense of shame upon being detected in propagating falsehoods (EHU 10.5; SBN 111–12). These qualities of human nature disincline eyewitnesses to provide false reports and, at the same time, incline recipients of testimony to believe what is reported. However, Hume's reference to beliefs based on reports of "apparitions,

enchantments, and prodigies" in T 1.3.9.12 (SBN 112) shows that his focus in this passage is not on the beliefs we form on the basis of everyday testimony, but on credulous beliefs derived from testimony regarding miracles. Thus, my references to testimony in what follows should be understood as restricted to the case of reports of miracles or extraordinary events.

Experience, Hume reminds us, is the appropriate standard of the truthfulness of human beings, "as well as of all other judgments" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113). It is important to contextualize this claim, for although it states that experience is the standard of *all* judgments, the context of *Treatise* 1.3—in which Hume is focused on probable reasoning regarding causes and effects and not demonstrative reasoning concerning relations of ideas—indicates that this claim is restricted to causal judgments. Given the prominent role of experience as the standard of all causal judgments, it is worth examining why this standard is, nevertheless, ignored when we form credulous beliefs.

Hume maintains that it is "the resemblance betwixt the ideas and the facts" that leads us to neglect the evidence of experience and observation in judging the veracity of others' testimony (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113). The point seems to be that if one assumes the ideas in the testifier's mind to be the "effect" of particular events or facts (the "cause"), then one will assume an extremely close (if not perfect) resemblance between the facts and the ideas being expressed. After all, testimony is generally taken to be a verbal reporting of facts. This widespread assumption about testimony is reflected in Hume's claim that the testimony of others is to be regarded "as an image as well as an effect" (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113). Testimony is often taken to directly reflect—present an image of—facts or the occurrence of certain events. In instances of credulity, this presumed resemblance overrides the contrary evidence of experience and observation to such an extent that the associative relation of resemblance enlivens the idea(s) that are verbally expressed in testimony, leading one to believe that the extraordinary events occurred. Hume offers an alternative explanation of the formation of this belief in the first *Enquiry*, claiming that the passion of "*surprize* and *wonder*" that attends hearing reports of miracles is "an agreeable emotion [that] gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived" (EHU 10.16; SBN 117). This is consistent with Hume's claim in the *Treatise* that belief makes an idea "approach an impression in force and vivacity" (T 1.3.10.3; SBN 119). The passion of surprise and wonder that attends one's ideas of miracles, then, is the source of the enlivening of this idea and, hence, the belief in it.

It is significant that Hume identifies experience as the true standard of all causal judgments, for this serves as a reminder that all such judgments should remain sensitive to the evidence of experience. However, Hume tells us, we are less guided by the criterion of experience in cases of credulity than in any other subject. We fail to "regulate ourselves" by this crucial standard and, instead, are "so rash"

in submitting to the natural inclination to believe all testimony (T 1.3.9.12; SBN 113). In this sense, we are hasty and unreflective. Properly reflective individuals regulate themselves by the standard of experience, whereas the credulous individual fails in this regard.

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume identifies specific examples of criteria drawn from experience to be used in the evaluation of testimony, including "when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; [and] when they have an interest in what they affirm" (EHU 10.7; SBN 112–13).[11] We must not only reflect in such ways on the character of the testifier, though; we must also reflect on the strength of the causal connection between the event's occurrence and the testifier's idea that the event occurred. Thus, Hume writes: "When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened" (EHU 10.13; SBN 115–16). The evaluation of testimony thus involves an assessment of the testifier's character as well as an assessment of the testimony itself.

In Hume's brief discussion of credulity in the *Treatise*, there is an implicit call to be more reflective and more attuned to the evidence of daily experience and observation. Such reflection would be conducive to respecting the true standard of causal judgments. Credulity represents a case of insufficient reflection, and its products (credulous beliefs), Hume suggests, are worthy of criticism. For my purposes, what is significant about credulous beliefs is the way in which they violate the *Treatise*'s main methodological principle, which requires careful attention to observation and experience.

Like credulity, prejudice involves rashness in judgment. Specifically, prejudice stems from the influence of rashly formed "general rules" (T 1.3.13.7; SBN 146). Not all general rules are flawed, however, for Hume lists several general rules that we "ought" to employ in our judgments about causes and effects (T 1.3.15; SBN 173–75). These are empirical generalizations that aid the task of determining when we are faced with an instance of genuine causation (that is, to know when one object really is the cause of some particular effect, or vice versa). An essential feature of these recommended general rules is that they take into account the evidence of past experience—indeed, such rules are formed on that basis. In this way, these rules respect Hume's main methodological principle.

In contrast, judgments based on prejudice, which Hume condemns as "errors," involve allowing oneself to be influenced by a general rule that fails to pay heed to evidence that contradicts the rule. Thus, a prejudiced individual (in Hume's sense) clings to her general rule that every Irish person lacks wit or intelligence, even when she is conversing with an undeniably witty Irish person. The source of this error is more easily understood when one recognizes what is involved: an unreflective transition of the mind.[12]

Hume distinguishes two ways in which general rules can influence one's judgment. One significant difference between the two concerns the cognitive faculty upon which custom has an effect. In its "first influence," custom affects the imagination, 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 1.3.13.8; SBN 147). This is precisely what happens in an instance of prejudice—the imagination pre-reflectively transitions from *A* (an Irish person, to stay with Hume's example) to *B* (lack of wit). In the "second influence" of general rules, custom affects the judgment, inducing a reflection on the nature of the complicated circumstances surrounding causal relations (mainly, that some circumstances are essential to the production of the effect, while others are accidental in that they merely frequently happen to accompany the genuine cause). By noting that exceptions disprove causality and that irregularities in experience must be explained by factors that may not be evident, the judgment is able to correct the imagination's natural tendency to adhere to its pre-established general rules even when faced with contrary evidence.

For my purposes, what is of particular significance in this case is the unavoidable nature of beliefs based on prejudice. Because the effect of custom on the imagination is a mental transition that precedes reflection, Hume points out that the transition cannot be prevented by reflection. (Reflection could not avert a mental transition that is *pre*-reflective.) While custom's effect on the imagination cannot be prevented, reflection reveals the error in the imagination's conclusions, resulting in a "condemnation" of general rules' first influence (T 1.3.13.12; SBN 150).

Although the two influences of general rules can be distinguished according to the faculty upon which custom operates in each case (imagination or judgment), the more important difference that emerges in the preceding considerations, for my purposes, is the role of reflection in each case. In the case of the first influence, "when an object appears, that resembles any cause in very considerable circumstances, the imagination naturally carries us to a lively conception of the usual effect, tho' the object be different in the most material and most efficacious circumstances from that cause" (T 1.3.13.12; SBN 149–50). This decidedly unreflective process is contrasted with the second influence, where "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" (T 1.3.13.11; SBN 149). When he explains the relationship between the second and first influence of general rules in cases of prejudiced beliefs, Hume specifically describes the second influence as involving "a review of [the first] act of the mind," emphasizing the fact that the second influence involves an act of reflection (T 1.3.13.12; SBN 150).

Prejudiced individuals fail to take into account evidence that undermines the general rule guiding their prejudiced beliefs. In other words, they attribute full conviction to a belief in the face of present opposing evidence. Of course, trying to eradicate the first influence of general rules is a futile endeavor, since such conclusions are already drawn before one has time to reflect. This is why Hume does not criticize the propensity itself. However, he clearly advocates its correction through reflection on the circumstances of the causal judgment in question, which is seen in the second influence of general rules. Hume's discussion of prejudice thus illustrates another case of insufficient reflection that Hume assesses negatively. As in the case of credulity, the prejudiced individual fails to attend to experience, the true standard of causal judgments, and thereby violates Hume's methodological principle of basing our conclusions on all relevant evidence of experience. Like credulous beliefs, prejudicial beliefs are "rashly" formed (T 1.3.13.7, 1.3.9.12; SBN 146, 113).

In his discussions of credulity and prejudice, Hume suggests that reflection that is sensitive to the full range of one's experiences leads to more accurate beliefs and, for this reason, he speaks of it approvingly. Moreover, Hume does have grounds for criticizing the beliefs of these insufficiently reflective persons, namely, the failure to attend to relevant experiential evidence that would undermine their beliefs. This is significant, for it reveals the basis for Hume's criticisms of forms of insufficient reflection. "Not reflecting enough" consists in failing to take into account relevant experiential evidence that bears on one's beliefs and, by extension, violating the main methodological principle of Hume's project in the *Treatise*.

2.2. Excessive Reflection

In the closing pages of Book 1, Hume turns his attention to the opposite end of the reflective spectrum, namely, excessive reflection. Here Hume indicates that he is not entitled to reject reflections of the "refin'd and metaphysical" sort (that is, what would be subsumed under my proposed category of excessive reflection), saying, "Very refin'd reflections have little or no influence upon us; and yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268). This claim presents a problem for my suggestion that Hume justifiably draws a distinction between proper and illegitimate reflection and rejects the insufficient and excessive variants of the latter category; it is problematic insofar as it contains Hume's own admission that he cannot show that excessive reflection is illegitimate. In this section, I show that despite what he says in the conclusion of Book 1, Hume *can* establish that our beliefs should not be affected by excessive reflection.

I first consider why Hume claims that reflections of this sort have, as a matter of fact, little or no influence upon us (the first clause of the passage quoted above).

In a footnote, Hume makes it clear that the intended referent of "very refin'd reflections" in this passage is the argument for "total scepticism" presented in *Treatise* 1.4.1.5–6 (SBN 181–83) (T 1.4.7.7n53; SBN 267n1). I consider that argument before examining why, according to Hume, the refined reflections it contains have little or no influence on us.

The argument for total skepticism begins with a causal judgment.[13] As Hume notes in T 1.3.6.7, "The idea of cause and effect is deriv'd from *experience*, which informs us, that such particular objects, in all past instances, have been constantly conjoin'd with each other" (SBN 89–90). In other words, experience and observation lead us to conclude that one object or event is the cause of another. Experience and observation further reveal, however, that the understanding—the faculty responsible for our causal judgments—is prone to error in judging of causes and effects. In light of this experientially based conclusion regarding the understanding's fallibility, Hume considers the confidence accompanying the reflective reasoner's initial causal judgment to be consequently diminished. But what about the reflective reasoner's assessment of the general reliability of the understanding? If past experience reveals that her faculties are fallible, and any assessment of their general reliability must employ those very faculties, then her very judgment of their reliability will also be open to error. It follows that the judgment of her faculties' reliability is itself error-prone. The argument for total skepticism details how this iteration can be continued (we "turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation [we] make of [our] faculties") until the reflective reasoner's confidence in her initial causal belief is completely eroded (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 183).

Understanding Hume's claim that the refined reflections contained in the preceding argument have little or no influence on us requires that we bear in mind what beliefs are on Hume's account, for the influence he has in mind is reflection's influence on our beliefs. For Hume, belief is "a more vivid and intense conception of an idea, proceeding from its relation to a present impression" (T 1.3.8.11; SBN 103). Because a believed idea is more vivid and intense than the same idea when it is merely conceived, Hume draws an even more direct connection between belief and vivacity when he claims that "belief is the same with the vivacity of the idea" (T 1.3.11.13; SBN 130). The source of an idea's vivacity is the present impression (whether of the senses or memory) that causes us to conceive of the idea in the first place. In other words, the idea is enlivened by its associated impression and the remembrance of past constant conjunctions of the relevant objects or events.

Hume's account of belief suggests that if an idea lacks sufficient vivacity, it does not qualify as a belief (and, hence, it will not affect our other beliefs). David Owen stresses this point: "The beliefs we form as a result of a chain of reasoning are only formed when enough vivacity is communicated to the last idea in the chain."[14] Insufficient vivacity prevents an idea from attaining the status of a belief,

a point that is essential for understanding Hume's claim that very refined reflections have little or no influence upon us. As Owen explains, Hume attributes this fact to a feature of human nature, namely, "the quite general feature that ideas which lack sufficient vivacity have little influence on us" ("Reason and *Reductios*," 205–6). In forms of excessive reflection, Hume observes, "the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure" (T 1.4.1.10; SBN 185), indicating that such ideas lack sufficient vivacity. This helps to explain why Hume dismisses the potentially devastating argument for total skepticism presented in T 1.4.1.5–6 as having little influence on us—the excessive reflections it contains lack the requisite vivacity to qualify as beliefs, which is why they do not affect our other beliefs.

It is one thing to claim that excessive reflections have a negligible (or even nonexistent) influence on our beliefs; establishing the stronger claim that they should not affect our beliefs is, however, another matter. Hume's explanation of why he is unable to establish this stronger claim is brief: he cannot do so because the attempt would imply a "manifest contradiction" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 266). The contradiction stems from the fact that establishing that excessive reflections should be rejected would itself require "sufficiently refin'd and metaphysical" reasoning (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 266). In other words, any attempt to prove the illegitimacy of excessive reflection would require its employment. For this reason, Hume concludes, he cannot show that excessive reflections are illegitimate—that they are not the activity of a properly reflective individual—and the problem of reflection's equivocal role in Book 1 remains.

Hume need not draw this conclusion, however. The first judgment in the argument is "derived from the nature of the object" (T 1.4.1.5; SBN 182). I have an impression of object or event *A*, which leads me to have a vivid conception of object or event *B* (the object or event that has been constantly conjoined with *A* in the past). That vivid conception constitutes my belief in *B*. This unreflective judgment (either that *A* causes *B* or that *A* is the effect of *B*) is based on my previous experiences of the observed union of *A*s and *B*s.

The second judgment is, Hume says, "derived from the nature of the understanding" (T 1.4.1.5; SBN 182). The judgment in question is the conclusion that the understanding is fallible—it does not always correctly identify causes and effects (in fact, there are many cases in which, in the past, it has not). This is principally due to the difficulties involved in isolating the essential circumstances from the accidental in supposed cases of causation. In the case of the second judgment, Hume says, "I examine my judgment itself, and observing from experience, that 'tis sometimes just and sometimes erroneous, I consider it as regulated by contrary principles or causes" (T 1.4.1.9; SBN 184–85). Here, experience is explicitly identified as the basis for the second judgment. I call to mind specific instances in which I mistakenly judged one object to be the cause or effect of another. As a

result of this judgment about my past mistakes, my confidence in the accuracy of the initial causal judgment is tempered.

The realization that the understanding is fallible together with the fact that any assessment of the reliability of my cognitive faculties must, in making such an assessment, employ those very faculties leads me to conclude that the understanding's evaluation of its own reliability is fallible. This third judgment is, as Hume puts it, "a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties" (T 1.4.1.6; SBN 182). But then I must assess my general assessment of the reliability of my own cognitive faculties (in a "fourth" judgment), and assess that assessment, and so on, until the initial causal belief finally becomes extinguished.

The argument for total skepticism displays the power of reflection to completely undermine belief. What I seek to explain is why, at a certain point, the reflections contained in the argument are not the workings of a properly reflective individual. To substantiate my claim that there is a conception of proper reflection to which Hume is implicitly committed in Book 1, I must show what makes the excessive reflections featured in the argument for total skepticism illegitimate. In what follows, I suggest two explanations available to Hume, one based on epistemic grounds and the other based on practical considerations. While I claim that both explanations are available to Hume, he only employs the latter explanation, and it is much weaker than the former.

Upon presenting the argument for total skepticism, Hume readily admits that there is no "error" to be found in it (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 183).[15] For this reason, the illegitimacy of excessive reflection cannot be attributed to some mistake in the reasoning of the total skeptic. Instead, Hume's remarks call attention to the difference between two competing accounts of belief: the "simple act of the thought" theory and the "peculiar manner of conception" theory. Hume explicitly states that one of his intentions in presenting the skeptical argument is to show that belief is a manner of conception and *not* "a simple act of the thought, without any peculiar manner of conception, or the addition of a force and vivacity" (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 184).

Hume alludes to the simple act of the thought theory in his discussion of the nature of belief in T 1.3.7 (SBN 94–98, 628–29). He points out that a major drawback of the theory is that it cannot adequately explain the difference between incredulity and belief: "'Tis confest, that in all cases, wherein we dissent from any person, we conceive both sides of the question; but as we can believe only one, it evidently follows, that the belief must make some difference betwixt that conception to which we assent, and that from which we dissent" (T 1.3.7.4; SBN 95–96).

Hume further argues that when two parties disagree about a factual matter, it is not the case that they entertain different ideas (as the simple act of thought theory would have it). Instead, they entertain the same ideas (that "*mercury [is] heavier*

than gold," to use one of Hume's examples), and one assents to the conceived ideas while the other dissents (T 1.3.7.3; SBN 95). Hume concludes that belief can only change how the ideas are conceived—as opposed to what their content is—for "[i]f you make any other change on it, it represents a different object or impression" (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96), and that this can only be accounted for by variations in the force and vivacity of the ideas. If belief were a simple act of thought, a purely cogitative act, then, Hume thinks, the difference between incredulity and belief could not be explained. (See also EHU 5.11; SBN 48.) Therefore, we should adopt the manner of conception theory, which does account for this important distinction.

Applying the manner of conception theory of belief to the argument for total skepticism, it becomes clear that the influence of the successive iteration of judgments on our beliefs is "by no means equal" at each stage of the argument; after the first and second judgments, "the action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure" (T 1.4.1.10; SBN 185). The vivacity of the ideas involved decreases with each iteration and, as a result, we do not suffer from the erosion of belief. As William Edward Morris puts the point, "we should understand the 'total extinction of belief and evidence' as a sceptical consequence of a view Hume rejects, not as something his own account implies."[16] The view that Hume is rejecting is the cogitative, simple act of thought theory of belief. The question concerning excessive reflection's illegitimacy can now be seen as the question of why we are not obligated to follow the skeptical argument through to the very end.

If we adopt the manner of conception theory of belief, then our epistemic obligation to follow out the successive iterations of the skeptical argument vanishes. This obligation vanishes because, assuming that "ought" implies "can," to claim that excessive reflections of the sort on display in the later stages of the skeptical argument *should* influence our beliefs requires that such reflections *can* influence our beliefs. Because they cannot, Hume has grounds for claiming that they should not.

If Hume recognizes that very refined reflections cannot influence our beliefs, it is unclear why he thinks he needs a further argument to show that they ought not. One possible explanation is that Hume does not accept the principle that "ought" implies "can." An alternative explanation is suggested by the way in which Hume formulates his main claim: "Very refin'd reflections have little or no influence upon us; and yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268). Here, Hume distinguishes what is from what ought to be: while excessive reflections do not, as a matter of fact, affect us (they *have* little or no influence), this does not necessarily imply that they should not. Hence, based on the way Hume formulates his main claim, he is right to think that just because refined reflections do not influence us, it does not mean that they should not. These are distinct questions. (For example, many of us do not exercise regularly, but this does not imply that we should not.)

The problem is that the formulation of Hume's main claim concerning very refined reflections obscures the fact that his view involves a stronger claim. It is not just that excessive reflections have little or no influence on our other beliefs; as we have seen, his other remarks imply that they *cannot* (on account of insufficient vivacity) influence our other beliefs. Narrowly focusing on Hume's observation that excessive reflections do not influence our other beliefs overlooks his stronger claim that they cannot do so. Thus, we might explain Hume's misguided assumption that he needed a further argument to show that very refined reflections ought not to affect our other beliefs as a consequence of the way he formulates his main claim. While the fact that excessive reflections do not affect us is consistent with the idea that they should, the claim that they cannot affect us is inconsistent with this idea. Hume's main claim only focuses on the former contrast, quite possibly leading him to think that he needs a further argument to show that refined reflections ought not to influence belief. Regardless of why Hume thought he needed a further argument, my claim is that such an argument is unnecessary based on the principle that "ought" implies "can."

I suggested above that the question of excessive reflection's illegitimacy can be understood as the question of why we are not obligated to follow the skeptical argument to the point of belief's extinction. As Morris argues, "We ought to ask why should we think that we are rationally or epistemically *required* to make these assessments? The answer lies not in their usefulness or reasonableness for promoting any of the ends of human life" (105). Morris's point suggests a different explanation of what makes excessive reflections illegitimate. Unlike the first explanation offered above, Hume does avail himself of this second explanation, which considers the practical value of excessive reflection.

Considering the need to "torture [his] brain with subtilities and sophistries," Hume claims, "I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have [I] any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270). He continues, "And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest?" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270). Here Hume suggests that very refined reflections have neither theoretical nor practical value, for they offer no hope of discovering truth, and they do not promote either personal or societal ends. An even more explicit statement of the impracticality objection—and its significance—is presented in the *Enquiry*. "For here is the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism," Hume says, "that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour" (EHU 12.23; SBN 159–60). If no good can come of excessive reflection, then our obligation to engage in it remains unclear.

It is also useful to consider in this connection Hume's own goals for his science of human nature, which he articulates as follows: "we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be

hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272). To the extent that excessive reflection impedes the formation of such a system of beliefs that stands firm against criticism, it lacks a practical purpose. Indeed, if it were true that excessive reflection ought to influence our beliefs, then there would be no beliefs left to be subjected to a critical examination. Insofar as it serves no practical end, indulgence in very refined reflections is, according to Hume, "an abuse of time" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270). Thus, from a practical standpoint, the answer to Hume's question, "Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time?" is "None" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270).

Thus far, I have tried to show that the illegitimacy of excessive reflection can be explained on both epistemological and practical grounds. We are not epistemically required to pursue very refined reflections; moreover, such a pursuit serves no practical purpose. While Hume appeals to the latter explanation, the former is also available to him and provides a stronger reason why he can establish, despite what he claims, that excessive reflections should not influence us. Focusing solely on the lack of excessive reflection's practical value leaves the question of our epistemic obligation to engage in it unanswered and, to this extent, it leaves the skeptic unanswered. The skeptic might simply claim that the practical value of skepticism is irrelevant. The issue, rather, is whether properly reflective individuals are entitled to dismiss the skeptical doubts that result from intensive reflection. Concerning this issue, Karánn Durland rightly notes "the absence of any clear and straightforward story of what permits Hume to reject his extreme scepticism."[17] My account of what makes excessive reflections illegitimate is intended to supply this story.

While the claim that excessive reflection should not influence our other beliefs can be explained on both epistemological and practical grounds, one might object that my account ignores Hume's immediate retraction of the claim that such reflections do not affect us in the following passage:

> But what have I here said, that reflections very refin'd and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us? This opinion I can scarce forbear retracting, and condemning from my present feeling and experience. The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 268–69)

Here, Hume bases his judgment on experience ("from my present feeling and experience," thereby remaining consistent with his methodological restriction to experience and observation) and finds himself at a frustrating epistemological

impasse, which I will call "doxastic nihilism." It is a strange and surprising position to find Hume in, given that he shows earlier in *Treatise* 1.4 that the manner of conception theory of belief—which he is concerned to establish—explains why excessive reflection does not affect our beliefs. It is, moreover, rather ironic for Hume to be in this position, for, regarding the view that we lack *any* measures for evaluating the truth and falsehood (or probability) of our beliefs, he confidently remarks, "neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion" (T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183). And yet, in the closing pages of Book 1, he certainly appears to be "of that opinion."

The "manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason" that Hume cites as the source of his doxastic nihilism are the various problems arising in T 1.4.2–1.4.6, including—though not limited to—the problems involved in the belief in objects, the belief in substance as "a principle of union or cohesion among [sensible] qualities," and the belief in a self that remains identical over time (T 1.4.3.5; SBN 221). Hume's discussions of our beliefs in objects, substances, and a self focus on the contrast between what we are naturally inclined to believe and what more reflective considerations suggest we should believe. The so-called contradictions arising in these contexts have to do with our inability to relinquish our natural, unreflective beliefs even when reflective considerations mandate that we should.

The careful reader of Book 1 will notice that Hume's psychological condition as described in the conclusion (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 268–69) is foreshadowed in Hume's discussion of the influence of belief in part 3 (T 1.3.10.9–10; SBN 123, 630–31). In this earlier passage, Hume claims that a lively imagination—a necessary condition for belief formation, on his account—"very often degenerates into madness or folly. . . . When the imagination, from any extraordinary ferment of the blood and spirits, acquires such a vivacity as disorders all its powers and faculties, there is no means of distinguishing betwixt truth and falshood" (T 1.3.10.9; SBN 123). Hume's characterization of his psychological state in the conclusion in terms of an overwrought, "heated" brain stemming from an "*intense*" view of the aforementioned contradictions (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 268–69) suggests that this later passage offers an example of Hume's personal encounter with the madness characterized in the earlier passage. Hume's heated brain, an "extraordinary ferment of blood and [splenetic] spirits," causes "every chimera of the brain" (T 1.3.10.9; SBN 123) to be as vivid and intense (and, hence, believable) as legitimate causal inferences.

But if this is the case, then Hume's immediate retraction of his claim that excessive reflection has no influence on our beliefs need not be problematic. The original tension that his retraction of the claim introduced is that, on the one hand, the ideas involved in excessive reflection do not influence our other beliefs because they (the reflections) are too faint (given that belief is a matter of the vivac-

ity or liveliness of an idea). On the other hand, Hume retracts this claim in light of his own experience, which indicates that he is, indeed, substantially affected by excessive reflection, to the point of not knowing what to believe about anything. Thus, the tension lies between excessive reflection having no influence on our other beliefs and having the quite opposite effect of shaking all of our beliefs to the core.

The passage from part 3 resolves this tension, for there Hume claims that when we are mad, all of our ideas are hyper-vivacious, and their vivacity is derived from the overheated brain (T 1.3.10.9–10; SBN 123, 630–31). Dropping the metaphor, the vivacity of ideas is derived from "the present temper and disposition of the person" and not from "the particular situations or connexions of the objects of these ideas" (T 1.3.10.10; SBN 630). This is significant, for Hume clearly states that any idea whose vivacity is produced in this way is "the mere phantom of belief or perswasion" (T 1.3.10.10; SBN 630). This suggests that Hume's retraction of his claim does not require that he abandon the idea that excessive reflections have a negligible effect on our other beliefs; excessive reflection only has deleterious effects on our beliefs when we are psychologically overwrought to the point of madness. From the perspective of one possessing a lively—but not hyper-lively—imagination, Hume can consistently maintain that excessive reflections should not affect us.

One might wonder whether this way of defusing Hume's retraction of the claim that excessive reflection has no influence on us requires that we recognize in ourselves the difference between being mad and having an appropriately lively imagination. While Hume does not offer criteria for distinguishing between the two, when he says, "Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me?" (T 1.4.7.8; SBN 268–69), he suggests that one sign of madness might be the unfocused reflection on a number of very general questions, all at the same time. It seems that the overly general nature of the questions and the lack of focus in choosing one or another of the questions to reflect on could indicate the presence of a hyper-lively imagination, which leads to pseudo-beliefs. In this way, it would be possible for one to determine the difference between being mad and having an appropriately lively imagination (the latter of which, perhaps, focuses its reflections on a single question). Further consideration of this issue would take me away from my main purposes, but the problem as well as possible solutions should be acknowledged.

Thus far, I have shown what insufficient and excessive reflection consists in and why each of these extremes of reflection is illegitimate on Hume's account. In so doing, I have tried to give substance to the very vague notions of insufficient reflection as "not reflecting enough" and excessive reflection as "reflecting too much." While I have fleshed out the concept of illegitimate reflection in Book 1, it remains for me to show what legitimate or "proper" reflection consists in. To

this end, I turn to the relationship between illegitimate reflection and a particular dilemma that Hume considers, which seems to suggest that we are forced to choose between insufficient and excessive reflection. In other words, by the end of Book 1, it seems that there may be no such thing as proper reflection.

2.3. Illegitimate Reflection and the Dangerous Dilemma

Hume presents the alternatives of insufficient and excessive reflection in the form of "a very dangerous dilemma" and confesses that he does not know "what ought to be done" about the problem (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267–68). According to the dilemma, we must either assent to "every trivial suggestion of the fancy" or adhere to the "refin'd or elaborate reasoning" employed when the understanding acts alone. While the former option leads us to be "asham'd of our credulity," the latter leads to the "total scepticism" analyzed above (T 1.4.7.6–7; SBN 267–68). In essence, we have a choice between insufficient and excessive reflection. Hume elsewhere characterizes the difference between the respective products of each option, saying, "There is a great difference betwixt such opinions as we form after a calm and profound reflection, and such as we embrace by a kind of instinct or natural impulse" (T 1.4.2.51; SBN 214).

The dangerous dilemma can be construed as a choice between nature and reason, competing sources of belief that Hume characterizes as "two enemies" (T 1.4.2.52; SBN 215). Choosing nature is problematic because, as Ira Singer observes, Hume knows that "we cannot endorse nature wholesale without making a mockery of the concept of endorsement."[18] This is because endorsing nature "wholesale" would amount to believing anything we had a natural inclination to believe. This includes beliefs we should not hold (such as beliefs in miracles or prejudiced beliefs), which explains why Hume claims that in choosing nature over reason, we will find ourselves ashamed of our credulity. Singer argues that although he consistently emphasizes the natural—as opposed to the abstractly rational and the supernatural—sources of our beliefs, Hume realizes that "nature is a permanently problematic source of beliefs" (Singer, 225; see also 236). For this reason, embracing the nature horn of the dilemma is unappealing.

Still, choosing reason (Hume explicitly tells us that he is referring to "refin'd" reasoning in this context, or what I call excessive reflection) is also problematic, for this option leaves us with no beliefs at all. According to David Owen, Hume's goal in presenting the argument for total skepticism—and the refined, abstract reasoning it contains—is to show that reason should not act on its own, in isolation from other aspects of human nature. Hume's overarching concern, as Owen sees it, is the establishment of an enlarged conception of human nature according to which reason plays a limited role in belief formation ("Reason and *Reductios*," 204, 207). As I see it, and as I tried to show in the previous section, Hume's main

goal in presenting the argument for total skepticism is, instead, to show that if we abandon the simple act of thought theory of belief, then our epistemic obligation to follow out the successive iterations of the skeptical argument vanishes.

Combining Singer's and Owen's insights into the two "enemies"—nature and reason—we might say that while nature is a permanently problematic source of beliefs, reason is a permanently problematic source of doubts. The latter claim finds support in Hume's characterization of skeptical doubt as "a malady, which can never be radically cur'd, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it" (T 1.4.2.57; SBN 218). Still, we must not overlook the significance of the source of skeptical doubt, namely, "profound and intense" reflection. As Singer observes, "Hume's approach renders us vulnerable to bouts of skepticism, as a price we must pay for a certain sort of reflection" (Singer, 237). While we can indeed be vulnerable in this respect, I maintain that we need not pay this price, for the "certain sort of reflection" in question is, by Hume's own lights, illegitimate.

I am suggesting that, when confronted with the dilemma of choosing between nature and reason (or, to use Hume's terminology, "the fancy" and "the understanding"), we should reject both alternatives, because each involves a form of illegitimate reflection. Unfortunately, this suggestion seems to be undermined by Hume's discussion of his "sceptical disposition" in the closing pages of Book 1. In the next section, I turn to this discussion and show that, in it, Hume reveals a way of avoiding both horns of the dangerous dilemma that discloses his conception of proper reflection.

3. Hume's "Sceptical Disposition"

In the concluding paragraphs of Book 1, Hume admits that he is "absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). Living like everyone else in this way involves an "indolent belief in the general maxims of the world," including—though not limited to—belief in objects, an enduring self, and the reality of causes in objects (as opposed to in the mind, where Hume locates causality). The sentiments of Hume's indolence involve a dependence on natural, commonsense beliefs that involve no "study" or "effort of thought," which explains why Hume calls them indolent.[19]

At the same time, Hume continues to feel the remains of his melancholic disposition to such an extent that he feels prepared to burn his books and papers, "and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). This reaction is hardly surprising in light of the demoralizing dead-end faced at the height of Hume's philosophical melancholy and delirium. He characterizes these melancholic remnants as his sentiments "in that splenetic humour" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269).

The distinction between insufficient and excessive reflection that I have drawn, and which is crucial for my argument, can be seen to map onto the distinction between indolence and spleen. One who is insufficiently reflective with respect to one's beliefs possesses sentiments of indolence (doxastic "laziness"), while one who is excessively reflective has "splenetic" sentiments (melancholy, despair, and so on).[20] Thus, given the choice between indolence with insufficient reflection and spleen with excessive reflection, the question is: which sentiments are to be preferred?

While it would seem that neither set of sentiments is desirable, Hume grants priority to the sentiments of indolence: "I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). This claim demonstrates a granting of priority to sentiments of indolence insofar as the "current of nature" is explicitly described as leading to indolence and pleasure. Given the inevitable character of nature's cure of the melancholy brought on by excessive reflection, Hume's "nay, I must" here should not be interpreted as "I should" or "I ought to." Rather, one must yield to the current of nature in the sense that rehabilitation from philosophical melancholy and delirium is inevitable; it will naturally come about, whether by means of social diversion or the mind's natural slackening when it cannot withstand further straining through renewed reflection. Hence, I must yield to the current of nature in the sense that I have to; I am unable not to yield in this way. Further support for this interpretation of Hume's "must" stems from the fact that he proceeds to ask if it follows that he must strive against the current of nature (by withdrawing from society and torturing himself with "subtilities and sophistries"), a question that would make little sense if the initial "must" meant "ought to."

This granting of priority to indolence over spleen suggests that Hume favors what I have been calling insufficient reflection, a claim that Louis Loeb defends. According to Loeb, "The beliefs of the unreflective person occupy a preferred epistemic status. I believe that securing this paradoxical result was among Hume's intentions in the *Treatise*. Hume seeks to show that an epistemic preference for reflection is a prejudice" (Loeb, 97). On Loeb's interpretation of Hume, our epistemic preference—specifically, in the context of belief formation—ought to be for stability, not reflection. This is because achieving stable beliefs is necessary for accomplishing belief's natural function of influencing the will. Summarizing the crucial role of stability in the formation of beliefs, Loeb says, "In Hume's view, one ought to seek doxastic states that are stable. One ought to do so in order to relieve the uneasiness due to an unstable state. The value that Hume places on stable doxastic states thus has a naturalistic foundation" (Loeb, 22). On Loeb's stability-based account of justified belief in the *Treatise*, reflection is not only demoted, it actually hinders the attainment of stable beliefs. Thus, he writes, "the beliefs of

the reflective person are unstable and hence unjustified" (Loeb, 97). Hume's preference for the current of nature over the path of reflection (which works against nature) supports Loeb's view that it is the unreflective person's beliefs that enjoy preferred status in Book 1 of the *Treatise*. It also poses a significant problem for my claim that reflection—specifically, proper reflection—is a crucial aspect of Hume's account of belief formation and retention.

It is easy to overlook an important qualification of Hume's choice of indolence over spleen. He says, "Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led a wandering into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met with" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270). As noted above, Hume's skeptical disposition involves submitting to nature's current, or holding indolent beliefs. In this passage, however, Hume refers to the circumstances in which we ought to abandon the skeptical disposition and strive against its current, namely, when there is a "good reason" to do so. Here, in general terms, Hume discloses his conception of proper reflection: proper reflection consists in striving against the current of nature (that is, reflecting upon one's indolent beliefs, with an eye towards revising them) when there is a good reason to do so. The key question, of course, is what constitutes a good reason.

In his various discussions of the process of belief formation, Hume often uses the word "error" and appeals to the associated notion of "correcting" ourselves. Regarding prejudiced beliefs, he claims, "Human nature is very subject to *errors* of this kind" (T 1.3.13.7; SBN 147); regarding the belief in objects, he wonders about "the source of the *error* and deception with regard to identity, when we attribute it to our resembling perceptions, notwithstanding their interruption" (T 1.4.2.32; SBN 202) and cites the same error as being involved in the belief in a self (T 1.4.6.6–7; SBN 254–55); and, regarding the propensity to have a vivid conception of a particular effect even in the absence of its cause, he observes, "we may *correct* this propensity by a reflection on the nature of those circumstances" (T 1.3.13.9; SBN 148, emphasis added throughout). These passages suggest that when Hume identifies particular beliefs as "errors" or invokes the language of "correcting" ourselves, this indicates that we have a "good reason" to reflect upon and revise those beliefs.

Upon closer inspection, matters are not so simple; the fact that Hume refers to a belief as an "error" does not necessarily indicate that we have a good reason to revise it through reflection. Thus, there is an important distinction that must be drawn within the category of doxastic errors between corrigible and incorrigible errors. Determining when we have a good reason to strive against nature's current is not simply a matter of correcting all cases of "error" in our beliefs for, in some cases, this is not possible.

Based on the accounts of the errors to which we are prone scattered throughout Book 1, the subcategory of corrigible errors includes credulous beliefs, prejudiced

beliefs, and beliefs based on the first influence of general rules. As we have seen, what these erroneous beliefs have in common is a failure to adhere to the main methodological principle of the *Treatise*—paying heed to the evidence of experience and observation. Each is described as capable of correction by means of reflection on relevant experiential evidence that is overlooked in the process of forming the erroneous belief.

In contrast, the subcategory of incorrigible errors includes—but is not limited to—the beliefs in mind-independent objects and a simple, unchanging self. Hume cites both of these indolent beliefs as stemming from the same error, namely, ascribing identity to what is really a succession of related objects. He diagnoses the source of the error as the resemblance between the action of the mind when it contemplates a succession of related objects and the action of the mind when it considers "one continu'd object"—these actions are "almost the same to the feeling" and consequently cause us to substitute identity for what is really a series of related objects (T 1.4.6.6–7; SBN 254–55). This error underlies both the belief in objects and the belief in a self, each of which is conceived as an identical object instead of a succession of related parts.

Regardless of the fact that "daily experience and observation" can show that objects to which we attribute identity really only consist of a succession of related parts (and that it is our conflation of the mental actions involved in each case that leads to the erroneous ascription of identity), this error is incorrigible. In T 1.4.6.8–14 (SBN 255–58), Hume details how experience and observation can show that objects regarded as "identical" are really only a rapid succession of related parts, "connected together by resemblance, contiguity, or causation." With respect to the belief in a self, Hume maintains, "and tho' we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy" (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 254); regarding the belief in objects, he observes, "the notion of an independent and continu'd existence . . . has taken such deep root in the imagination, that 'tis impossible ever to eradicate it, nor will any strain'd metaphysical conviction of the dependence of our perceptions be sufficient for that purpose" (T 1.4.2.51; SBN 214). Here we are told that even though the beliefs in objects and a self are rooted in a specific doxastic error, the error cannot finally be rectified. This explains why Hume prefaces his discussion of the belief in objects with the disclaimer that it will be restricted to the question of what causes us to have the belief rather than whether we should have the belief (that is, whether we should reflect upon it and perhaps correct it) (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187). He analogously investigates personal identity (the belief in a self) when he asks, "What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives?" (T 1.4.6.5; SBN

253) In both cases, the concern is only with what causes us to have the belief in question and not with whether we should hold the belief.

The distinction between corrigible and incorrigible errors shows that the category of "good reason(s)" to reflect (in Hume's sense of the term) is not to be simply equated with those beliefs that Hume identifies as "errors," for some of our indolent beliefs cannot be corrected. Hume would presumably characterize the attempt to correct them not as a case of proper reflection but, rather, as another instance of an "abuse of time" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 270). In such cases, we do not have a good reason to reflect upon and revise our doxastic errors and are, therefore, justified in following nature's current. Finally, proper reflection consists in striving against nature's current—revising indolent beliefs—when experiential evidence that undermines the belief has been overlooked in its formation. In other words, it consists in revising our corrigible doxastic errors when there is good reason to do so.

Further evidence of Hume's conception of proper reflection and its relationship to the sentiments of indolence and spleen is found in his own reflective assessment of his project in the *Treatise*, displayed in the following passage:

> Human Nature is the only science of man; and yet has been hitherto the most neglected. 'Twill be sufficient for me, if I can bring it a little more into fashion; and the hope of this serves to compose my temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence, which sometimes prevail upon me. (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273)

Hume's language of "composing" himself from spleen and "invigorating" himself from indolence suggests that a splenetic (melancholic) mind is excessively reflective (hence, something from which one needs to be composed), while a mind dominated by indolent sentiments is insufficiently reflective (hence, a condition out of which one needs to be invigorated). The significance of this passage, for my purposes, is that it shows Hume seeking to avoid the excessive forms of reflection that destroy belief. At the same time, he is seeking to avoid the insufficient forms of reflection capable of rendering him shamefully credulous. In this reflective assessment of his project, Hume reveals what he has implicitly been seeking all along: the elusive condition of proper reflection.

4. Proper Reflection and the "True Sceptic"

In the oft-cited penultimate paragraph of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, Hume maintains that a "true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273). On the account of proper reflection I am proposing, Hume's remark can be understood as a claim about the two variants of illegitimate reflection. Because, as Singer argues, nature is a permanently

problematic source of beliefs and, as I have argued (by way of an extension of Owen's interpretation of the argument for total skepticism), reason operating on its own is a permanently problematic source of doubts, Hume thinks we should remain diffident with respect to both indolent beliefs *and* skeptical doubts. To accomplish this, we should reflect when we have a good reason to do so; in the absence of such a reason, we are justified in following nature's current. In this way, the life of the true (Humean) skeptic is imbued with proper reflection. The aim of such a life, for Hume, is to avoid being indolent to the point of invariably following nature's current, on the one hand, but also to avoid being splenetic to the point of buying into the skeptical argument and leaving no basis for the retention of any belief whatsoever, on the other hand.

As we have seen, avoiding buying into the skeptical argument and the destruction of belief that it entails proves to be no easy task, for it requires Hume to show why the excessive reflections it requires should not influence our other beliefs. Although Hume maintains that he is unable to establish this claim, I have argued that his novel theory of belief gives him the epistemological grounds to do so. Hume's argument that total skepticism serves no practical purpose does not suffice to explain why we are not required, as a matter of epistemic obligation, to engage in the iterative reflective assessments involved in the argument for total skepticism. Thus, while it may serve as a supplementary explanation, the argument from practical considerations is, on its own, inadequate to show that excessive reflections should not influence our beliefs.

While it is not clear why Hume does not recognize that he has the resources to substantiate the claim that very refined reflections should not affect our other beliefs, I have suggested that Hume presents a false dilemma between the idea that such reflections *do not* influence us and the idea that they *ought not to* influence us. Of course, establishing that excessive reflections do not influence us does not necessarily imply that they ought not to. Perhaps we are simply naturally prone to what I have called doxastic laziness; in terms of expenditure of mental effort, it is simply easier to be unreflective. Again, though, this does not imply that we ought not be affected by excessive reflections. The third idea that is needed—an idea implied by Hume's novel theory of belief, but which the formulation of his main claim does not include—is that very refined reflections *cannot* influence us. Assuming that "ought" implies "can," this claim (unlike the claim that they do not influence us) does imply that they ought not to. Thus, while I offer a solution to Hume's problem of accounting for the illegitimacy of excessive reflection, it is not Hume's own solution.

A potential advantage of my interpretation is that the concept of proper reflection affords Hume a better response to the threat of skepticism than his oft-cited observation that the clouds of skepticism evaporate upon resumed participation in the activities of common life. Of course, Hume's response does not show what

legitimates the dismissal of skepticism, as Karánn Durland emphasizes: "That nature often overrides our extreme doubts is not itself justification for thinking that the doubts should be ignored" (Durland, 75). Focusing on the concept of proper reflection encourages us to approach this issue differently. Instead of starting from Hume's skeptical despair and asking what entitles him to dismiss it, it encourages us to start from the argument for total skepticism and ask what entitles Hume to avoid following that argument through to the point of skeptical despair. I have argued that the illegitimacy of very refined reflections is the source of the latter entitlement.

Louis Loeb argues that Hume's account of belief assigns privileged epistemic status to stability, not reflection, in light of the "deeply destabilizing" character of reflection (Loeb, 97). On my interpretation, it is only excessive reflection that has this character, and there is still room to consider what legitimate, or proper, reflection consists in. This, along with a defense of the idea that reflection does enjoy privileged epistemic status for Hume, is what I have aimed to articulate. Once we recognize that Hume can be seen as placing a premium on reflection in his account of belief—in particular, the question of what it means to be a properly reflective individual—we are in a position to understand the reasons for the ostensibly puzzling shifts in his assessments of its value throughout Book 1.

NOTES

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1 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph, and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), hereafter cited in the text as SBN followed by page number.

2 See, for example, Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 94. In *Hume's Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), David Owen explicitly denies that Hume is concerned with justification in either his account of probable (that is, causal) reasoning or his account of skepticism with regard to reason: "In neither case is Hume concerned with the justification of beliefs or the warrant of reason so much as with the explanation of the presence of beliefs. In his account of probable reasoning the issue was the origin of beliefs; in his account of scepticism with regard to reason the issue is the retention of beliefs in the face of sceptical arguments" (Owen, *Hume's Reason*, 10).

3 Louis E. Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume's* Treatise (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 45n15.

4 I thank an anonymous *Hume Studies* referee for highlighting the importance of this necessary preliminary step.

5 I thank Donald Ainslie for providing me with an unpublished document created by some of his graduate students which lists every passage in the *Treatise* featuring the word "reflection(s)" or "reflexion."

6 While I restrict my attention to Book 1 of the *Treatise*, it is worth noting that Hume continues to emphasize the correcting role of reflection in Book 3. For example, see T 3.3.1.15–17 (SBN 582–83) regarding reflection's role in correcting "the momentary appearances of things" as well as our "sentiments of blame." I thank an anonymous *Hume Studies* referee for bringing this to my attention.

7 Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 382–83.

8 For contrasting views on Hume's discussion of miracles in the first *Enquiry*, see Robert Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) and John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Axel Gelfert has recently argued that in narrowly focusing on testimony concerning miracles, the debate over the success of Hume's argument against miracles in the first *Enquiry* has obscured Hume's views on testimony in general. Gelfert claims that, while Hume rejects testimony-based belief in miracles, Hume's position is more favorable to default acceptance of "everyday" testimony than commentators have recognized (Gelfert, "Hume on Testimony Revisited," *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 13 [2010]: 60–75).

9 I thank an anonymous *Hume Studies* referee for emphasizing the need to consider Hume's remarks on testimony in the first *Enquiry* as well in order to suggest a more balanced picture of Hume's attitude towards its epistemological significance.

10 All references to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), hereafter cited in the text as "EHU" followed by section and paragraph number, and to David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), hereafter cited as 'SBN' followed by page number.

11 Another source of Hume's views on testimony is *Enquiry*, Section 5. Regarding the significance of testimony in learning of historical events, Hume writes, "we must peruse the volumes, in which this instruction is contained, and thence carry up our inferences from one testimony to another, till we arrive at the eye-witnesses and spectators of these distant events" (EHU 5.7; SBN 45–46).

12 In saying that prejudice can be "more easily understood," I have in mind Norton and Norton's reminder that "in Hume's time this term was less pejorative than it now is. For Bailey, a *prejudice* is simply a prejudgment, 'a rash Judgement made before a Matter is duly considered' . . . , and not an entrenched bias" (Norton and Norton, 464). In the

case of prejudice, the judgment is rash because one blindly adheres to a general rule without considering present evidence that contradicts the rule.

13 Strictly speaking, the argument for total skepticism begins by targeting demonstrative reasoning in T 1.4.1.2–4 (SBN 180–81) and draws the intermediate conclusion that all knowledge degenerates into probability. From there, it proceeds to show how probable reasoning degenerates into total skepticism. Thus, it could be said that the argument proceeds in two stages: the destruction of certainty and the destruction of belief. I have chosen to begin the argument at T 1.4.1.5–6 (SBN 181–83) because it targets probable reasoning, which is the focus of Hume's account of belief and my focus in this paper.

14 David Owen, "Reason, Reflection, and *Reductios*," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 195–210, 207.

15 Thanks to Kevin Meeker for drawing my attention to this important point.

16 William Edward Morris, "Hume's Conclusion," *Philosophical Studies* 99 (2000): 89–110, 105.

17 Karánn Durland, "Extreme Skepticism and Commitment in the *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 37 (2011): 65–98, 67.

18 Ira Singer, "Nature Breaks Down: Hume's Problematic Naturalism in *Treatise* I iv," *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 225–44, 235.

19 See T 1.4.1.11 (SBN 185) for Hume's remarks on the inversely proportional relationship between the mental effort involved in "subtile" reasoning and the degree of conviction that arises from such reasoning.

20 The connection between spleen and melancholy can be traced back to the humoral theory of the ancient Greeks. In "Melancholia and the Waning of the Humoral Theory," Stanley W. Jackson offers an illuminating history of this connection. Interestingly, the English word "melancholia" was derived from the Greek word for "black bile" (which was stored in the spleen). See Jackson, "Melancholia and the Waning of the Humoral Theory," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 33 (1978): 367–76.