



Michael Losonsky

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# Hume’s Skepticism and the Whimsical Condition

MICHAEL LOSONSKY

*Abstract:* This essay examines the content, context and relevance of Hume’s characterization of the human condition in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* as “whimsical.” According to Hume, human beings are by nature both theoretical and practical beings and the whimsical condition is an instability generated by both theory and practice. It is the fact that by nature human beings must and do act, reason and believe with assurance and conviction, but are unable to satisfy their natural desire to justify their assurances and convictions. On Hume’s account, this skepticism is cancelled neither by theoretical reflection nor human practice. Finally, Hume’s text suggests that human beings suffer the “whimsical condition of mankind” not only collectively, but that it is a condition human beings experience individually, including dogmatic reasoners.

## Introduction

At a crucial point in the final section 12 of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* he refers to “the whimsical condition of mankind” (EHU 12.23; SBN 160).<sup>1</sup> This occurs in his concluding remarks about the untenability of what he calls “Pyrrhonism, or *excessive* scepticism“ that set the stage for “*mitigated* scepticism, or ACADEMICAL philosophy” (EHU 12.24; SBN 161), which then culminates in the famous agitated final paragraph of the first *Enquiry* that advocates “havoc” and committing certain kinds of books “to the flames” (EHU 12.34; SBN 165).

I wish to examine the content, context, and significance of Hume's characterization of the human condition as whimsical because I believe that it sheds light on the scope and limits of Hume's skepticism, and that he stakes out a position that still has contemporary relevance. I begin in section 1 with a brief discussion of the appropriate eighteenth-century uses of "whimsy" and its cognates relevant to understanding Hume's whimsical condition. Section 2 places the passage in its immediate textual context in the first *Enquiry*. Section 3 raises a central question about who, on Hume's account, is the subject of the whimsical condition. Section 4 examines the motivations that lead to philosophical reflection, including the dissatisfaction that leads to theoretical reflection and skeptical considerations. But cognitive dissatisfaction is not dispelled by theoretical reflection, I argue in Section 5. In Sections 6 and 7, I argue that the skeptical conclusion is preserved in common life and guides the mitigated skeptic in common life. Section 8 explores the extent of the whimsical condition: is it a condition that human beings suffer only collectively or is it a condition that is typical of individual human beings?

## 1. On Whimsy

In current usage, the dominant meaning of "whimsical" is to be carefree, playful, or perhaps ironical, but this is not Hume's primary meaning of "whimsy" and its cognates.<sup>2</sup> Hume often uses "whimsical" to refer to a view, or position, that is without justification. In the *Treatise*, Hume chastises a moral theory that both lacks justification and cannot account for the difference between the merit and turpitude of an action as being a "whimsical system" (Tn68; SBN 461–62). In the second *Enquiry* on morals, Hume writes that the final ground for resolving questions and problems about property is "the interest and happiness of human society" and "[w]here this enters not into consideration, nothing can appear more whimsical, unnatural, and even superstitious" (EPM 3.35; SBN 197–98).<sup>3</sup> A similar use occurs in the *Essays*, where Hume writes that "[w]here difference of interest is removed, whimsical and unaccountable factions often arise."<sup>4</sup> Clearly Hume is not referring to something playful, because for Hume these are conditions that destroy "all order and public good."

A related eighteenth-century meaning of "whimsical" relevant to understanding Hume's concept of the whimsical condition is capriciousness. The actions or thoughts of a person are whimsical if they depend on "whim or caprice."<sup>5</sup> A whim is a pun, a fanciful or fantastic creation, but it is also a "capricious notion or fancy" ("Whim, n.3," OED) and the first definition of "caprice" is "a sudden change or turn of the mind without apparent or adequate motive; a desire or opinion arbitrarily or fantastically formed" ("Caprice, n.1," OED). "Capricious," on the other hand, is first defined as "[c]haracterized by play of wit or fancy," but the second definition echoes the primary definition of "caprice": "Full of, subject to, or characterized

by caprice, guided by whim or fancy rather than by judgment or settled purpose" ("Capricious, n.2," OED). Accordingly, something is capricious if it is "subject to change or irregularity, so as to appear ungoverned by law" ("Capricious, n.3," OED). For Hume, the imagination is whimsical in this sense (EHU 12.29n35; SBN 164).

A now obsolete meaning of "whimsy," but current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is "dizziness, giddiness, vertigo" ("Whimsy, n.I.1," OED). This component of whimsy is vividly expressed by William Congreve (1670–1729), in his use of "whimsical" in the comedy *The Way of the World*. It occurs in a soliloquy by the male protagonist, Mirabell, describing the volatile, unstable state of falling in love:

Think of you! To think of a Whirlwind, tho' 'twere in a Whirlwind, were a Case of more steady Contemplation; a very tranquility of Mind and Mansion. A Fellow that lives in a Windmill, has not a more whimsical Dwelling than the Heart of a Man that is lodg'd in a Woman. There is no Point of the Compass to which they cannot turn, and by which they are not turn'd; and by one as well as another; for Motion not Method is their Occupation. To know this, and yet continue to be in Love, is to be made wise from the Dictates of Reason, and yet persevere to play the Fool by the force of Instinct. (Congreve, *The Way of the World*, 2:35)

This dizziness and disorientation is brought about by key components of the lover's whimsical condition. The lover's actions are characterized by eccentric and sudden changes of direction because they are not guided by reason, hence without rational justification. But they are not wholly unguided. Instead of reason, they are guided by instinct: "Motion not Method is their Occupation," and instinct is fickle, erratic and impulsive. The soliloquy concludes with another source of the lover's turmoil and agitation. The protagonist is aware of the conflict between his "dictates of reason" and the "force of [his] instinct," but nevertheless still follows his inclinations. To know that one is head over heels in love—acting erratically and impulsively and against one's better judgment—yet persevering in this foolishness is a component of the protagonist's whimsical condition.

Similarly, I will argue, Hume's whimsical condition of humanity is not just the fact that human beings act without justification, nor the resulting tension between reason and instinct, or even the perplexity and confusion this causes. Rather, a central unsettling feature of Hume's whimsical condition is that human beings, like Congreve's protagonist, are compelled to believe, reason, and act while knowing that they lack the justification they seek.

## 2. “The Whimsical Condition of Mankind”

The phrase “the whimsical condition of mankind” in the first *Enquiry* follows on the heels of Hume’s claim that Pyrrhonism has a severe handicap despite the fact that it is based on arguments and conclusions that are “just” regarding the evidence human beings have for any matter of fact that lies beyond what is immediately given in experience and memory (EHU 12.22; SBN 159). The arguments show that all our evidence is “derived entirely from the relation of cause and effect,” and our causal judgments, in turn, depend on inductive inferences, but human beings do not have arguments to justify these types of inferences. However, while this skeptical conclusion might lead to “a momentary amazement or confusion” and briefly “destroy all assurance and conviction,” it fails in the long term to destroy all assurance and conviction (EHU 12.22–23; SBN 159–60). “Nature is always too strong for principle,” Hume maintains, and our customs and instincts prevail against our philosophical scruples. Nevertheless, Hume draws a lesson from these objections, namely: “[They] show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them” (EHU 12.23; SBN 160). This passage concludes the critique of Pyrrhonism and Hume then turns to his discussion of “mitigated scepticism, or ACADEMICAL philosophy” (EHU 12.24; SBN 161).

An important feature of the whimsical condition passage is that it explicitly ties the concern with “the foundations of these operations” to the search for justification.<sup>6</sup> Here Hume couples the quest for a foundation for action, reason, and belief to the removal of *objections* against them. To object to an action, reason, or belief is to maintain that it fails to satisfy some norm that is required for it to be legitimate or justified. To have “doubts and scruples” regarding human action, reason, or belief is to question their justification. It makes little sense to object to some matter of fact, for example a disease or inclement weather, unless they raise legitimate normative questions, for instance whether or not human beings should alter these conditions.

The justification Hume is seeking is epistemic or, more broadly, cognitive justification. Throughout the *Enquiry* Hume discusses the question of foundations interchangeably with the question of evidence and truth.<sup>7</sup> Section 4 in the *Enquiry*, on the “*Sceptical Doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding*,” begins with a discussion of how propositions about matters of fact are “ascertained” and “our evidence for their truth,” and defines his enquiry as attempts to answer the question of “what is the nature of that evidence, which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory” (EHU 4.2–3; SBN 25–26; also EHU 4.19 and 21; SBN 35–36 and 37–38). Famously, his first answer is “[a]ll reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to

be founded on the relation of *Cause and Effect*" (EHU 4.4; SBN 26), and, as we just saw, references to evidence, assurance, guidance, and argument are featured in Hume's summary of his sceptical conclusion regarding induction that leads up to the whimsical condition passage. The whimsical condition, then, is about justification: it is the condition that we must act and reason and believe, while at the same time being dissatisfied concerning the justification of our action, reason, and belief, and unable to remove the skeptical objections to them.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, in the whimsical condition passage, Hume refers to "*the foundation*," that is, everything that is relevant to rational justification (EHU 12.23; SBN 160, my italics). Hume is concerned with removing all doubt, settling all justificatory questions, and answering all objections.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that the whimsical condition requires that human action, reason and belief are "*utterly without rational ground, warrant, or justification*" (Garrett, "A Small Tincture," 71–72). However, having only *some* warrant means that not all justificatory issues have been settled, leaving room for doubt. The justificatory issues of the whimsical condition passage in EHU section 12 concern foundations: the justification of the basic background assumptions of our action, reason and belief. This is theoretical or philosophical justification, and complete rational justification includes theoretical justification.

The whimsical condition passage occurs on the heels of a summary of his views on induction and the theoretical justification of causal judgments, but Hume's account of our views about external objects is also marked by the whimsical condition. Our natural, practical point of view is that "the very perception or sensible image is the external object." On the other hand, he points out, reason concludes that perceptions are mere representations of external objects and not themselves the external objects. Perhaps this tension could be resolved if reason could show that the representations of external objects are at least caused by external objects, but "your reason . . . can never find any convincing arguments from experience to prove, that the perceptions are connected with any external objects" (EHU 12.14; SBN 154). Needless to say, purely rational arguments—a "chain of clear and convincing argument," perhaps with "a recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being"—also fail to establish such a connection (EHU 12.10, 12.13; SBN 152–53). Here again we find ourselves believing something in our ordinary, day-to-day affairs that reason cannot fully justify.

That similar whimsy infects our concepts of causality is expressed by Hume's two definitions of causality in section 7 of the *Enquiry*. Both definitions characterize the necessary connection between cause and effect in terms of what Hume describes as "something extraneous and foreign to" the cause (EHU 7.29; SBN 76). It is foreign or extraneous because it is not a part or feature of the cause. Hume's first definition relies on the experience of constant conjunction, and the second definition relies on the "customary transition" or inference from one idea to

another. Neither constant conjunction nor customary inference are internal to the actual causal event that brings about the effect. For example, when a violin or guitar string produces a sound, Hume writes, we believe that “the vibration of this string is the cause of this particular sound” but in philosophical reflection on this experience we are able only to identify the constant conjunction of vibrating strings and sounds, or the customary transition from the idea of a vibrating string to the idea of a particular sound. Hume believes that this is an unavoidable defect.<sup>10</sup> We “desire to know” this connection intrinsic to the cause, and we have a natural inclination to attribute causal ties to “a circumstance in the cause,” but the best that our philosophical examination can ever do is to define causal connection in terms of ideas of circumstances “external and foreign” to the cause (EHU 7.29; SBN 77).

Our idea of necessary connection suffers from the same problem that our thoughts of external objects have. We have an impression of a necessary connection between cause and effect, and instinctively we assume that this connection is external to us and in the particular cause, for example, the vibrating string. But philosophical reflection can only offer a representation of something internal and subjective, namely “a sentiment or impression” that we “*feel*” after two events have been constantly conjoined in experience a sufficient number of times. It is a sentiment or impression of a “customary connexion or transition of the imagination” from the thought of the cause to the thought of the effect (EHU 7.30; SBN 78). We represent the vibrating string as external to us, but the cause is represented as an internal sentiment or impression. Here, too, our natural or instinctive views about necessary connection are in conflict with our rational and reflective examination of the human understanding, but we nevertheless persist in our natural beliefs without revising our philosophical conclusions.

Finally, the whimsical condition involves some self-knowledge. While human beings must act, believe, and reason, at the very least human beings, as a class, are not able “to satisfy *themselves* concerning” the justification of these because anyone who seeks satisfaction concerning these fails. Consequently, at least some human beings must act, believe, and reason while remaining dissatisfied about the justification of human belief, action, and reason, including their own beliefs, actions and reasonings. They are in the condition of Congreve’s lover, who is “made wise from the Dictates of Reason, and yet perseveres to play the Fool by the force of Instinct.” Furthermore, a natural reading of Hume’s whimsical condition passage suggests that this is a condition not just for some, but for every individual. When Hume refers to “mankind, who must act and reason and believe,” he is not maintaining that the class has these properties, but that each individual in that class must act, believe, and reason. Accordingly, when he continues with the pronouns “they” and “themselves” in the claim that “they are not able . . . to satisfy themselves,” the anaphoric reference cannot now change and refer to the class, but remains constant to the individuals who must act, believe, and reason. In what follows, I

examine this whimsical condition in the narrower sense of the person who, with Hume, has embraced the skeptical considerations. In the concluding section, I will consider the stronger claim that this condition characterizes human beings more generally.

### 3. The Whimsical Condition and its Location

The late Richard Popkin in his classic and groundbreaking discussion of the nature of Hume's skepticism mentions the whimsical condition passage to illustrate Hume's view that beliefs are necessary for life and that we believe on the basis of instinct or other natural mechanisms that prevail in the face of our negative philosophical conclusions that these beliefs lack justification ("David Hume," 402). According to Popkin, the Humean skeptic is someone who "will be modest, diffident, and careless. He will come to some degree of doubt, and will always see the lack of rational basis for any conclusion." Popkin adds that this Humean skeptic believes "that both the [skeptical] difficulties and the necessity [of nature and common life] exist. The picture of the two, the dogmatist and sceptic, is a picture of the perfect Pyrrhonist in his two moods, his split personality. In one mood, the difficulties overcome him, in another, the necessities do. Only by being both can one be a philosopher, and live according to nature" ("David Hume," 407). But this raises a question about the subject of these mental states: exactly *who* sees the lack of rational basis for any conclusion? Is it the rationally reflecting philosopher pursuing theoretical questions about the status of human knowledge, or the practical agent engaged in common life? Two alternative interpretations are available for Popkin's characterization of the Humean skeptic. On the one hand, the engaged agent merely observes that philosophical thinking leads to skeptical difficulties for major principles that guide his agency without affirming, from this practical point of view, these skeptical difficulties. On the other, the engaged agent affirms that major principles guiding his agency are without justification, but nevertheless also fully affirms and acts on these principles. This is the difference between (a) the practical agent noting that philosophical reflection leads to skeptical results without affirming them, and (b) the practical agent also *accepting those results*.

This issue makes a difference to Popkin's claim that the Humean skeptic can attain a state of "quietude," that is, "have a peaceful attitude . . . since how he feels . . . will be natural, and there will be no attempt to combat his inclinations" ("David Hume," 405). This quietude is plausible only if the skeptical considerations are limited to philosophical reflection and do not find a foothold within the practical point of view. But it is not plausible to assume that option (b) is wholly peaceful. If the engaged agent has a desire for a kind of justification that leads to skeptical considerations, then within practice there is some tension or disquiet. As an agent,

she acts and believes according to her inclinations, but she also has the disquiet of an unsatisfied desire, namely a desire for justification that she cannot have.

This same question arises for Neal Gascoigne's account of the whimsical condition in his *Scepticism*, which places "The Whimsical Condition of Mankind" at the center of the philosophical problem of skepticism (1). Gascoigne characterizes Hume's whimsical condition as a split between human "theoretical and practical attitudes," where our practical attitude involves the assurances and convictions of our everyday engagements with people and things, while our theoretical attitude reflecting on these assurances and convictions casts doubt on them. However, our practical attitude persists "insouciantly" in the face of these philosophical challenges (Gascoigne, *Scepticism*, 3–4).

Gascoigne unpacks the tension between theory and practice in terms of what he calls a "Humean Paradox":

Sceptical doubts raised from the philosophical standpoint carry no conviction at the level of common life. Although we feel the lack of conviction ought to carry with it some theoretical basis for rejecting the sceptic's doubts, we cannot seem to find one. And yet without a rejection, the suspicion is that the sceptic is picking up on some feature [of common life] that we are not entitled to. (*Scepticism*, 136)<sup>11</sup>

In other words, for Gascoigne the fact that, in Hume's words, "Nature is always too strong for principle," and that the skeptical doubts do not carry over to ordinary life and practice, should be a basis for refuting the skeptical considerations. But we cannot find such an argument, and since we cannot find it, the skeptic succeeds in casting doubt on key features of common life and practice.

Gascoigne's paradox is a "Humean Paradox" and not "Hume's Paradox," because Hume does not explicitly raise it. Still, it is not wholly disconnected from Hume's text. In the *Enquiry*, Hume considers the objection that "[m]y practice, you say, refutes my doubts," granting that it is reasonable to suppose that the fact that the theoretical doubts carry no conviction at the level of practice refutes the doubts (EHU 4.21; SBN 38). Hume responds that practice does not remove his doubts, and that he has not found any considerations that would remove these doubts. He writes that he remains quite satisfied in his practice, but at the same time he has not found satisfaction in his search for theoretical justification.

Gascoigne's Humean Paradox, as was the case in Popkin's account of the Humean skeptic, leads to the question: Who is the *subject* of what he describes as the Humean Paradox? Gascoigne does not clarify whether it is the philosopher engaged in theoretical reflection, or also the agent at the level of practical engagement in ordinary life. Clearly, this suspicion that there are key features of common life that lack justification belongs to philosophical reflection, but does it belong

*exclusively* to philosophical reflection? If it is *not* limited to the philosopher's philosophical reflection, but is also part of the philosopher's common life, then common life itself includes some recognition of skeptical considerations. Consequently, it would not be true without qualification, as Gascoigne maintains, that the skeptical doubts raised from the philosophical standpoint carry *no* conviction at the level of common life.

On the other hand, if this suspicion belongs only to the philosophical standpoint, the air of paradox dissipates. It is a given that the philosophical standpoint leads to skeptical doubts, namely that common life consists of features to which we are not entitled. This means that the suspicion that characterizes Gascoigne's Humean Paradox just *is* the skeptical doubt. If the suspicion just is the skeptical doubt, and it is not part of common life, then human beings are indeed saddled with two segregated points of view that exist side-by-side, but this in itself is not paradoxical. It is not paradoxical that two distinct people have incompatible views, and similarly it is not paradoxical that two distinct and autonomous points of view are incompatible, even if they belong to the same individual. For instance, if the practical and philosophical points of view are distinct personalities or agencies in the same body, these distinct agencies or modules can contradict each other without paradox.<sup>12</sup> The Humean Paradox, if there is one, has to involve more than a general "split between the theoretical and practical attitudes," where the convictions of the practical attitude are completely insulated from theoretical skepticism.<sup>13</sup> If there is a Humean Paradox, there has to be enough seepage from theory to practice to contaminate common life with the suspicion that it is not entitled to its commitments.<sup>14</sup>

These open questions about the identity of the subject in Popkin's and Gascoigne's accounts of Humean skepticism apply to Hume's whimsical condition itself. When the skeptic awakes from his dream, recognizing that the skeptical considerations carry no conviction in human practice, but only "show the whimsical condition of mankind," does this recognition belong only to the "philosopher, who has some share of curiosity," or also to the agent engaged in practice? In the one case, the whimsical condition consists of the fact that we must act, reason, and believe without theoretical justification, and the recognition of this only belongs to theory, not practice. In the other case, agency itself includes the whimsical condition, namely that the agent acts, reasons, and believes while recognizing that she lacks justification.

If the whimsical condition is merely the fact that in practice we innocently enjoy assurances and convictions that from the theoretical point of view cannot be justified, then the sense of whimsy dissipates. There is nothing whimsical about one person acting with conviction unaware that their conviction is without justification. By analogy, there is nothing whimsical or capricious about acting with conviction from the practical point of view, blind to the skeptical considerations

of the theoretical point of view. What is whimsical about the lover's condition in Congreve's play is that he is both "made wise from the Dictates of Reason, and yet persevere[s] to play the Fool by the force of Instinct." The parallel to Hume's epistemic condition is that the individual persists in acting with the assurance and conviction of practice while at the same time affirming in practice the conclusion of the skeptical considerations.

#### 4. Internal Motivation for Turning from Practice to Theory

In order to answer the question about the subjective locus of the whimsical condition I turn to what on Hume's account motivates the shift from ordinary practice to theoretical reflections.

In the *Enquiry*, practical life includes several motivations for turning to reflection. For one, practical life is ruled not only by the "necessities of life," but also "business and occupation," and a human mind "requires some relaxation" from this. Accordingly, human beings "indulge" a "passion for science" which includes "abstract and profound" philosophy (EHU 1.6–7; SBN 9). Other factors that motivate reflection is "innocent curiosity",, for example, "to find those principles, which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action, or behavior" (EHU 1.10 and 2; SBN 11 and 6). "The sweetest and most inoffensive path of life leads through the avenues of science and reflection," Hume writes (EHU 1.10; SBN 11).

Practical life also includes "a spirit of accuracy" that leads to the improvement and perfection of "every art or profession," but it also leads one to inquire more deeply into the underlying causes and structures of common life (EHU 1.9; SBN 10). Hume compares this to artists who are led to study the underlying anatomy and biology of the human body in order to better paint the beautiful appearances of "a Venus or an Helen" (EHU 1.8; SBN 10).<sup>15</sup>

Hume develops his account of the sources of theoretical reflection in human practice in greater detail in the concluding section 7 of Book 1 of the *Treatise*.<sup>16</sup> There Hume argues that it is within practical life that causal reasoning and our natural belief in the "contin'd existence of external objects, when absent from the senses" come into conflict (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 266).<sup>17</sup> Ordinary experience and custom convince us of the continued and independent existence of external objects when they are not perceived, but ordinary causal reasoning leads to the conclusion that all the qualities we perceive and attribute to objects do not have such a continued and independent existence (T 1.4.5.14–15; SBN 231). The quest for causal explanations in practical life also drive us to philosophical reflection on "the original and ultimate principle" (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266).

Finally, Hume describes how curiosity and ambition lead to speculations outside the sphere of common life. He writes that when he becomes "tir'd with

amusement and company," he indulges "a *reverie* in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a river-side." While lost in thought in his room or on a solitary walk, he feels his "mind all collected within itself" and he becomes "naturally *inclin'd* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation" (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270). In this state, "I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me" (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270–71). The reason he cannot avoid this curiosity is that he is dissatisfied not knowing the reasons for his basic judgments: "I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed" (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). A natural reading of these passages locates this curiosity and uneasiness in common life and not outside of the sphere of common life. Becoming tired of amusement and company is certainly a normal feature of common life, as is getting lost in thought while alone and feeling calm and collected, and it is in this state that Hume is "naturally *inclin'd*" to turn to these subjects and is "uneasy" about not knowing what the principles are that guide his judgments and evaluations. While the investigation into the principles underlying these judgments is best assigned to philosophical reflection, the curiosity and uneasiness that can inspire such investigations is not exclusive to philosophy.

That Hume assigns this curiosity and uneasiness that leads to philosophical reflection to common life is confirmed in the next paragraph where he considers the alternative case where curiosity and ambition does "not transport me into speculations without the sphere of common life" (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271). Clearly this curiosity and ambition, when it leads to such speculations beyond common life, cannot be wholly outside of the sphere of common life because they *transport* him to the sphere of reflection. Something within the sphere of common life motivates him to speculations that transcend common life.

## 5. Skepticism and Dissatisfaction

Another important motivation for theoretical reflection is dissatisfaction. As we just saw in the *Treatise*, Hume is "uneasy" that he does not know on what grounds he makes judgments about value, truth or rationality (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). Similarly, in the *Enquiry*, it is "a reproach to all literature" that human beings "should for ever talk of truth and falsehood, vice and virtue, beauty and deformity, without being able to determine the source of these distinctions" (EHU 1.2; SBN 6).

Unfortunately, theoretical reflection, on Hume's account, does not dispel cognitive dissatisfaction, even with the adoption of mitigated skepticism in the

*Enquiry*, where he contrasts “*mitigated* scepticism, or ACADEMICAL philosophy” with “PYRRHONISM, or *excessive* scepticism” (EHU 12.24; SBN 161). Pyrrhonism, as Hume understands it, combines (1) the skeptical conclusion that the reasonings and actions of common life, in the end, are without justification with (2) the aim, on those grounds, to suspend all the assurances and convictions of common life. The mitigated skeptic, by contrast, recognizes the futility of the Pyrrhonian project of suspending all conviction, but nevertheless, on account of the skeptical conclusion, exercises “a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty . . . in all kinds of scrutiny and decision” (EHU 12.23–24; SBN 160–61) and limits human enquiry “to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of the human understanding” (EHU 12.25; SBN 162). While it might seem that this strategy shields the mitigated skeptic from skeptical disquiet or dissatisfaction, this is not the case.<sup>18</sup> Bouts of Pyrrhonism are still possible even for the moderated doubter. While the mitigated skeptic recognizes that the Pyrrhonist’s aim to suspend conviction cannot have any “durable” or “constant influence on the mind” (EHU 12.23; SBN 160), it may still take a hold of the mind, albeit briefly. The Pyrrhonian “may throw himself or others into a *momentary* amazement and confusion” and it can “*for a time* at least . . . destroy all assurance and conviction” (EHU 12.22–23; SBN 159–60, my italics). Presumably the *others* Hume refers to are non-Pyrrhonists that are also engaged in skeptical considerations, including mitigated skeptics. No matter how brief, a bout of Pyrrhonian skepticism is still a state of instability, even if it is very quickly “put to flight” by common life (EHU 12.23; SBN 160).<sup>19</sup>

However, a brief bout of Pyrrhonism that might accompany even a mitigated skeptic’s skeptical considerations is not the dissatisfaction that defines the whimsical condition. The central instability of the whimsical condition for Hume is not Pyrrhonism, but the unsatisfiable desire for justification. By nature, we desire to justify our actions, reasonings, and beliefs, but we are not able to satisfy this desire. Hume succinctly describes this in section 4 on the “Sceptical Doubts”:

As an agent, I am quite satisfied in the point [that from uniform observations we make inferences about what we haven’t observed]; but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say scepticism, I want to learn the foundations of this inference. No reading, no enquiry has yet been able to remove my difficulty, or give me satisfaction in a matter of such importance. (EHU 4.21; SBN 38)

Hume’s satisfaction as an *agent* does not lie in having or thinking he has a justification for these inferences. It simply lies in having a conviction and acting accordingly. The dissatisfaction comes when he begins to seek “the foundation of this inference,” but is unable to find it. So he is saddled with both the satisfaction of agency and the dissatisfaction of reflection. Accordingly, the whimsical

condition can have an “on-again-off-again” component, where one “is hesitant and dogmatic by turns.”<sup>20</sup> Agents are wholly satisfied in making inductive inferences until they seek to justify these, and then they become dissatisfied. But this dissatisfaction does not shut down the satisfaction of agency. What is turned on and off again is the dissatisfaction of reflection. This is not to be confused with an on-again-off-again Pyrrhonism. Rather, it is an intermittent dissatisfaction because we are not able to justify ourselves when we seek justification. Although we do not always desire justification, it is nevertheless a typical feature of our natural curiosity.

Thus the dissatisfaction of reflection does not cancel the satisfaction of agency except during momentary and fleeting bouts of Pyrrhonism that nature quickly dispels. But common life only shuts down *Pyrrhonism*, not the skeptical conclusion.<sup>21</sup> The sceptic may still “*justly* insist” that basic operations of common life lack justification (EHU 12.22; 118–19, my italics). When Hume writes that we need not fear that philosophy “should ever undermine the reasonings of common life” he is not retracting the skeptical conclusion (EHU 5.2; SBN 41). His sense of “undermine” here is that we need not fear that this conclusion will put an end to all our common life convictions.

Hume’s view that dissatisfaction comes with skeptical considerations even apart from bouts of Pyrrhonism is anticipated in the *Treatise*, when he writes that we are “disappointed, when we learn that this connexion, tie, or energy [connecting cause and effect] lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but the determination of the mind. . . . Such a discovery . . . cuts off all hope of ever attaining satisfaction [of our] desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266–67). This discovery is part of “[t]he *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason” which then “heated [his] brain” and caused a bout of Pyrrhonism: he is “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). I suggest that when Hume writes in the *Treatise* about the “philosophical melancholy and delirium” of his skeptical considerations, he intends “melancholy” to characterize the “*intense* view” of the skeptical considerations, while “delirium” characterizes the bout of Pyrrhonism in which he actively tries to cancel all his convictions.

While reason is not capable of “dispelling these clouds,” nature cures him by “relaxing this [philosophical] bent of mind” or by distracting or diverting him to some non-philosophical activity or topic (T 1.4.7.9; SBN 268–69). He stops striving against his natural convictions—his Pyrrhonist delirium is over—but this not a refutation of the skeptical conclusion, which remains a permanent “discovery,” something “we learn.” And, as noted earlier, in a time when his mind is at ease, he “naturally” turns back to these considerations (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270–71).

I have focused, following Hume, on the dissatisfaction of the skeptic, but in a remarkable passage in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume seems to attribute a related dissatisfaction to the philosophical dogmatist as well:

No philosophical Dogmatist denies, that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science; and that these difficulties are in a regular, logical method, absolutely insolvable. No Sceptic denies, that we lie under an absolute necessity, notwithstanding these difficulties, of thinking, and believing, and reasoning with regard to all kind of subjects, and even of frequently assenting with confidence and security. The only difference, then, between these sects, if they merit that name, is, that the Sceptic, from habit, caprice, or inclination, insists most on the difficulties; the Dogmatist, for like reasons, on the necessity. (DNR 12.8; 219n1)

Presumably, the philosophical dogmatist once desired to remove these difficulties, but concluded that this desire cannot be satisfied and ceased to care. The dogmatist and the skeptic accept the difficulties, but the skeptic still cares.

## 6. Skepticism and Common Life

So far, I have discussed the awareness of the whimsical condition that one's most basic beliefs and actions of common life are without justification only as a philosophical or theoretical awareness. I now turn to the question whether for Hume this awareness actually penetrates into common life and renders common life itself whimsical.

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume answers this in the "whimsical condition" passage. When common life distracts him from his skeptical considerations, that is "[w]hen he awakes from his dream," these considerations will seem like "mere amusement." Hume likens the skeptical considerations to a dream and he awakes from this dream into common life, remembering the dream. However, now awake in common life, the skeptical considerations are not only a memory, but while awake in common life, he affirms that these considerations show that human beings, "by their most diligent enquiry [are not able] to satisfy themselves concerning the foundations of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them" (EHU 12.23; SBN 160). In other words, while the conclusions of his skeptical considerations do not alter the convictions and actions of common life, he nevertheless recognizes *in common life* that these convictions and actions are without justification.

It bears repeating that when Hume writes that "a PYRRHONIAN may throw himself into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings," but the "first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts

and scruples," he is *not* maintaining that common life refutes the conclusion of his skeptical considerations (EHU 12.23; SBN 160). Rather, his point is that these skeptical considerations can lead to the serious suggestion that one should aim to cease to have convictions in common life. This is the unsustainable suggestion that throws him into "momentary amazement and confusion" and is then banished by the first event of common life. In spite of the skeptical conclusion, human beings will continue to believe and act with conviction, but some of them will believe and act with conviction while knowing they lack justification. That just is the whimsical condition.<sup>22</sup>

Hume's mitigated skepticism depends on the possibility that the skeptical conclusion can be affirmed in common life.<sup>23</sup> Hume asserts that most human beings, whether learned or illiterate, tend toward dogmatism, and skeptical considerations will "naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, diminish their fond opinion of themselves." A "just reasoner" always accompanies her "scrutiny and decision," including the scrutiny and decision of common life, with "a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty," and skeptical considerations promote this (EHU 12.24; SBN 162). Merely remembering that philosophical reflection led to the conclusion that our ordinary beliefs and actions lack justification does not lead to such an adjustment because it is possible to remember the skeptical considerations and remain completely unmoved by them in common life. Mitigated skepticism involves affirming this conclusion in common life at least to the degree that it motivates greater caution and modesty in our ordinary reasoning in common life.<sup>24</sup>

Another feature of mitigated skepticism and a "natural result" of skeptical considerations is to limit "our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of the human understanding." Mitigated skeptics avoid "all distant and high enquiries" and confine their enquiries "to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience." Hume writes that "they will never be tempted to go beyond common life, *so long as they consider* the imperfections of those faculties they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations" (EHU 12.25; SBN 162 *my italics*). With the skeptical considerations in mind while engaged in common life, the mitigated skeptic will not be tempted to pursue certain topics beyond common life.<sup>25</sup>

The topics Hume has in mind here are not topics such as the skeptical considerations, but topics such as "the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from and to eternity" (EHU 12.25; SBN 162). What keeps the mitigated skeptic away from these "distant and high" topics is the awareness of the skeptical considerations: "While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?" (EHU 12.25; SBN

162). For Hume, it is the affirmation of the skeptical conclusion that keeps us from naturally drifting from common life into extravagant cosmological speculation.<sup>26</sup>

In the *Treatise* the skeptical conclusion is also a guide in common life and practice. After his bout of Pyrrhonism, his first response is to stop philosophical reflection altogether, including his skeptical considerations, and turn to common life. He then becomes mentally “indolent,” that is, too lazy to worry about the justification of his beliefs and actions. When he does eventually remember his skeptical considerations, he succumbs to another feverish or manic state. Ruled by a “splenetic humour” he is “ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy” (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). However, this state of “spleen and indolence” does not last and it is replaced by “a serious good-humour’d disposition” in which the skeptical considerations play a role. He writes:

In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our skepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, ‘tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise. Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270)

This passage, including the prescription of the last two sentences, is not only about philosophical beliefs, but beliefs in all the incidents of life.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, he is addressing how we should adjust our beliefs in all domains, including the domain of common life, when we are convinced that these beliefs lack justification. We “preserve our scepticism” in common life by affirming that fire warms us or water refreshes “from an inclination” and “because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise,” rather than assuming that these beliefs rest on a rational justification on the basis of evidence and truth.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Hume’s skeptical conclusion that the beliefs and actions of common life are without justification and his skeptical solution that these beliefs and actions rest on inclination are preserved in common life.<sup>29</sup>

## 7. Skepticism, Inclination and Whimsy

Hume’s prescription regarding the deliverances of reason mixed with inclination—called the “Title Principle” by Don Garrett—is not intended to deny or supersede Hume’s skeptical considerations. On the contrary, it is founded upon them.<sup>30</sup> By following the Title Principle we “preserve our scepticism” because we affirm that we believe “from an inclination.”

Garrett has argued that in fact this principle is not compatible with the apparent conclusion of the skeptical considerations that all our beliefs are without theoretical justification: "But to say that we ought to assent to some judgments because they are deliverances of reason seems to entail that belief in these propositions is rationally warranted. Thus, Hume's concluding adoption of the Title Principle seems incompatible with his maintaining an unmitigated theoretical skepticism" (Garrett, "Tincture," 76). Garrett plausibly assumes that if Hume affirms the following conditional: *if a proposition is a deliverance of reason, then it ought to be assented to*, then Hume is affirming that belief in this proposition is rationally warranted. However, the Title Principle states that if a proposition is a deliverance of reason *and reason is lively and mixed with an inclination*, then it ought to be assented to. Now it is not obvious anymore that it follows from this conditional that belief in the proposition is *rationally* warranted. Perhaps belief is warranted on account of the inclination because the non-cognitive psychological costs of suppressing our inclination are too high. This does not render belief in the proposition warranted rationally in the sense of being justified on epistemic or cognitive grounds.

Accordingly, it is important to worry about the nature of Hume's "ought" in the Title Principle. There are three options: a proposition ought to be assented to only on the basis of reason, that is, rational evidence for the truth of a proposition, it ought to be assented to only on the basis of non-cognitive inclinations, or on the basis of some mix of both. In the first case, clearly belief in the proposition is rationally warranted, but this case is not relevant to the Title Principle. In the second case, it is possible that we ought to assent to a proposition even if belief in it is not *rationally* warranted.<sup>31</sup> In the third case, where a proposition ought to be assented to on the basis of a mix of reason and inclination, it is still possible that it ought to be assented to even if belief in the proposition is not warranted on rational grounds. For example, in a case where the evidence is not good enough to warrant belief, but the inclination is strong enough to overcome this deficit and bring about belief. In light of the fact that Hume writes "we preserve our skepticism . . . if we believe *only* because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise" (my italics), arguably Hume's Title Principle should be read as follows: Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to only when it costs us too much pains to think otherwise, that is, to deny our inclination. However, even if we reject this reading and instead hold that Hume maintains that we ought to assent on the basis of a mix of reason and inclination, as we just saw, it is possible that belief is not warranted on rational grounds.

Finally, there is a difference between the rational warrant of common life and practice and the rational warrant of theoretical reason. Theoretical skepticism is about rational justification that is attainable through theoretical or philosophical reflection, not common life or practice, including scientific practice. Accordingly, Garrett's characterization of unmitigated theoretical skepticism, namely as the

view that belief in any proposition “is *utterly* without rational ground, warrant, or justification,” needs to be qualified (Garrett, “Tincture,” 71–72). It is the view that belief in any proposition is without any *theoretical* rational justification, leaving unscathed the ordinary kinds of justifications of common life. It is only when we reflect on the most basic assumptions and methods of common life and seek to justify them that we fail. This theoretical failure is compatible with aspiring to and attaining the kinds of ordinary warrants available in common life, which includes scientific practice, and aspiring to improve the epistemic practices of common life.<sup>32</sup>

The Title Principle is not a final resting place in Hume’s skeptical considerations, but a pivot to further reflection.<sup>33</sup> Immediately after stating the “Title Principle,” Hume returns to questions of justification that arise naturally when his mind is “all collected within itself” (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270–71). He now “cannot forbear having a curiosity” about the justification of moral, aesthetic, political, and epistemic judgments. The Title Principle allows him to follow reason when it is “lively” and mixed with inclination, and therefore he is entitled to follow reason to consider the nature and extent of justification. Curiosity and ambition are not only natural propensities, but they are also, when occurrent, lively “sentiments.”<sup>34</sup>

Inclination, then, leads him to skeptical considerations and it also is the basic source of his affirmations and denials of common life, and this is a source of the whimsical condition. While Hume does not use the term “whimsical condition” in the *Treatise*, he affirms it in the concluding paragraph of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, where he turns to the apparent tension between his skepticism and his use of “such terms as . . . ’tis evident, ’tis certain, ’tis undeniable” (T 1.4.7.15; SBN 274). While these terms can be expressions of dogmatism and immodesty, and thus this would indeed be a “fault” on the part of a skeptic, Hume offers “a caveat against any objections” raised against him on that basis. Hume’s caveat allows him to “yield to that propensity, which inclines us to be positive and certain in *particular points*,” in particular if it is an “assurance, which always arises from an exact and full survey of an object” (T 1.4.7.15; SBN 273–74). Natural assurances in the face of experience and practice, Hume writes, “imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment” (T 1.4.7.15; SBN 274). We should read this literally: to make a common life judgment with natural assurance does not imply making a reflective judgment that one’s judgment with natural assurance is rationally justified.<sup>35</sup> Hume accepts the skeptical conclusion that his common life judgments rest on basic components that lack justification, and at the same time, without contradiction, not only makes such judgments, but makes them with confidence.<sup>36</sup> This is precisely the whimsical condition: we must act and reason and believe, although we are not able, by our most diligent inquiry, to satisfy ourselves concerning the justification of the foundation of these operations.<sup>37</sup>

The first *Enquiry*’s concluding dramatic prescription about the “proper subjects of science and enquiry” should also be considered in the light of the whimsical

condition. On the basis of his skeptical considerations, he concludes that quantity and number are the only proper domain of abstract reasoning, and all other enquiries should be limited to experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence. All else is “nothing but sophistry and illusion” and, Hume famously commands, should be “commit[ted] to the flames” (EHU 12.34; SBN 165). Hume’s immoderate exhortation has struck readers as a case of precisely the dogmatism and “intellectual rigidity that his mitigated scepticism is designed to overturn” (Norton, “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy,” 391). But mitigated skepticism grants that we may yield to our natural inclinations to act, believe, and reason, while still affirming skepticism about our justification. Perhaps Hume could have expressed himself more moderately, without the injunction to burn books, but arguably his vehemence matches the strength of his natural inclinations on this particular topic. A relevant context is Hume’s fear of religious dogmatism and superstition, and Hume’s vehemence is explained by his fear of the dangers of “religious fears and prejudices” whereby critics are “oppressed” and suffer from the “harsh winds of calumny and persecution” (EHU 1.11 and 11.2; SBN 11 and 132). Hume personally felt this bigotry in the successful public campaign against him and his appointment to the chair of moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, which occurred before he completed the first *Enquiry* (Stewart, “Two Species,” 81–95). Hume’s own personal whimsical condition combines the strength of his practical and political concerns with his skeptical considerations in this passage.<sup>38</sup>

The imperative nature of Hume’s final remarks in the first *Enquiry* also needs to be understood in light of his desire to “unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy” (EHU 1.17; SBN 16). One type of philosophy is “easy philosophy” (EHU 1.4; SBN 7), which is “born for action” and aims to “make us *feel* the difference between vice and virtue,” “excite and regulate our sentiments,” and “bend our hearts to the love of probity and true honor” (EHU 1.1; SBN 5). The other type aims at knowledge and understanding, including “the foundations of morals, reasoning, and criticism.” Hume’s concluding recommendation to commit certain books to the flames is an exercise in “easy philosophy,” exhorting to action and exciting the reader’s sentiments after a long stretch of “arduous,” “accurate and abstract,” “profound,” but “painful and fatiguing” philosophy of the second kind (EHU 1.2, 1.8, 1.10, and 1.11; SBN 6, 9, and 11). In fact, Hume’s aim to combine these two species of philosophy, one considering human beings “in the light of . . . an active being” while the other in the light of “a reasonable being,” is an affirmation and instance of the whimsical condition. It is Hume’s own expression of “a mixed kind of life,” and his admonition to “[b]e a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man” (EHU 1.6; SBN 9) finds its most dramatic expression in the *Enquiry*’s famous concluding admonition.

## 8. The Whimsical Condition of All

So far, my focus has been on the whimsical condition of those human beings moved to abstract reflections that lead to the skeptical considerations. This, of course, is not the “whimsical condition of mankind,” but of a certain class of reflective thinkers, including Hume, namely ones concerned with theoretical justification. Does Hume think that this is indeed a condition that human beings suffer more generally?

There is a sense in which it follows from Hume’s considerations that all human beings suffer from the whimsical condition. If it is true that human beings are not able by their most diligent enquiry to satisfy themselves concerning the foundations of action, reason, and belief and remove the objections that may be raised against them, then if any human being were to try to satisfy herself in this respect, she would fail.<sup>39</sup> However, given that Hume is concerned with internal justification—that is, from the agent’s point of view—the whimsical condition can be understood as an internal condition, for instance, when the Pyrrhonian awakes from his dream, or Hume himself in his discussion of the fact that he must act, reason, and believe, even though he is not able to rationally justify these when he attempts this. The whimsical condition is an internal condition in an actual deliberative context. It is the condition of a person that desires and attempts to find, as diligently as she is able, a rational justification for the foundations of action, reason and belief, but is not able to find such justification.<sup>40</sup> Try as she might, she does not have an option open to her that leads to the rational justification she seeks.<sup>41</sup> What I wish to pursue in this section is whether for Hume the internal whimsical condition is a feature of the human condition.

Hume certainly attributes key elements of the whimsical condition to human beings. In the opening section 1 of the *Enquiry*, Hume affirms that “Man is a reasonable being. . . . Man is a sociable, no less than a reasonable being. . . . Man is also an active being” (EHU 1.6; SBN 8). Human beings “must submit to business and occupation,” but at the same time “the mind requires some relaxation, and cannot always support its bent to care and industry.” Accordingly, “nature has pointed to a mixed kind of life as most suitable to the human race,” which includes both a “passion for science” as well as the needs of “action and society.” However, this also means that the “human race” is subject to the “biasses” of each and the danger that they “draw too much, so as to incapacitate” a person for the competing needs.

In fact, Hume suggests that the “generality of mankind” has some interest in “abstract and profound” philosophy! He writes:

Were the generality of mankind contented to prefer easy philosophy to the abstract and profound, [. . .] it might not be improper, perhaps, to comply with this general opinion, and allow every man to enjoy, without

opposition, his own taste and sentiment. But as the matter is often carried farther, even to the absolute rejecting of all profound reasonings, or what is commonly called *metaphysics*, we shall now proceed to consider what can reasonably be pleaded on their behalf. (EHU 1.7; SBN 9)

Human beings, for the most part, are also drawn into theoretical reflection, even if they end up rejecting it.<sup>42</sup> A person can reject all profound reasoning, but that assumes some familiarity with it and enough interest to become familiar with it.

The human attraction to “profound reasoning” is also a source of danger because it makes human beings susceptible to “false and adulterate” metaphysics, including superstition that promotes religious fear and prejudices. Hume believes that this is a very widespread danger and the “stoutest antagonist, if he remits his watch a moment, is oppressed” (EHU 1.11; SBN 11). In some people, laziness is an antidote against these dangers, but human vanity, as well as curiosity, are very powerful and widely shared drives that have these dangerous consequences (EHU 1.11 and 12; SBN 11 and 12). According to Hume, the human imagination is also a source of problems because it “is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without control, into the most distant parts of space and time, in order to avoid the objects, which custom has rendered too familiar” (EHU 12.25; SBN 162). Hume believes that the only remedy for this problem is accurate and careful reasoning, which builds on, as noted above, “the spirit of accuracy” that is found in “every art or profession, even those which most concern life or action” (EHU 1.9; SBN 10).

In the *Treatise*, Hume describes the split between theory and practice in terms of topics within and outside of the sphere of common life. The pursuit of topics beyond the sphere of common life is a widely shared property of human beings, who are “led to such enquiries” because: “’tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in the narrow circle of objects which are the subject of daily conversation and action” (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271). Hume writes that this dissatisfaction with the sphere of common life, if it does not lead to philosophy, leads instead to religious superstition, which also transcends the sphere of common life. One source of dissatisfaction is the need for causal explanations, and while philosophy seeks explanations in terms of observable events, religious superstition explains in terms of “scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new” (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271). These explanations have an advantage over philosophy because they are easier to understand and capture the mind’s attention. However, they have the disadvantage that they are “able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions” and become “dangerous,” while the errors of philosophy are “only ridiculous” (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271–72).

Thus, at the very least, human beings are saddled with a split between (1) thinking limited to the sphere of common life and (2) thinking about topics that

are beyond the sphere of common life. Moreover, these spheres are in tension. Philosophy, insofar as it is concerned with the basic principles of action, belief, and reasoning, leads to skeptical considerations. But religious superstition is also a source of its own tension within common life because it “is often able to *disturb* us in the conduct of our lives and actions” (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271–72, my italics). Moreover, Hume’s suggestion that regarding philosophy and religious superstition “we ought . . . to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide,” and his worry that religious superstition “seizes more strongly on the mind” than philosophy, assumes that these are competing ways to satisfy the human need to be concerned with matters outside of the sphere of common life. While Hume recommends philosophy over religious superstition, he does not presume that his recommendation will settle these tensions between common life, and the competing demands of philosophy and religious superstition.

Although human beings for the most part need to pursue matters beyond common life and are subject to the attendant conflicts and tensions of this pursuit, Hume recognizes exceptions in the *Treatise*:

[M]any honest gentlemen, who being always employ’d in their domestic affairs, or amusing themselves in common recreations, have carried their thoughts very little beyond those objects, which are everyday expos’d to their senses. And indeed, of such as these I pretend not to make philosophers. . . . They do well to keep to themselves in their present situation; and instead of refining them into philosophers, I wish I cou’d communicate to our founders of systems, a share of this gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which wou’d serve to temper those fiery particles, of which they are compos’d. While a warm imagination is allow’d to enter into philosophy, . . . we can never have any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience. (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272)

Thus the split and tension between theory and practice that characterizes the whimsical condition is not a necessary property of every human being, but it is typical of the human condition. This split characterizes human beings as a species, in the same way that human beings by nature have eyesight even though some human beings are near-sighted or even blind.

Nevertheless, it seems significant that in this passage, Hume does not maintain that they have *no* interests whatsoever in topics beyond domestic affairs and common recreations, but “have carry’d their thoughts *very little* beyond those objects” (my italics). Moreover, Hume does not recommend that we try to be like those gentlemen, or even envy them.<sup>43</sup> As noted above, if he were to “banish” philosophical reflection, Hume believes that he would “be a loser in point of

pleasure,” namely the pleasure of curiosity, which is also a natural disposition of human beings (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). What Hume does recommend is that those with an *excessive* philosophical bent have “a share of this gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient” to temper the “heated” brain and “warm imagination” that leads to bouts of Pyrrhonism. Neither the skeptical conclusion nor the desire for justification are targets of this recommendation.<sup>44</sup>

While in both the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise* Hume assigns to human beings, for the most part, some of the key features of the whimsical condition, none of these have included the most dramatic feature, namely having to believe and act while dissatisfied about their justification and removal of objections. So far, human beings suffer from the whimsical condition of mankind on account of the fact that every human being must act, reason, and believe, but the most diligent enquiry by human beings regarding the justification of these human activities has not led to satisfaction. This only requires that some have sought this satisfaction and failed. Accordingly, the whimsical condition is a condition of the species as a whole, but an individual problem only for those seeking this satisfaction.

While, as discussed above in the concluding paragraph of section 2, the grammar of Hume's whimsical condition passage suggests something stronger, namely that every human being must act, reason, and believe, while they—each one of them—have not been able to satisfy themselves concerning the justification of these, Hume does not make an explicit case for this. In fact, in the *Enquiry*, it might even seem that he explicitly denies that this is the case: “The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments” (EHU 12.24; SBN 161). However, Hume continues with an account of the underlying psychology of these “dogmatical reasoners” that suggests that the whimsical condition is, after all, also a condition of this “greater part of mankind.” These human beings rush headlong into the beliefs and actions to which they are inclined because they are deeply uncomfortable with deliberation: “To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy; and they think, that they can never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of their belief” (EHU 12.24; SBN 161). On this account, human beings are naturally dogmatic because they are naturally averse to the state of pausing to weigh the pros and cons of a belief or action to which they are inclined.<sup>45</sup> They are so averse to this state of deliberation that justification requires, that they keep it in check with the vehemence and stubbornness of dogmatism. So dogmatic reasoners are not without a

need for justification, but they are so averse to the search for justification that they believe and act “precipitately,” that is, prematurely and without due deliberation.

The dogmatic reasoner, then, is also subject to the tensions between the need to believe and act, on the one hand, and the need for deliberation and justification, on the other. The deliberative process of justification “perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action,” and they are “so uneasy” with this process that they respond with a kind of cognitive retrenchment and repression of their deliberative capacities. But this assumes that they have some natural inclination to engage in the justification of their beliefs and actions and are familiar enough with it to be averse to it and keep it in check. If they are averse to their natural desire for justification and, instead, harden their affirmations, they have some degree of awareness of not satisfying their natural desire for justification. Hence they act, reason, and believe with some awareness that it is without the justification they naturally desired. In this respect they are not different from Hume’s philosophical dogmatist described above, who does not deny that there are difficulties regarding justification (DNR 12.8; 219n1).

In sum, while admitting that the case is not conclusive, I believe that this stronger view about the whimsical condition of mankind has some textual basis. I also think it is arguably a consequence of Hume’s view that a human being, typically, is a “reasonable being” drawn to reflection, as well as a “sociable” and “active being” subject to the necessities of life, business, and occupation, and that these draw us in competing directions. Finally, I believe Hume would be essentially correct about the whimsical condition of humanity in this stronger sense. I submit that the following empirical hypothesis is true. Mature human beings, for the most part, at some point after the most careful deliberation they are capable of, conclude that their actions and beliefs do not satisfy what they take to be the best standards of justification—standards they admire and wish they could satisfy. People’s standards are surely very diverse, but typically nobody, after due deliberation, believes that their beliefs and actions fully satisfy their own best standards of justification.

## NOTES

1 I first discussed Hume’s concept of the whimsical condition in *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, 252 and “Filozofie a Náladový Stav Lidí [Philosophy and the Whimsical Condition of Mankind],” a paper I first presented November 15, 2007 for Masaryk University’s celebration of UNESCO’s World Philosophy Day. I thank Prof. Jan Zouhar for making this possible and for his excitement about this topic. I also want to thank my student Alex Hallam, currently at the University of Kentucky, for our many lively discussions and explorations while working on his thesis *The Whimsical Condition of Mankind*, as well as the graduate students in my 2014 seminar on Hume’s first *Enquiry*,

especially John Davis, Matt Gustafson, Graeme Troxell, and Tyler Will. My colleague Jeff Kasser read an early draft and pushed me to cast a much wider and better net. As always, I am very indebted to Jane Kneller. She worked through countless drafts of this paper as well as my countless bouts of self-doubt. I sincerely thank Ann Levey, co-editor of *Hume Studies*, for her patient and encouraging guidance. Finally, I am indebted to the anonymous referees, whose reviews forced and even inspired me to sharpen and tighten my case.

Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as "EHU" followed by section and paragraph number, and to Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

2 See Millican, "Context, Aims, Structure of the Enquiry," 45 and Stroud, *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*, 16.

3 Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as "EPM" followed by section and paragraph number, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

4 Hume, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," 528–29. Also Hume, *Political Essays*, 233.

5 "Whimsical, n.1" *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971. Hereafter abbreviated "OED" and cited in text by the term entry followed by the signification number.

6 My discussion in the next two paragraphs does not aim to settle the case against non-normative readings of Hume's skeptical considerations. See Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 40, 82–83 and 91–92; and Owen, *Hume's Reason*. Nevertheless, I believe that Hume's description of these foundations as subject to objections is *prima facie* evidence for the normative reading of Hume's skeptical considerations. Peter Millican and Gabriella DePieris offer a comprehensive critique of the thesis that Hume is not concerned with justification, but only with the description of cognitive mechanisms. See Millican, "Sceptical Doubts Concerning Induction," 147–51; and DePieris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 206–23, 228–33, and 283–89. Garrett refines and qualifies his position in "A Small Tincture of Pyrrhonism," 68–97. For a response, see DePieris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 289, 294–95 and note 359. Moreover, in the whimsical condition, the relevant concept of justification for Hume is one that is distinct from other non-cognitive standards of assessment, for example, in terms of our inclinations and propensities to believe; compare Loeb, *Stability and Justification*, 10. Finally, I leave open questions regarding the nature of the reasoning of justification according to Hume, although Millican's view in "Sceptical Doubts," 154–61, that Hume shares with Descartes and Locke a perceptual view of reason, and DePieris's "presentational-phenomenological" account in *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 2–6, also note 297, are viable alternatives.

7 Millican, "Sceptical Doubts," 149, argues that "foundation" refers to the "founded on" relation, which for Hume is a relationship of justification. Millican highlights Hume's reference to Hume's phrase "founded on . . . the authority of experience" (EHU 4.20, 10.35; SBN 36, 127). Also see DePieris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 220–22.

8 Hume's concept of justification in the context of his skeptical considerations is an internalist conception. In other words, he is concerned with justification from the believer's point of view, basing beliefs on reasons accessible to the believer. See Gascoigne, *Scepticism*, 24 and 90–92, and Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*, 120. Hume is inquiring into the limits of rational self-control, and basing one's beliefs on grounds that are available to oneself as a rational agent is an essential component of rational self-control. See Hookway, *Scepticism*, 106 and 185–87.

9 Note this refers to actual doubt, not all possible doubt.

10 “But though both of these definitions be drawn from circumstances foreign to the cause, we cannot remedy this inconvenience, or attain a more perfect definition, which may point out the circumstances in the cause, which gives it a connection with its effect” (EHU 7.29; SBN 77).

11 See also Gascoigne, *Scepticism*, 97–98.

12 That human beings consist of distinct agencies was suggested by Gazzaniga, *The Social Brain* and Minsky, *The Society of the Mind*.

13 Gascoigne, *Scepticism*, 4 and 135–36.

14 Note that the Humean Paradox does not require an explicit contradiction. All that is required is that agents have certain commitments together with the suspicion that they are not entitled to them. This would be contradictory if it is also assumed that having a commitment entails believing that one is entitled to it.

15 On the artist and anatomist in Hume's *Enquiry*, see Stewart, “Two Species of Philosophy.”

16 I turn to the dramatic concluding section 7 of Book 1 of the *Treatise* in order to highlight shared themes, not to find evidence for an interpretation that cannot be found in the *Enquiry*. While Hume's *Advertisement* for the *Enquiry* declares that the *Enquiry* “may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles,” he also maintains in the *Advertisement* that the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* share “principles, and reasonings” (SBN 2). It should also be noted that this counsel not to ignore the *Treatise* is specifically aimed to deal with certain “polemical” critics who violated “all rules of [. . .] fair-dealing” and marked by “bigotted zeal.” On the relation between the *Enquiry* and *Treatise*, see Millican, “Context, Aims,” 40–48. Also see DePierris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 210–20 and 272–83 on Hume's skepticism in both books.

17 References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph number, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as “SBN” followed by the page number.

18 On the view that the state of the mitigated skeptic is stable, calm, and even happy, see Smith, “The Naturalism of Hume,” 149–73. Also see Penelhum, *David Hume*, 27–29, and McCormick, “A Change in Manner,” 431–47.

19 Compare to McCormick, “A Change in Manner,” 445, who argues that the skeptical conclusion can lead to “the brink of [Pyrrhonian skepticism],” but that in the *Enquiry* Hume's skeptic does not go over the brink, even briefly. Note that what is under discussion is the Pyrrhonist doctrine of suspension of belief, not the Pyrrhonist doctrine of

assent, which is “mere cultural acquiescence, not conviction” (Penelhum, *David Hume*, 21). Also Hookway, *Scepticism*, 11–18.

20 Penelhum, *God and Skepticism*, 124–27. Millican, “Critical Survey of the Literature,” 422.

21 Compare D. F. Norton, “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy,” 376: “These arguments . . . by no means *convince* us of their sceptical conclusions.”

22 On my reading, there is no need to distinguish between psychological and philosophical doubt (D. F. Norton, “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy,” 384). Hume fully affirms the conclusion that his ordinary beliefs and actions lack justification, without doubting those beliefs. Hume drives a wedge not only between actions and justification (Penelhum, *David Hume*, 111), but also between belief and justification.

23 McCormick, “Hume, Wittgenstein, and the Impact of Skepticism,” 417–34. Also, Hookway, *Scepticism*, 102–103.

24 This obviates DePierris’s problem of reconciling the temporary nature of Pyrrhonism or radical skepticism and the stable nature of mitigated skepticism. She assumes that according to Hume, “radical skepticism must . . . be permanently available” in order to ward “any temptations of the supernatural” (DePierris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 301–302). As I have argued, radical skepticism is the skeptical considerations *plus* the practical injunction to suspend all judgment. All mitigated skepticism requires is the accessibility of the skeptical considerations, not the unsustainable injunction.

25 Hume’s claim in the *Enquiry* about the temptation of topics beyond the sphere of common life is compatible with his claim in the *Treatise* that “’tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like of those of beasts, in the narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action” (T 1.4.7.13; SBN 271). First, as we will see below, the topics he has in mind are different. Second, the claim in the *Treatise* is that it is *almost* impossible to keep the mind within the narrow sphere of common life, and that philosophy can serve to limit the topics we pursue. The claim in the *Enquiry* is that we will not be tempted to pursue the dangerous topics beyond the sphere of common life as long as we keep the skeptical considerations in mind. Here philosophy already serves as a guide to limit the topics.

26 Accordingly, Hume here is rejecting neither philosophy nor scientific knowledge, but “pretended supra-scientific metaphysical knowledge.” See Biro, “Hume’s New Science of Mind,” 46. It should be noted that while in the *Enquiry* the topics beyond the sphere of common life that will never tempt the mitigated skeptic are cosmological speculations, in the *Treatise* the topics “without the sphere of common life” include superstition as well as “philosophy,” which in the context of the discussion includes scientific knowledge as well as the concern with the principles of morality, aesthetics, and knowledge (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270–71).

27 Fogelin, *Hume’s Sceptical Crisis*, 132, limits the prescription to philosophy, but gives no reason why it should only apply to philosophy. The topic is how to preserve our skepticism in all incidents of life, and the prescription is about how to do this. Of course, it is particularly relevant to philosophy because it shows how to continue doing philosophy.

28 Compare McCormick, “A Change in Manner,” 445. Hume’s admonition to “preserve our scepticism” is not merely an admonition to temper our dogmatism, but to recognize that, in the end, we believe on the basis of inclination.

29 Compare Hookway, *Scepticism*, 103.

30 Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, 234. Also see Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 89–110.

31 See Losonsky, “On Wanting to Believe,” 101–28.

32 See DePierris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 213. For a comprehensive discussion of Garrett’s discussion of the Title Principle, see DePierris, *Ideas*, 294–301.

33 Loeb, *Stability*, 87n45. Also DePierris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 296.

34 “These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition” (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271).

35 See Biro, “Science of Mind,” 38.

36 Compare Hume’s skepticism that allows for certainty in our ordinary judgments to Unger, who argues that “we are certain of at most hardly anything.” See his *Ignorance*, 89.

37 Hume is not committed to the claim that our engaged beliefs and actions are void of *any* justification. Common life includes giving reasons and “practical attitude doubts,” but these are distinct from philosophical reflection on our “entitlement to the concept of knowledge” (Gascoigne, *Scepticism*, 3 and 133).

38 His concluding prescription in the *Enquiry* should not be diagnosed as a blind impulse lacking any reasoning whatsoever. Compare Fogelin, *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, 131. Also see, Fogelin, “The Tendency of Hume’s Skepticism.”

39 This assumes that propositions about ability are equivalent to conditionals. The analysis of propositions about abilities has a long history, beginning prominently with Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 126–31, and Austin, “Ifs and Cans,” 205–32. Austin argues *can*-sentences are not hypothetical but indicative sentences. For a recent discussion of conditional analyses of abilities, see Clarke, “Dispositions, Abilities to Act, and Free Will.”

40 On agency, deliberation, and internal options, see Smith, “Practical Imagination and its Limits.” On external options, see Maier, “The Agentive Modalities.”

41 In other words, I am suggesting that in the clause “they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves,” the phrase “by their most diligent enquiry” is not within the scope of “not able.” Hume separates “by their most diligent enquiry” from the rest of the clause by commas, suggesting that it is within the context of a person’s most diligent enquiry that she lacks the ability to satisfy her desires for rational justification.

42 I take the clause “Were the generality of mankind contented to prefer easy philosophy to the abstract and profound” to be a counterfactual clause. In fact, mankind is not contented to prefer easy philosophy to the abstract and profound. The attraction to superstition and “adulterate” metaphysics is an expression of this preference.

43 Compare Flew, *David Hume*, 115, and Hookway, *Scepticism*, 101.

44 While these “honest gentlemen” have beliefs mostly untouched by their own theoretical reflection, Hume does not suggest that their beliefs therefore are justified. Pace Loeb, *Stability*, 92.

45 Compare Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 279: “The first therefore great use of Liberty, is to hinder blind Precipitancy; the principal exercise of Freedom is to stand still, open the eyes, look about, and take view of the consequence of what we are going to do, as much as they weight of the matter requires” (II.21.67). Hume’s view is that human beings for the most part are very uncomfortable in this state of suspended action and deliberation, and instead “throw themselves precipitately” into action without due deliberation. I developed some of these ideas in “Hume, Locke and the Whimsical Condition of Freedom and Determinism,” *History of Modern Philosophy Workshop*, University of Padua, Italy, March 18, 2015.

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