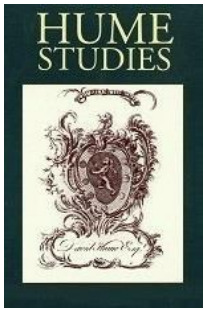

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I understand the title of this book, *Hume's True Scepticism,*[1] not as a promise to identify some thesis, or doctrine, that is a statement of Hume's scepticism and is true, but rather to *explain* what Hume's scepticism really amounts to, what it truly is—the real thing. That is what I too would like to discuss. And I applaud Ainslie's concentration on the concluding section of Book 1 of the *Treatise* as the best place to look for an expression of that Humean scepticism. I have long regarded that section, with the corresponding parts of the first *Enquiry*, as essential to the proper understanding of Hume as a philosopher.

Hume set out to investigate empirically the general character of all human experience, thought, understanding, knowledge, feeling, and action; he sought a "science of human nature." But in reviewing his progress at the end Book 1 of his *Treatise*, he laments at great length, and in dramatic, personal terms, the completely hopeless position he finds himself in. This presents us with these questions. What exactly is that "hopeless position"? What makes Hume think it is "hopeless"? If it really is "hopeless," how could Hume get out of it? *Does* he get out of it? And if he doesn't get out of it, how can he carry on his further philosophical studies in Books 2 and 3 of the *Treatise*, not to mention the two *Enquiries*?

These last questions are what Ainslie draws most attention to. I will try to say something about this.

Hume's laments about the position he finds himself in are all expressed in the first person, and they are personal laments. It is David Hume who complains that "After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I should assent to it; and feel nothing but a strong propensity to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear to me" (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265).[2] That is because he has found in his researches that certain "principles

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of the imagination" are responsible for human beings believing and feeling and doing all the things we do. It is only because "the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others" that we "assent to any argument, [or] carry our view beyond those few objects that are present to our senses" (T 1.4.7. 3; SBN 265). And which ideas happen to get "enlivened" in the mind depends only on the operation of the "principles of the imagination." Experience and habit, "conspiring to operate on the imagination, make me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner" (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265).

Hume describes those principles of the imagination as "so trivial, and so little founded on reason" (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265). He does not mean they are trivial in their effects; we think and feel and believe as we do only because those principles are in operation. But they operate independently of whether the beliefs they thereby produce are true or false, or even reasonable. It is no wonder, then, as Hume puts it, that a principle, "so inconstant and fallacious, shou'd lead us into errors, when implicitly follow'd (as it must be) in all its variations" (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 265–66). If we yield to every effect of the imagination, "we must at last become asham'd of our credulity" (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267). But to adhere only to the understanding would be fatal, since "the understanding, when it acts alone, . . . entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 267–68).

In speaking of "philosophy" here, Hume means the very enterprise he is engaged in in the *Treatise*. His study of human nature has apparently revealed to him that human beings in common life have no reasons for believing any of the things they do. But Hume is a human being, so he too has no reasons for believing anything, even the very conclusions he takes himself to have arrived at in his study of human nature, that is, in "philosophy." He really is in despair.

> 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)

But even this resolution "to reject all belief and reasoning" provides no escape. When he tries to carry it out, Hume finds he simply cannot do it. Not because there is reason against it; that would not help even if it were true. But because even having reached his gloomy verdict on human reasoning he simply finds himself "absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. . . . I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269).

Ainslie makes what I think is a very important point about this. Hume's investigations and his responses to the challenge of scepticism show that, as Ainslie puts it: "We are fully engaged by our mental processes, naturally believing the conclusions of our reasoning and the verdicts of our senses rather than standing over and superintending them" (219). We can reflect on the conclusions we have been led to accept, and perhaps we have second thoughts about them, or even change our mind, but in all this, as Ainslie puts it, "we continue to be

engaged in our reasoning and sensing" (219), not to stand above it, or beside it, or to assess it from some other standpoint. This is important, for Hume and for the rest of us; *there is* no other standpoint from which to engage in sensing and reasoning about whatever it might be.

But Ainslie suggests that despite this inevitable engagement:

> Philosophy . . . wants something more—a vindication of our cognitive capacities as enabling us to get things right. It turns out that philosophy is impotent when it takes on this task. . . . But . . . this was a problem only *for philosophy*, and leaves us, in common life, continuing to believe our reasonings and sensings without trouble. (219)

This is the basis of Ainslie's idea that the disappointment Hume expresses in the final Section of Book 1 of the *Treatise* is disappointment with *philosophy*: that philosophical reflection interferes with, and undermines, our tendencies to believe and reflect (219). Ainslie sees Hume's chief concern in his confrontation with scepticism as a matter of understanding and explaining the place of philosophy in Hume's conception of the mind or human nature (219).

I have doubts about this as an account of what Hume is really up to in that final Section of Book 1. For one thing, philosophy, as Hume understands it, is precisely the empirical, explanatory enterprise he is engaged in throughout the *Treatise*. A "philosophy" that seeks a "vindication" of our cognitive capacities as a source of truth would seem to be something "standing over" our human capacities in some way, trying to assess their adequacy, or "superintending" them. But in that final section of Book 1, Hume is not "standing over" his efforts and asking what the philosophy he is engaged in can legitimately do, or what kinds of claims it can make on us. He is a human being directly engaged in trying to understand human nature as it is. And he reports that his efforts leave him as a scientist of human nature "disappointed" (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266), with "no reason" why he should assent to whatever he assents to (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265), with no "hope of ever attaining satisfaction" (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 267), and "asham'd of our credulity" (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267): "When we trace up the human understanding to its first principles, we find it to lead us into such sentiments, as seem to turn into ridicule all our past pains and industry, and discourage us from further enquiries" (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266).

These are Hume's despairing responses "from within" philosophy, or the study of human nature. They are responses Hume thinks any engaged human student of human nature will find himself with. Ainslie suggests that overcoming or avoiding a disappointingly "impotent" philosophy, or regarding philosophy as an "optional" activity to be engaged in or not at our will, would leave us free to perceive, believe, and reason about the things we do in everyday life without difficulty. Of course, there is a sense in which that is right. Philosophy is in that sense "optional," in Ainslie's word. We can take it or leave it. But that is no help to Hume in the position he finds himself in. Even Hume does not engage in philosophy every hour of the day and night; most of the time he is like the rest of us. The problem for Hume is that when he does investigate human nature in general, he cannot get an understanding of it that he himself can find satisfactory. And he thinks anyone else who investigates human nature empirically and dispassionately will be led to the same outcome.

For Ainslie this raises a difficult problem of interpretation. If Hume fully "endorsed" the reflections that led him to his sceptical plight (226), if he is "committed to the negative verdicts about his beliefs" that he had reached at that stage (228), how could he or we explain his continuing his philosophical studies beyond the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise*? "Once we have learned that our cognitive capacities are fundamentally unsound," Ainslie says, "there is no longer any *reason* for our continued attraction" to such studies. Without having left those sceptical reflections behind, he says, "we would still *believe* the negative verdicts" (229). But "if we really believed that we are as cognitively disordered as the sceptical interpretation of Hume suggests, it is hard to see how we would ever continue to philosophize" (230).

I think there is an answer, or at least the beginnings of an answer, to this interpretative question in Hume. It lies in what his scepticism, or what he calls his "scepticism," really amounts to. The answer depends on what is unsatisfactory about the state Hume first finds himself in, and then on how he gets out of that state. He escapes the position he finds hopeless not by abandoning all belief and reasoning, which he simply cannot do, but by yielding to "the current of nature" and so, finding himself "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). He finds that he cannot accept what his study of human nature has revealed to him: that he has no reasons for believing anything. He cannot accept that and act in the light of it. And in yielding to the current of nature, and living and talking and acting like other people in the common affairs of life, as he finds he must, Hume says "I shew most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269).

What Hume here calls his "sceptical disposition and principles" is akin to the attitudes attributed to sceptics in antiquity who were said to pursue a trouble-free way of life by following their natural inclinations and "going along with appearances." Hume thought we cannot live and act without beliefs, but he aligns himself with the sceptical tradition in his acquiescence in beliefs that are fully "natural" to human beings and so unavoidable. Hume found the beliefs of common life unavoidable even in the face of his despair about finding reasons to believe anything. The forces of nature alone are what free him from that sceptical plight: "Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium" (T 1.4.7.9; SBN 269). "'Tis happy," Hume says, "that nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time" (T 1.4.2.13; SBN 187).

The general forces of nature—human nature—free Hume from the paralyzing position he would otherwise have found himself in. And more specific forces of nature—David Hume's nature—lead him to continue his philosophical enquiries into the questions that concern him. He is "naturally inclin'd" to carry his view into all those subjects (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270); he "cannot forbear having a curiosity" about them (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 270); he is "uneasy to think" that he approves of one thing and disapproves of another "without knowing upon what principles" he proceeds (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). "These sentiments spring up naturally" in him, and he "*feels* he shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure" if he were to avoid them (T 1.4.7.12; SBN 271). The feelings are not even exclusively self-interested. As he explains, with all due humil-

ity: "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" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273).

In yielding to these natural inclinations, and proposing to continue his philosophical investigations, Hume describes himself as proceeding "upon sceptical principles" (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270): "A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273). This description in the *Treatise* of the attitudes of a "true sceptic" comes close to expressing what Hume in the last section of *An Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding* comes to call "mitigated scepticism." That condition is "the natural result" of "Pyrrhonism, or *excessive* scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection" (EHU 12.24; SBN 161).[3] The "innocent satisfaction" Hume seeks and expects from his continued philosophical investigations are not to be foregone simply because of the "excessive" doubts and melancholy that temporarily overwhelmed him.

This "sceptical disposition" with which Hume proposes to continue in philosophy—what he later calls "mitigated scepticism"—promises a way of thinking and reflecting that combines acknowledgement both of the profound "excessive" doubts of "Pyrrhonism" that overcame him at first, and of the "natural instincts" that he found to free him, and so, protect him from those "excessive" doubts: "To bring us to so salutary a determination, nothing can be more serviceable, than to be once thoroughly convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt, and of the impossibility that anything but the strong power of natural instinct can free us from it" (EHU 12.25; SBN 162). Hume here stresses the equal importance of both ingredients in the combination. We must see and appreciate *both* the impossibility of a satisfactory answer to the "excessive" doubts of "Pyrrhonism," *and* the impossibility—the human impossibility—of accepting that scepticism, and living as if it is true. The "mitigated scepticism" within which Hume continues to philosophize is attainable *only* by our being once "thoroughly convinced" of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt, and *then* finding that in fact, the forces of nature have freed us from the inactivity that the doubts seem to imply. At the very end of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, I think Hume acknowledges the presence of both those ingredients in the truly "sceptical" way of life he finds himself in. And it is in that more "diffident" spirit that he ventures to "launch out into the immense depths of philosophy which lie before" him.

Hume thinks such a durable combination of attitudes is likely to lead to greater "modesty and reserve." "The greater part of mankind," he says, "are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions," and "a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride" and encourage in them "that degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which . . . ought forever to accompany a just reasoner" (EHU 12.24; SBN 161–62). "Another . . . natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, is the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding . . . avoiding "all distant and high enquiries" (EHU 12.25; SBN 162).

> 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)

What Hume thinks the "excessive" and unanswerable force of Pyrrhonian doubt brings home to us what he calls:

> 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)

Hume himself was certainly unable to satisfy himself concerning the "foundation" of his acting, reasoning, and believing as he does. His despair at that point seemed far from "whimsical." And he saw his own dissatisfaction with the foundations of those operations as the fate of all of us. There is no satisfactory vindication of our cognitive capacities in general that meets the Pyrrhonist's standards. Not because philosophy, in standing over our reasonings and assessing their validity, is impotent to show that those standards have been met. And not because superintending philosophical reflection interferes with, or undermines, our natural inclinations to reflect and believe. The Pyrrhonian conclusion cannot be accepted simply because the lively endorsement required for believing and acting as we do comes from fully natural forces or instincts. And those forces operate even in the face of what we recognize, and even feel, to be a paralysis of reason.

Our being naturally unable to resist believing things does not provide a "naturalist vindication" of the beliefs we naturally arrive at, or of the processes which generate them. It is simply an undeniable fact about human thinkers and believers and agents as we find ourselves in the world. That is what frees Hume from "excessive" scepticism and leads him to his "mitigated scepticism." There are questions Hume does not answer about this apparently more liberated "sceptical" condition within which he resolves to continue his philosophical reflections. Exactly what attitude does he hold towards those things he cannot help believing, while being unable to satisfy himself about their "foundation," or to remove objections that can be raised against them? Does he fully endorse them, or not? How "diffident" can he consistently be towards these questions about reasons while continuing to accept what he believes? These and other questions would need to be answered before Ainslie's challenge to this "sceptical" understanding of Hume could be fully met.

But there seems little doubt that Hume himself understood the position he found himself in in some such way. Given his questions, and his natural curiosity, about human nature, he cannot refrain from investigating more closely the details of human life, despite being unable to satisfy himself concerning the foundation of the very operations he recognizes to be the

only ways of finding out anything about the world. And in carrying on as he does, he shows "most perfectly" his "sceptical disposition and principles."

NOTES

1 Numbers alone in parentheses in the text refer to the pages of this book.

2 References 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.

3 References are to 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.

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