Hume, Naturalism and Scepticism: Rejecting an Influential Narrative

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Since the influential work of Norman Kemp Smith, it has become standard to interpret and debate Hume's philosophy in terms of the broad themes of "scepticism" and "naturalism". This has been particularly popular with scholars – notably Peter Strawson – who favour a relatively consistent narrative, whereby Hume's "naturalism" is understood as providing some general response – or even a resolution – to the sceptical problems (and some related issues) that he raises. My aim here is to challenge this sort of narrative, by drawing distinctions within both scepticism and naturalism, and showing how Hume's attitudes and responses to his most prominent philosophical challenges are importantly different, while the idea that he employs a broadly consistent "naturalist" strategy to address them is also misguided when examined in detail.

1. Background: Humean "Naturalism", from Kemp Smith to Strawson

Kemp Smith's conception of "The Naturalism of Hume" was introduced in his eponymous two-part paper published in *Mind* in 1905. There he announced, as his "general conclusion", that:

> "the establishment of a purely naturalistic conception of human nature by the thorough subordination of reason to feeling and instinct is the determining factor in Hume's philosophy" (1905, p. 150).

On this reading, instinctive belief and practice dominate theoretical reason:

> "The assumption of the existence of body is a 'natural belief' due to the ultimate instincts or propensities that constitute our human nature. … Belief in causal action is equally natural and indispensable; …" (1905, pp. 151-2)

> "Reason is not the guide to action, but, quite the reverse, our ultimate and unalterable tendencies to action are the test of practical truth and falsity. Reason … is nothing distinct from our natural beliefs, and therefore cannot justify them. [Hume's] attitude in ethics – that 'reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions …' has its exact counterpart in his theory of knowledge." (1905, p. 156)

So just as our natural moral sentiments provide the basis for moral commitment (a thought familiar within the sentimentalist tradition), so our fundamental commitments to *the external world* and to *objective causality* are "shown to be 'natural', 'inevitable', 'indispensable', and are thus removed beyond the reach of our sceptical doubts" (p. 152). Naturalistic feeling trumps sceptical reason.

30 years later, as reported in the preface of his monumental book of 1941, Kemp Smith broadened this position by concluding that Hume was primarily inspired by Francis Hutcheson's "moral sense" theory and its generalisation to epistemology and metaphysics. Accordingly, "it was through the gateway of morals that Hume entered into his philosophy, and … as a consequence of this, Books II and III of the *Treatise* are in date of first composition prior to the working out of the doctrines dealt with in

Book I" (1941, p. vi). This last speculation seems rather daring given Hume's publishing history, but it has nevertheless proved influential.[1]

The next major work to emphasise Humean "naturalism" was Barry Stroud's well-known book of 1977, which acknowledges Kemp Smith's influence and initially seems to follow him closely:

> "[Hume] agrees with the essentials of Hutcheson's theory of morality and aesthetics … But in Hume's hands the denigration of the role of reason and the corresponding elevation of feeling and sentiment is generalized into a total theory of man. Even in the apparently most intellectual or cognitive spheres of human life, even in our empirical judgments about the world and in the process of pure ratiocination itself, feeling is shown to be the dominant force. Even 'belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures' [*T* 1.4.1.8]." (Stroud 1977, pp. 10-11)

However, in his final chapter, "Problems and Prospects of Humean Naturalism", which argues for the predominance of Hume's naturalism over both scepticism and concept empiricism, Stroud interprets "Humean naturalism" rather differently from Kemp Smith. Here any "subordination of reason to feeling" is strongly downplayed outside the specific area of morals,[2] with Stroud emphasising instead Hume's ambition to achieve an empirically-based *natural science* of humanity,

> "seeking extremely general truths about how and why human beings think, feel and act in the ways they do … in the only way possible – by observation and inference from what is observed" (p. 222).[3]

That Hume is committed to this sort of "naturalism" is relatively uncontroversial, and quite different – even arguably in serious tension – with any systematic subordination of reason to instinctive feeling.[4]

Kemp Smith's more specific understanding of Humean "naturalism" came back to prominence indirectly, through a combination of Peter Strawson's famous 1962 paper "Freedom and Resentment" (which mentions Hume only in a footnote concerned with the justification of induction), and Paul Russell's influential work on Hume's treatment of *free will and responsibility*. In his initial 1983 paper "On The Naturalism of Hume's 'Reconciling Project'", Russell focused only on Hume, but later, in a paper of 1992 and his 1995 book *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, he went on to draw connections, and also some contrasts,[5] with Strawson's position:

[1] See for example Stroud (1977), pp. 186, 251 n. 9, 263 n. 10; Craig (1987) p. 71; Noonan (1999), pp. 18-19; and Blackburn (2008), p. 108 n. 15. Quite apart from other objections, it is chronologically very implausible that Hume left for France in 1734 with his moral ideas significantly worked out, composed the bulk of Books 3, 1 and 2 there within three years, and then on his return delayed publishing Book 3 until 21 months after the others.

[2] On p. 234, Stroud states: "[Hume's] view is that 'morality … is more properly felt than judg'd of' [*T* 3.1.2.1], so he sees our making moral 'pronouncements' as a matter of having impressions or feelings rather than thoughts or beliefs".

[3] A similar emphasis is apparent in Stroud's paper "Naturalism and Skepticism in the Philosophy of Hume", published nearly 40 years later in 2016. Here it is not *feeling* that ameliorates scepticism, but rather, the undogmatic state of mind that naturally results from reflection on profound sceptical problems, and facilitates the kind of "mitigated scepticism" advocated in Section 12 Part 3 of the first *Enquiry*.

[4] A range of disciplines – from cultural history to child psychology and cognitive science of religion – tell us that the practice of systematic, empirically disciplined, scientific thinking is very far from "natural" to us.

[5] The two main contrasts that Russell identifies are, first, that Hume considers "the truth of the thesis of determinism [as] required for the functioning of our moral sentiments" whereas "Strawson is explicitly agnostic"; and secondly, that Strawson, unlike Hume, exhibits little interest in "the general causes of these reactive attitudes" (Russell 1995, p. 79).

> "on Hume's view, regarding a person as responsible 'is more properly felt that judg'd of'. To hold a person responsible is to regard them as the object of a certain kind of *passion* – namely, a moral sentiment. In the absence of any appropriate passion of this nature, no one would, as a matter of fact, be regarded as responsible. One of the objectives of Hume's science of man was to discover under what circumstances people are *felt* to be responsible for their actions." (Russell 1995, p. 58)

> "The overall resemblance between Hume's and Strawson's strategy in dealing with issues of freedom and responsibility is quite striking. The fundamental point that they agree about is that we cannot understand the nature and conditions of moral responsibility without reference to the crucial role that moral sentiment plays in this sphere. This naturalistic approach places Hume and Strawson in similar positions … Both these thinkers … shift emphasis and attention from problems of freedom to problems of responsibility. Instead of arguing that we interpret responsibility in terms of the conditions of freedom, it is suggested that we try to understand the conditions of freedom in terms of an empirically better informed … naturalistic approach to the problem of responsibility." (Russell 1995, p. 81)

As Russell points out (pp. 65-6), this "naturalistic approach" involves both the empirical "science of man" that Stroud emphasises, and also subordination of reason to feeling as stressed by Kemp Smith. Such subordination, however, runs counter to the classical compatibilist interpretation of Hume, which understands his "reconciling project with regard to the question of liberty and necessity" as primarily a matter of conceptual clarification rather than the empirical psychology of moral sentiments.[6] On this reading, Hume's famous definition of *liberty* – as *"a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will"* – facilitates such a reconciliation by specifying a plausible condition for moral responsibility that is clearly consistent with the "doctrine of necessity" (i.e. determinism). Such "hypothetical liberty" is quite distinct from *indifference* or *chance*, whose reality Hume consistently denies,[7] and yields the attractively straightforward account that *responsibility* is linked conceptually to *causation by the agent's willings* (rather than requiring any lack of causal necessity). Russell's novel "naturalistic" reading of Hume, however, rejects this "classical" approach, in favour of the view that holding someone responsible is to regard them as an object of *sentiments* of approval or disapproval, with such ascriptions turning on human psychology rather than conceptual connections.[8] Thus interpreted, Hume does indeed anticipate Strawson's influential discussion of the problem of moral responsibility.

Meanwhile Strawson himself had been taking an explicit interest in Humean "naturalism", not in connection with his own earlier work on responsibility, but rather, as providing a potential answer to *epistemological* scepticism (as hinted in his 1962 footnote about induction mentioned earlier). He first developed these ideas in lectures given at Oxford in 1980, which later became the Columbia Woodbridge Lectures of 1983, ultimately published in 1985 as *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. In his early sections "Hume: Reason and Nature" (pp. 10-14) and "Hume and Wittgenstein" (pp. 14-21),

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[6] The quoted phrases in this and the next two sentences are from *EHU* 8.23.

[7] For Hume's denial of chance, see *EHU* 8.25 which echoes *T* 1.3.11.4; also *T* 2.3.1.15, 18. The *Treatise* discussion of "liberty and necessity" is marred by Hume's repeated use of "liberty" to mean *chance*, though he does once explicitly distinguish *liberty of spontaneity* from *liberty of indifference* (*T* 2.3.2.1). It seems likely that he intends the former to be essentially the same as his "hypothetical liberty" – for detailed interpretative discussion, see Millican 2023b, §§4-7.

[8] See, for example, Russell (1995), pp. 58, 61.

Strawson cites several passages from the *Treatise*, shown below in their original textual order, with the parts that he explicitly quotes or mentions underlined:

> "Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sunshine. Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable." (*T* 1.4.1.7, quoted on p. 11)

> "My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*." (*T* 1.4.1.8, quoted on p. 15)

> "Thus the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings." (*T* 1.4.2.1, quoted on pp. 11-12)

Strawson sums up that "According to Hume the naturalist, skeptical doubts are not to be met by argument. They are simply to be neglected … because they are *idle*; powerless against the force of nature, or our naturally implanted disposition to belief." (p. 13). But Strawson then clarifies that this still leaves reason with a "part to play in relation to our beliefs concerning matters of fact and existence", albeit "a subordinate one: as Nature's lieutenant rather than Nature's commander":

> "Our inescapable natural commitment is to a general frame of belief and to a general style (the inductive) of belief-formation. But *within* that frame and style, the requirement of Reason, that our beliefs should form a consistent and coherent system, may be given full play. Thus, for example, though Hume did not think that a rational justification of induction in general was either necessary or possible, he could quite consistently proceed to frame 'rules for judging of cause and effect'. Though it is Nature which commits us to inductive belief-formation in general, it is Reason which leads us to refine and elaborate our inductive canons and procedures and, in their light, to criticize, and sometimes to reject, what in detail we find ourselves naturally inclined to believe." (Strawson 1985, p. 14).

Here Strawson's discussion of "Hume: Reason and Nature" ends.[9] But this ending, though reasonable enough as a summary of Hume's philosophy of *inductive method*, fits rather uneasily with what

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[9] Although unacknowledged, it seems hard to deny that Kemp Smith influenced this discussion, which starts with the comment that "In a famous sentence in Book II of the *Treatise* Hume limits the pretensions of reason to determine the ends of action", followed by a footnote to the quotation "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (*T* 2.3.3.4). Strawson then goes on to say that "In a similar spirit, towards the end of Book I, [Hume] limits the pretensions of reason to determine the formation of beliefs concerning matters of fact and existence." (pp. 10-11). Strawson's Wittgensteinian interpretation of Hume's natural beliefs also seems to be anticipated by Kemp Smith: "The natural beliefs … provide the context – the frame of reference, so to speak – in the absence of which none of our other more specific beliefs … could have been possible to the mind" (1941, p. 124).

Strawson said earlier about naturalism as an answer to *scepticism* (e.g. about the external world), because Hume's discussion of his rules (in *Treatise* 1.3.15) is anything but sceptical. As we shall see later, Strawson is here running together topics which Hume himself treats somewhat differently.

2. Four Topics, Five Types of Naturalism, and an Agenda

We have now encountered four main topic areas in epistemology and metaphysics, which have featured strongly in the relevant scholarly discussions about Humean "naturalism":

- <u>Inductive Scepticism</u>
  As just quoted, Strawson's summing-up focuses on "Our inescapable natural commitment … to a general frame of belief and to a general style (the inductive) of belief-formation", interpreting this as an answer to sceptical objections.

- <u>Causation as a Natural Belief</u>
  Kemp Smith considers belief in objective causality to be one of the two basic Humean "natural beliefs", grounded on "the ultimate instincts or propensities that constitute our human nature" and "thus removed beyond the reach of our sceptical doubts" (1905, pp. 151-2).

- <u>Free Will and Responsibility</u>
  Russell understands Humean ascriptions of responsibility to be founded on our "reactive attitudes" rather than on metaphysical judgments about free will. This approach is close in spirit (though not identical) to that of Strawson in "Freedom and Resentment".

- <u>Scepticism about the External World</u>
  Belief in external objects is the second of Kemp Smith's "natural beliefs", and this kind of response to external world scepticism is also a major focus of Strawson's discussion.

The question to be addressed in what follows is how far, and in what sense(s), Hume can properly be considered a "naturalist" in these four topic-areas, and for this purpose, it will be helpful first to distinguish five main varieties of naturalism that have been commonly or prominently ascribed to him.[10] These are all to be understood in the context of his general ambition "to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects" (as in the subtitle of the *Treatise*), and thus to create an empirically based science of the mind – what we now call *psychology*, and focused particularly on the subfield of *cognitive science*. This ambition is manifest in virtually all of Hume's philosophy, including the two *Enquiries* and the *Dissertation on the Passions*, the essays on politics, economics, and aesthetics, and his various contributions to the philosophy of religion.

[10] There is, however, no standard taxonomy, and here I am using the same categories as in my (2016). Garrett (2006), pp. 301-2 instead itemises *doxastic naturalism*, *epistemic naturalism*, *explanatory naturalism*, and *metaphysical naturalism*, while making the point that other varieties are also possible.

(a) Explanatory Naturalism

First, Hume seems to be aspiring to establish a *natural* science of human thought and behaviour, explaining mental phenomena in terms of down-to-earth and empirically evident entities (e.g. individual "perceptions") and causal mechanisms (e.g. the Copy Principle, association of ideas, and custom) rather than any supposed divine ideas, transcendental insight, or psychic powers.[11]

(b) Biological Naturalism

Secondly, Hume's science of man places us squarely in the natural world alongside the other animals, a point emphasised strongly by his explicit comparisons between humans and animals, and the prominence within the *Treatise* of the relevant discussions. Three parts of the *Treatise* end respectively with sections on "the reason of animals" (1.3.16),[12] "the pride and humility of animals" (2.1.12), and "the love and hatred of animals" (2.2.12), all of which stress human parallels. Hume ends Part 2.3 without a section on "the will and direct passions of animals" only because, he says, the parallel there is too obvious to require discussion (*T* 2.3.9.32).

(c) Anti-Supernaturalism

Thirdly, several of Hume's works argue vigorously, albeit often indirectly, against the supposed evidence for "invisible intelligent powers",[13] i.e. supernatural *agents* such as gods or spirits, and many of his writings – both published and private – evince hostility to established religion. Although some of his statements, notoriously, appear to indicate a commitment to theistic belief, these are widely regarded as either ironic or as "theological lying".[14]

I take it to be uncontroversial that all three of these varieties of "naturalism" are evident in Hume's works, and indeed that they cohere well together. The point of highlighting them here is simply to emphasise that these are *not* the varieties primarily under discussion in what follows. For in discussing the claim that Hume presents some kind of "naturalist" answer to scepticism along the lines sketched by Kemp Smith and Strawson, it is the following two varieties that are particularly relevant.

(d) Justificatory Naturalism

This involves the claim that (in some way or other) the *naturalness* of our beliefs or methods of reasoning somehow *justifies* them or at least *entitles us* to maintain them, by answering, avoiding or otherwise neutralising sceptical objections. One example is Strawson's statement, on Hume's behalf, that "sceptical doubts are … simply to be neglected … because they are *idle*; powerless against the force of nature, or our naturally implanted disposition to belief." (1985, p. 13).

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[11] It is unnecessary here to attempt to circumscribe precisely what counts as a "natural" entity or mechanism.

[12] Hume also devotes Section 9 of the first *Enquiry* to "the reason of animals".

[13] Hume uses this formula many times in the *Natural History of Religion* (*NHR* Intro.1, 2.2, 2.5, 3.4, 4.1, 5.2, 8.2, 15.5); at *EHU* 7.21 he talks of "some invisible intelligent principle". As understood here, anti-supernaturalism specifically rejects supernatural *agents*, rather than supernatural entities in general (e.g. Platonic Forms).

[14] For discussion of such texts and of Hume's attitude towards religion in general, see Millican (2002), §3.

(e) Sentimentalist Naturalism

This is Kemp Smith's particular variant of *justificatory naturalism*, involving "the thorough subordination of reason to feeling" (1905, p. 150), enabling the naturalness of our *feelings* to provide the ultimate justification of our relevant beliefs. It also encompasses the position that Russell attributes to Hume on the issue of moral responsibility, whereby "holding someone responsible is primarily a matter of feeling rather than reasoning. One knows an agent is responsible only if one is aware of that person's causing a certain sentiment of approbation or blame. Nor is this sentiment itself amenable to rational justification." (1995, p. 64).

Let us now go through the main sceptical topics listed above, and examine how far Hume's treatment of them does indeed exemplify justificatory and/or sentimentalist naturalism.

3. A Naturalist Justification of Induction (à la Strawson)?

In the *Treatise*, Hume never describes his treatment of induction as *sceptical*, and the famous argument of *T* 1.3.6 appears to function mainly as an important stage in his quest to identify the impression of necessary connexion (which began at *T* 1.3.2.11 and finally bears fruit at *T* 1.3.14.20).[15] There is indeed a hint of scepticism at *T* 1.3.6.11, where Hume emphasises the inability of reason "to prove, that there must be a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those which lie beyond the reach of our discovery". But instead of leading to epistemological anxiety, this is immediately followed by an appeal to associative principles, and to the identification at *T* 1.3.6.14 of the specific inductive principle which Hume will later call *custom* (at *T* 1.3.7.6).

By contrast, *Enquiry* Section 4 on induction is explicitly titled "Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding", and in Section 12 ("Of the academical or sceptical philosophy"), Hume puts his own argument from Section 4 into the mouth of the sceptic:

> "The sceptic … seems to have ample matter of triumph; while he justly insists, that all our evidence for any matter of fact, which lies beyond the testimony of sense or memory, is derived entirely from the relation of cause and effect; that we have no other idea of this relation than that of two objects, which have been frequently conjoined together; that we have no argument to convince us, that objects, which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise, in other instances, be conjoined in the same manner; and that nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful. While the sceptic insists upon these topics, he shews his force, or rather, indeed, his own and our weakness; and seems, for the time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction." (*EHU* 12.22)

Hume then responds to the sceptic with an answer which appears (to me, at any rate), to be quite persuasive:[16]

> "For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, *What*

[15] The factor of *constant conjunction*, which is destined to play a key role, enters at *T* 1.3.6.3.

[16] For a fuller explanation of what I take this answer to be, see §1 of my (2012).

> *his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* … a PYRRHONIAN cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. It is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a PYRRHONIAN may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples … When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first … to confess, that all his objections … can have no other tendency than to 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)

Is this an example of *justificatory naturalism* of the Strawsonian kind, claiming that "sceptical doubts are … simply to be neglected … because they are *idle*; powerless against the force of nature, or our naturally implanted disposition to belief"? Hume's pithy observation that "Nature is always too strong for principle" might seem to point in that direction, but this actually occurs as something of an aside – explaining why "so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded" – rather than as a fundamental part of Hume's positive argument. That argument is to the effect *that no durable good can ever result from excessive scepticism, even were it possible to be achieved*. For the sceptic "must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail" (and if the sceptic refuses to "acknowledge any thing" – by refraining from any prediction whatever – then he clearly cannot provide any advice for the future, either positive or negative). All this should be read, I believe, against the background of an important paragraph earlier in Section 12, where Hume rejects what he calls extreme *antecedent* scepticism:

> "There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others … It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others … Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject." (*EHU* 12.3)

Instead of attempting the hopeless task of justifying our faculties *a priori* (when any such justification could only be done using those very faculties), Hume seems to be suggesting here – and over the next two paragraphs – that we should be prepared initially to give *default* authority to our faculties (at least where they are carefully applied), but remain open to adopting a *"consequent"* sceptical position if, and when, we discover by experience "either the absolute fallaciousness of [our] mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination" (*EHU* 12.5). In the case of induction, the recognition of our "whimsical condition" – whereby we "must act and reason and believe" without being able to justify our fundamental assumption that the future will resemble the past – does not constitute such a worrying

discovery. It may indeed raise a *theoretical sceptical worry*, but it gives no practical basis for *rejecting* our default reliance on induction, especially when we are convinced "that all human life must perish" were the sceptic's "principles universally and steadily to prevail". We stand to lose everything by following the sceptic, who cannot reasonably (on his own principles) assure us of any benefit if we do so. This looks like a principled argument against extreme inductive scepticism, combining epistemic and pragmatic considerations that would remain forceful *even if we were capable of maintaining and acting on sceptical beliefs*. It is thus quite different from the Strawsonian justificatory naturalism which simply insists that such beliefs are psychologically unsustainable.

4. Causation as a Natural Belief (à la Kemp Smith)?

As we saw in §1 above, Kemp Smith interprets Hume as viewing our fundamental commitments to *the external world* and to *objective causality* as "natural beliefs" grounded on "the ultimate instincts or propensities that constitute our human nature" which are "thus removed beyond the reach of our sceptical doubts" (1905, pp. 151-2). He describes this as Hume's "doctrine of natural belief" (1905, p. 170), later going on to say that "This doctrine of natural belief is one of the most essential, and perhaps the most characteristic doctrine in Hume's philosophy." (1941, p. 86, cf. 447). Focusing here on the objective world (as opposed to the domain of human sentiments),[17] the doctrine essentially involves just two core natural beliefs, first in "the continuing and therefore independent existence" of objects (1941, pp. 116 n., 222, 455) – to be considered in §6 below – and a second which is most often described by Kemp Smith as belief in "causal connexion" (1905, p. 167; 1941, pp. 222, 486) or "causal dependence" (1941, pp. 116 n., 455, 483, 503 n.). But he sometimes elucidates this second "natural belief" more fully, as a commitment to "the existence of 'secret' causes, acting independently of our experience" (1905, p. 152), "that … bodies … are causally operative upon one another", "*causally* interrelated" or "causally active" (1941, pp. 124, 410, 543), or more specifically, "that nothing can come into existence save through a pre-existent cause" (1905, p. 167) and "the necessity of events always being caused" (1941, p. 409).

There are several respects in which this account can be challenged. To start with, it is highly debatable whether there is any such "doctrine of natural belief" to be found in Hume. He never uses the term, despite Kemp Smith's assertions to the contrary (1941, pp. 114, 120, 222, 447), and as we shall see, it is far from clear that Hume treats the two topics that Kemp Smith identifies in a parallel way.[18] Most obviously, although Hume very clearly considers the existence of the external world (and the nature of our belief in it) as a *sceptical* topic – both in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* – he does not treat causation (and our conception of it) sceptically in either work. On the contrary, he embarks on his discussion of causation in a constructive spirit, aspiring to clarify our conceptual understanding by

[17] Kemp Smith mentions morality and aesthetics in connection with natural beliefs at (1905, p. 151) and (1941, p. 86).

[18] Such a supposed parallel is not only implicit in Kemp Smith's pairing of the two "natural beliefs", but also explicitly stated by him: "Hume's explanation [of the belief in causal interaction] runs more or less parallel with that … in the independently real" (1941, p. 119); "Hume's attitude to this question, whether every event is or is not caused, is thus precisely the attitude which he has adopted to the question 'whether there be body or not'." (1941, p. 409).

tracing the impression-source of the "essential" component idea of *necessary connexion* (*T* 1.3.2.11, cf. *EHU* 7.5). Moreover, his discussion culminates – again in both works – with a positive identification of the relevant impression (*T* 1.3.14.20, *EHU* 7.28), in radical contrast with the confused "fictions" that constitute our beliefs in external objects (*T* 1.4.2.29, 36, 42-3, 52).[19] Having identified the key impression, Hume then derives from it two *definitions of cause*. Certainly there are questions to be asked about how these derivations are intended to work, how the two definitions are supposed to fit together, and whether Hume's discussion is ultimately coherent. But whatever the answers to these questions might be, it is not plausible to interpret Hume here as having *sceptical* intent, given the way in which he later employs his definitions.[20] In the *Treatise*, he immediately goes on to draw several important "corollaries" (*T* 1.3.14.32-36), and then devotes the next section (*T* 1.3.15) to formulating the "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" to which Strawson alludes (as we saw at the end of §1 above). Perhaps even more significantly, Hume later – in both works – applies his two definitions of cause to establish two *definitions of necessity*, which he applies to resolve the vexed topic of "liberty and necessity" (in *T* 2.3.1-2 and *EHU* 8).[21]

Thus Hume's overall treatment of causation cannot plausibly be put alongside his treatment of the external world as exhibiting some "natural belief" that is supposed to defeat scepticism. But it might be thought that his more specific attack on the demonstrability of the Causal Maxim (in *T* 1.3.3) is a more plausible candidate. Perhaps Kemp Smith himself had this primarily in mind, because as we saw above, his most specific characterisations of the supposed "natural belief" are "that nothing can come into existence save through a pre-existent cause" (1905, p. 167) and "the necessity of events always being caused" (1941, p. 409). Hume was indeed *accused* of scepticism about the Causal Maxim, as we can see in his *Letter from a Gentleman* of 1745 (*LFG* 7, 15). But he explicitly denied being sceptical about it (*LFG* 26), and we have other correspondence also to confirm that he was sincere in this denial. The text of the *Treatise* itself is, regrettably, less clear on the matter, but the final paragraph of the relevant section (*T* 1.3.3.9) strongly corroborates Hume's claim that he was intending to argue that the Causal Maxim can be "supported by *moral Evidence*" (*LFG* 26). Unfortunately, it seems that he forgot to return explicitly to the topic later in the *Treatise*, and left it as a loose end (unless he was intending the paragraph at *T* 1.3.12.5 to supply the necessary argument).[22]

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[19] Hume does acknowledge a confusion that arises from the mind's "propensity to spread itself on external objects" when we falsely imagine that the impression in question is external rather than in the mind (*T* 1.3.14.25). But he invokes this propensity to explain why his theory of causation is likely to meet opposition, rather than as a part of that theory.

[20] Here I shall merely summarise a few of the most crucial points that have been made extensively against the so called "sceptical realist" or "New Hume" interpretation of Hume, which to some extent claims inspiration from Kemp Smith. For much more detail on these, see Millican (2007, 2009, 2011, and – for my own positive interpretation – 2024).

[21] Also worthy of mention – as a significant positive application of his theory of causation – is Hume's appeal to it in an important argument at *T* 1.4.5.30-33, where he aims to refute a popular objection to materialism.

[22] For much more detail on all this, see my (2010), especially §§IV, VI and VII.

5. Responsibility as Sentimentally Determined (à la Russell)?

It is uncontroversial that Hume takes *moral judgments* to be founded on sentiment, but the question here is whether he takes *moral responsibility* to be so founded. Just one passage in his philosophical writings – at *T* 2.3.2.6 – talks about the conditions for being *responsible* using that very term.[23] But the points it makes are echoed elsewhere (notably *EHU* 8.29-30), and follow familiar themes in his theory of moral appraisal, which focuses not so much on *types of action*, as on *durable qualities of mind* that are manifested in agents' behaviour, and may be judged as either *virtues* or *vices*:

> "… 'tis impossible, without the necessary connexion of cause and effect in human actions, that punishments cou'd be inflicted compatible with justice and moral equity; … The constant and universal object of hatred or anger is a person or creature endow'd with thought and consciousness; and when any criminal or injurious actions excite that passion, 'tis only by their relation to the person or connexion with him. But according to the doctrine of … chance, this connexion is reduc'd to nothing, … Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them, they … can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil. The action itself may be blameable; … But *the person is not responsible for it*; and as it proceeded from nothing in him, that is durable or constant, … 'tis impossible he can, upon its account, become the object of punishment or vengeance. 'Tis only upon the principles of necessity, that a person acquires any merit or demerit from his actions, however the common opinion may incline to the contrary."[24] (*T* 2.3.2.6, emphasis added)

According to Hume's virtue-ethical theory, we judge these qualities of mind by their *general tendencies* rather than *specific consequences*.[25] In its ultimate form in the second *Enquiry*, this constitutes something like a *utilitarian virtue ethics*,[26] with *reason* playing a crucial role in assessing these general tendencies of characters, while *sentiment* generates our approval of beneficial outcomes and disapproval of bad (*EPM Appx* 1.2-3). In the *Treatise*, by contrast, Hume downplays the role of reason, and devotes far more attention to our moral sentiments, explaining how the mechanism of *sympathy* plays a vital role by causing the ideas that we have of other people's pains and pleasures to become enlivened into impressions that we ourselves feel (*T* 2.1.11.2-7).[27] This mechanism is non-rational, just part of our

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[23] Most of *EHU* 8.29 is copied almost verbatim from the passage quoted below, but from the 1758 edition onwards Hume substitutes the term *answerable* – possibly a subtle acknowledgement that his theory subjects people to judgment for mental qualities over which they have no control? Along with Hume's relative silence about the notion of *responsibility*, it is also striking that he says very little about the conditions for just *punishment* except within his short and posthumously published essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (on which, see Russell's discussion mentioned in note 37 below).

[24] Thus Hume argues that his *doctrine of necessity* (in effect, determinism), so far from undermining morality as "the common opinion" presumes, is actually essential to it, ensuring the crucial link between motives and actions.

[25] There are two aspects to this sort of generalisation. First, when we make moral judgments about particular situations, we attempt to view them in abstraction from our own particular interests, fixing "on some *steady* and *general* points of view" that facilitate social agreement regarding moral sentiments and language (*T* 3.3.1.14-18, 30; cf. *EPM* 5.41-42, 9.6). Secondly, "the tendency of actions and characters, not their real accidental consequences, are alone regarded in our moral determinations or general judgments" (*EPM* 5.41 n. 24, cf. *T* 3.3.1.19-22).

[26] For more details and discussion, see Millican (2023a).

[27] This specific mechanism of sympathy apparently disappears from the second *Enquiry*, but is commonly assumed to remain implicit. My own view, however (see Millican 2020, §§5-7), is that sympathy is crucial in the *Treatise* precisely because Hume is there developing his theory on a predominantly egoistic basis. Its absence from the second *Enquiry*, accordingly, reflects his new awareness – evident in *Appendix* 2 "Of Self-love" – that we are genuinely altruistic, and hence capable of caring about others without literally sharing in their feelings.

natural psychology, as is our tendency to feel the distinctive moral sentiments of approval and disapproval – "certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust" – when we consider characters of mind and their good or bad tendencies from a "general" point of view (*T* 3.3.1.15).[28]

All this might seem to provide strong support for Paul Russell's claim that the key to Humean moral responsibility lies in these natural moral sentiments, rather than in rational assessment or conceptual understanding of free human action. This claim underlies his "naturalistic" interpretation of Hume's "reconciling project", which draws inspiration from both Kemp Smith and Strawson.[29] On this basis, Russell sharply distinguishes Hume's approach from that of classic compatibilists such as Ayer, who have understood responsibility instead in terms of some favoured account of free will.

I agree with Russell that Hume's position is significantly different from Ayer's, though for different reasons.[30] I also agree with his emphasis on sentiment as a basis for Humean *moral judgment*. But unlike Russell, I think this can be combined with the "classical" compatibilist emphasis on free will as a basis for *moral responsibility*, as long as we are careful to distinguish (as many have not) between moral *responsibility* and moral *culpability*. This distinction is already plausibly implicit in Hume's discussion as quoted above from *T* 2.3.2.6, which seems to take for granted that we typically identify "the person who perform'd" some action *before* we determine whether that action "redound[s] to his honour [or] infamy".[31] Accordingly, we distinguish between judging someone *responsible* for an action – in the sense of deeming it to be *their* action – and judging them as *praiseworthy* or *blameable* for doing it. Hume's text, however, suggests also a more demanding criterion of *responsibility*, requiring that the action in question "proceed[s] … from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed [it]" and perhaps in addition some mental quality which is "durable and constant". As already explained, he classifies such "qualities of the mind" as *virtues* if they give *pleasure* or *approval* "by the mere survey"; *vices* if they give *pain* (*T* 3.3.1.30). Examples of the former would be *benevolence*, *discretion*, *generosity*, *justice*, and *moderation* (*EPM* 9.12, cf. *T* 3.3.1.11); examples of the latter would be *avarice*, *cruelty*, *folly*, and *meanness*.[32] But also, there can evidently be qualities of mind that are in themselves neither virtues nor vices, either because they are morally indifferent,[33] or because their goodness or badness is context-dependent (for example, some people are naturally *cautious*, while others are more *enterprising*, and as Hume points out at *EPM* 6.9, these can be appropriate in different circumstances). So on this basis, it is entirely possible for someone to be *responsible* for an action –

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[28] Hume uses various terms for these sentiments of pleasure and pain. In the *Treatise*, he often talks of *satisfaction* and *uneasiness* (e.g. *T* 3.1.2.3-4, 11; 3.2.2.24, 3.3.1.3), whereas in the second *Enquiry*, he generally prefers *approbation* or *praise* (sometimes *esteem* or *regard*), contrasting these with *censure* or *blame* (e.g. *EPM* 9.2-9). Despite this wide range of terms, Hume repeatedly insists that these *moral* sentiments are distinctive and "of a particular kind" (*T* 3.1.2.3, cf. 3.2.5.4; 3.3.1.3, 30), as witnessed by the language that we use for them (*T* 3.2.2.5, 3.3.1.11; *EPM* 5.3, 9.6), though he later acknowledges that different virtues "produce not, all of them, the same kind of approbation" (*EPM Appx* 4.6).

[29] Russell (1995) explains the Kemp Smith link at pp. 66 and 70 n. 16, and discusses Strawson in chapter 5.

[30] See §8 of Millican (2023b).

[31] Note that Hume's notion of an action includes "actions of matter" (e.g. *A* 32, 34), and is not confined to the *voluntary* even in respect of "actions of the mind" (e.g. *T* 2.3.1.3-4, 2.3.3.8).

[32] Hume provides no convenient list of vices, but see for example *EPM Appx* 4.17-20.

[33] For example, our "ease in the view of objects, to which [we are] accustomed" (*T* 2.2.4.8).

even in Hume's more demanding sense – while no moral sentiment (either positive or negative) is appropriate in respect of that action. Hence although it seems right that agents can be an appropriate object of a Humean moral sentiment only in respect of actions for which they are *responsible*, it does not follow that responsibility implies the appropriateness of some Humean moral sentiment. If Hume recognises this, then he cannot agree with Russell that "To hold a person responsible is to regard them as the object of … a moral sentiment".

A tempting synthesis here is to understand Hume's "hypothetical liberty" as intended to provide his criterion of *responsibility for an action* (as the traditional compatibilist interpretation maintains), while understanding his *moral sentiments* as determining when a responsible action has *a moral valence*, either positive or negative (as Russell recognises). But the long quotation earlier from *T* 2.3.2.6 seems to suggest that more is required for responsibility than simply "power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will", namely that the action in question should derive from something in the agent "that is durable and constant". What, then, would Hume say of an action that arises from a sudden and capricious "determination of the will", rather than a settled desire or intention? The best evidence is given by a closely related passage from earlier in *Treatise* Book 2:

> "If that quality in another, which pleases or displeases, be constant and inherent in his person and character, it will cause love or hatred independent of the intention: But otherwise a knowledge and design is requisite, in order to give rise to these passions. One that is disagreeable by his deformity or folly is the object of our aversion, tho' … he has not the least intention of displeasing us … But if the uneasiness proceed not from a quality, but an action, which is produc'd and annihilated in a moment, 'tis necessary, in order to … connect this action sufficiently with the person, that it be deriv'd from a particular fore-thought and design. 'Tis not enough, that the action arise from the person, and have him for its immediate cause and author. This relation alone … reaches not the sensible and thinking part, and neither proceeds from any thing *durable* in him, nor leaves any thing behind it; but passes in a moment, and is as if it had never been. On the other hand, an intention shews certain qualities, which remaining after the action is perform'd, connect it with the person, …" (*T* 2.2.3.4)

To put this in context, Hume understands moral sentiments as generating *love* or *hatred* of those whose mental qualities respectively *please* or *displease* us. But here *love* and *hatred* must be understood in a distinctive sense, as passions analogous to *pride* and *humility* respectively, but directed towards someone else rather than ourselves. Thus understood, "we … may pronounce any *quality* of the mind virtuous, which causes love or pride; and any one vicious, which causes hatred or humility" (*T* 3.3.1.3).

The quoted passage from *T* 2.2.3.4 implies that to feel such a moral sentiment, the action which prompts our pleasure or displeasure must have a sufficient *connection* with the person who performs it. And the passage distinguishes, three times over, between two possible ways in which such connection can be secured, one of which apparently concerns *characteristic* behaviours, while the second concerns *specifically intended* actions. Following the textual order of the quotation, the required connection between action and person can accordingly derive *either* (1) from a quality which is "constant and inherent in his person and character" (such as deformity or folly), *or* (2) from "knowledge and design". If the sentiment does not (1) "proceed … from a quality", then the action must (2) "be deriv'd from a particular fore-thought and design". And finally, it is "not enough, that the action … have [the person]

for its immediate cause and author", because this (2) "reaches not the sensible and thinking part", and (1) "neither proceeds from any thing *durable* in him". The final (truncated) sentence in the quotation seems to be attempting to integrate these two possible sources of connection, on the basis that an intention – by its very nature – "shews certain qualities" which endure "after the action is perform'd" and thus "connect it with the person". This apparently prepares the ground for passages like *T* 2.3.2.6 which, as quoted earlier, suggests that something "durable or constant" is required for responsibility (likewise *T* 3.3.1.4 and *EHU* 8.29). But whether or not this integration is successful, it seems clear that Hume views any intentional action – one that arises from "the determinations of the will" and therefore exhibits his "hypothetical liberty" – as appropriately subject to moral responsibility and judgment. This conforms neatly with compatibilist tradition, according to which I am responsible for an action if it is subject to my voluntary control, precisely because in that case my corresponding behaviour reflects my intentions, thereby becoming an appropriate object of moral judgment. So here Hume's attitude towards the question of responsibility is more closely tied theoretically to his view of "liberty", and less thoroughly "naturalistic", than Russell claims.

None of this implies that Hume's notion of "hypothetical liberty" yields a fully adequate account of human moral freedom – for example, it ignores the issue of *compulsive* desires, such as those of an addict. But how far this is an objection to Hume himself is unclear. In pursuit of his "reconciling project" with regard to the doctrines of liberty and necessity (*EHU* 8.23), his primary aim in the crucial passage at *EHU* 8.29 (as at *T* 2.3.2.6) seems to be not to present a *sufficient* condition of responsibility, but rather a *necessary* condition in the form of appropriate mental causation, implying in particular that "chance" (e.g. libertarian free will) is incompatible with responsibility. One might reasonably take the view that Hume succeeds to this extent, while still leaving gaps within his theory of responsibility.

A more serious objection to Hume's theory arises from the apparent suggestion at *T* 2.2.3.4 that an attribution of responsibility can arise not only with regard to an intentional action, but also an action that manifests a mental quality such as "folly" which in no way reflects a person's desires or intentions. This fits with the claim quoted from *T* 3.3.1.3 that "we … may pronounce any *quality* of the mind virtuous, which causes love or pride; and any one vicious, which causes hatred or humility". It also fits with Hume's extensively argued claim – especially in Appendix 4 of the second *Enquiry*, entitled "Of some verbal disputes" – that there is no clear boundary between *virtues* and *talents*, or between *vices* and *defects*.[34] But it is far from clear that this idiosyncratic theory faithfully reflects our natural judgments, and we might well be sceptical of Hume's claim that "the distinction of voluntary or involuntary was little regarded by the ancients in their moral reasonings",[35] and his suggestion that the modern emphasis on this distinction derives primarily from *theological* concerns (*EPM Appx* 4.20-21). On the contrary, it seems eminently "natural" to distinguish morally between actions that manifest a malevolent intention, and those – possibly equally harmful – that arise from ignorant foolishness. Our

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[34] Hume remarks at *EPM Appx* 4.1 (see also *T* 3.3.4.1-4) that drawing such distinctions is a merely "grammatical enquiry", which he generally side-steps in the second *Enquiry* by talking of "personal merit" rather than "virtue".

[35] Consider, for example, the emphasis that Aristotle gives to this distinction in Book III of his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

own such actions might afterwards cause us shame and humility of equal intensity, but we would draw a distinction between these two categories even in our own case, and would typically view them entirely differently when considering the actions of others.[36] So here I suspect that Hume is being led astray by disproportionate attachment to his own distinctive theory, which treats *pride* and *humility* – taken to be parallel to *love* and *hate* – as criteria of virtue and vice, and identifies forward-looking *utility* (without regard to retrospective *desert*) as a central unifying principle.[37]

If this diagnosis is correct, then it suggests that once again – as in his account of responsible *action* – Hume's theory is being shaped as least as much by theoretical considerations as by appeal to natural instinct. Certainly it claims a solid empirical basis in the passions – and thus exhibits *explanatory naturalism* – but there seems little trace so far of *justificatory naturalism*. One such trace does emerge, however, in the penultimate paragraph of the first *Enquiry*'s section "Of liberty and necessity":

> "The mind of man is so formed by nature, that, upon the appearance of certain characters … and actions, it immediately feels the sentiment of approbation or blame; … The characters, which engage our approbation, are chiefly such as contribute to the peace and security of human society; as the characters, which excite blame, are chiefly such as tend to public detriment and disturbance: Whence it may reasonably be presumed, that the moral sentiments arise … from a reflection on these opposite interests. What though philosophical meditations [e.g. regarding God's infinite perfection] establish a different opinion or conjecture; that every thing is right with regard to the WHOLE, and that the qualities, which disturb society, are, in the main, as beneficial, … as those which more directly promote its happiness and welfare? Are such remote and uncertain speculations able to counterbalance the sentiments, which arise from the natural and immediate view of the objects? A man who is robbed of a considerable sum; does he find his vexation for the loss any wise diminished by these sublime reflections? Why then should his moral resentment against the crime be supposed incompatible with them? [The] … distinction between vice and virtue … [is] founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind: And these sentiments are not to be controuled or altered by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever." (*EHU* 8.35)

Here we see a line of thought later wielded by Strawson, to argue that the thesis of determinism could not plausibly undermine our "thoroughgoing and deeply rooted" commitment to inter-personal relationships and the reactive attitudes that partly constitute them (1962, pp. 197, 203). Strawson explicitly employs this as an anti-sceptical move, and draws a comparison with "the question of the justification of induction". Just as "The human commitment to inductive belief-formation is original, natural, non-rational (not *ir*rational), in no way something we choose or could give up", so "the general framework of [reactive] attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society", and

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[36] Thus a capable worker who deliberately causes a serious accident (e.g. in air traffic control or a nuclear installation) would be treated very differently from an obviously incompetent worker who inadvertently causes such an accident (where blame would attach far more to those who unwisely put him in that position). Intermediate in blameworthiness between these would be a potentially competent worker who is himself negligent or reckless. Another point worth noting here is that virtues and vices can be manifested not only through voluntary actions but also through involuntary *reactions* (e.g. facial expressions or laughter). Such manifestations might indeed affect our judgment of people's character, but we would not usually view them as having the same moral gravity as deliberate actions.

[37] Russell's insightful discussion of these issues, which recognises the implausibility of attributing blame to involuntary mental defects such as folly or stupidity, likewise attributes Hume's error in part to his "utilitarian framework of analysis" (1995, pp. 126 and 128). In the subsequent chapter 10, Russell starts by highlighting the tension between forward-looking (utilitarian) and backward-looking (retributive sentimentalist) elements of Hume's account of punishment (pp. 137-8), going on to argue that these can nevertheless be brought together within a rich and distinctive theory (p. 150).

as such, "it neither calls for, nor permits, an external 'rational' justification" (p. 208). Here – with the reactive attitudes – Strawson's "nature defeats scepticism" strategy perhaps comes closest to Hume's own philosophy, though Strawson himself does not mention this parallel.[38]

6. The External World as a Natural Belief (à la Kemp Smith or Strawson)?

We finally come to the Humean discussion which, more than any other, lends itself to a "natural belief" interpretation, combining forthright scepticism with equally forthright acknowledgement that nature nevertheless compels belief. In the *Treatise*, particularly, Hume repeatedly states that the belief in the continued and distinct existence of body is both *clearly false in its vulgar form*, but nevertheless *psychologically universal and almost irresistible in that form*:

The vulgar belief in external objects is clearly false

> "the vulgar *suppose* their perceptions to be their only objects, and at the same time *believe* the continu'd existence of matter … yet a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion … we quickly perceive, that the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience" (*T* 1.4.2.43-4)

> "Whoever wou'd explain the origin of the common opinion concerning the continu'd and distinct existence of body … must proceed upon the supposition, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue to exist even when they are not perceiv'd. Tho' this opinion be false, 'tis the most natural of any, and has alone any primary recommendation to the fancy." (*T* 1.4.2.48)

> "a little reflection destroys this conclusion, that our perceptions have a continu'd existence, by shewing that they have a dependent one" (*T* 1.4.2.50)

This vulgar belief is nevertheless psychologically universal and almost irresistible

> "The persons, who entertain this opinion concerning the identity of our resembling perceptions, are in general all the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind, (that is, all of us, at one time or other) and consequently such as suppose their perceptions to be their only objects" (*T* 1.4.2.36)

> "'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence. 'Tis also certain, that this very perception or object is suppos'd to have a continu'd uninterrupted being, and neither to be annihilated by our absence, nor to be brought into existence by our presence." (*T* 1.4.2.38)

> "philosophers … immediately upon leaving their closets, mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue identically and uninterruptedly the same in all their interrupted appearances" (*T* 1.4.2.53)

But this is not enough to show that Hume views the belief in body as a Kemp-Smithian "natural belief",

[38] For brief but illuminating discussion of this strategy in both Hume and Strawson, see Russell (1995, pp. 75-77; pp. 82-3, n. 9), and at greater length on Strawson in particular, Russell (1992). I have benefited greatly from Russell's writings on free will and responsibility, and personal discussion with him. I am also very grateful to James Chamberlain, Rachel Cohon, Don Garrett, John Hyman, and Elizabeth Radcliffe for helpful discussion of the issues in this section.

or as inviting a Strawsonian "naturalist" response to scepticism. For either of these positions would require that Hume sees the belief's naturalness or irresistibility as *vindicating* it against scepticism, and this is not at all the impression he gives in the penultimate paragraph of the section:

> "I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou'd be the conclusion, I shou'd draw from the whole of my reasoning. But to be ingenuous, I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence. I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. … 'Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and 'tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions … are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses. … What … can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood?" (*T* 1.4.2.56)

Hume is here referring back to the section's initial paragraph, part of which (as we saw in §1 above) Strawson quotes as exhibiting his favoured style of naturalism:

> "the sceptic … must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings." (*T* 1.4.2.1)

If this had been Hume's *conclusion* in the section, it might have given support to the Strawsonian interpretation. But the despairing summing-up at *T* 1.4.2.56 makes it hard to interpret Hume as feeling comfortable – or even barely satisfied – with the Strawsonian response. Admittedly Hume goes on in the final paragraph of the section to recommend "Carelessness and in-attention" as affording us a "remedy" (*T* 1.4.2.57). But this last resort seems quite a long way from the complacent "neglect" of sceptical arguments that Strawson apparently advocates on the considered basis that such arguments can be seen as "idle" and "powerless against … our naturally implanted disposition to belief". Such complacent neglect also fails to take into account the seriousness of the problems that it is attempting to ignore, which concern not just the *lack of justification* of some otherwise legitimate belief, but rather, a fundamentally confused pseudo-belief composed of vivid but incoherent "fictions", which result from attributing identity to sequences of distinct perceptions (*T* 1.4.2.42-3).[39] It might be plausible for us to rest content with the Humean approach to *inductive scepticism* described in §3 above, maintaining our default belief in inductive uniformity because we see no reason not to do so. But it is far less plausible to rest content with what we know to be a bogus belief exhibiting confusion and incoherence.

[39] Note also the conceptual problems – involving the Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities – that emerge two sections later in *Treatise* 1.4.4, summed up in the final paragraph which begins: "Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body." (*T* 1.4.4.15).

Hume himself, indeed, seems not to have rested content with such confusion, because his discussion in the first *Enquiry* is very different. Now is not the time to discuss this in detail, but a sketch will suffice for the main points. First, Hume continues to attribute the same vulgar belief:

> "It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct …, to repose faith in their senses; and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe, which depends not on our perception, … It seems also evident, that, when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other." (*EHU* 12.7-8)

Also as in the *Treatise*, the vulgar view is easily seen to be false, but now a representative theory of perception – the alternative "philosophical" view which was attacked very forcefully in the *Treatise* (at 1.4.2.46-52) – is surprisingly described as something that "no man, who reflects, ever doubted":

> "But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed … The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: But the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: It was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent." (*EHU* 12.9)

In a more sceptical vein, Hume goes on to say – as in the *Treatise* though far less emphatically – that such a "new system" runs contrary to the "irresistible instinct of nature" and cannot be justified by argument (*EHU* 12.10). He then presents, in elegantly condensed form, the argument from *T* 1.4.2.47, that no causal inference can enable us to infer objects from perceptions:

> "It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: How shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning." (*EHU* 12.12)

The first sentence here, however, is significant: *if it is indeed "a question of fact"* whether external objects exist, then at least it cannot be *contradictory*, and this seems to be a crucial difference from *Treatise* 1.4.2, where as noted above, the belief in external objects involved incoherent "fictions" in which identity was falsely ascribed to sequences of distinct perceptions.[40] In his summing-up of the *Enquiry* discussion a few paragraphs later, Hume reinforces this change of view by implying that nothing in this sceptical argument "represents [the] opinion [of external existence] as contrary to reason" (*EHU* 12.16). The same does not apply, however, to the Berkeleian argument at *EHU* 12.15 (inherited with variations from *Treatise* 1.4.4), which aims to refute the "modern" conception of objects as possessing

[40] A related difference is that the *Enquiry* avoids the dubious view repeatedly expressed in the *Treatise*, that "one of the essential qualities of identity [is] *invariableness*" (*T* 1.4.2.31, cf. 1.4.3.2 and 1.4.6.6); indeed the *Enquiry* does not discuss identity at all.

primary qualities but not secondary. This discussion in Part 1 of *Enquiry* 12 ends on an ambiguous note, apparently leaving open the possibility that we can maintain a coherent belief in material objects if we conceive of them indeterminately, as "a certain unknown, inexplicable *something* [which is] the cause of our perceptions." (*EHU* 12.16).[41] But perhaps this rather vacuous but natural-instinct-satisfying belief can be understood as falling within the scope of Hume's discussion at *EHU* 12.23 (the final paragraph of Part 2), which as we saw in §3 above can be read as recommending default acceptance of our natural faculties (in accord with *EHU* 12.3). If so, this may be the closest Hume gets to a Strawsonian "naturalist" response to a sceptical problem.

7. Rejecting the "Nature defeats Scepticism" Narrative

To conclude, we have seen good reason to doubt the superficially attractive narrative that interprets Hume's epistemology as centred around some general relationship between *scepticism* and *naturalism*. Of the four topics that we have examined, only two – induction and the external world – are treated at all sceptically by Hume (and the former only in the first *Enquiry*). In both of these cases, the sceptical concerns arise from Hume's *explanatory naturalism*, in the form of his empirical investigation into the foundation of our relevant beliefs (in unobserved matters of fact and external bodies respectively). But these sceptical concerns are significantly different, with induction turning out to be based on an assumption of ongoing uniformity that cannot be independently justified but is otherwise entirely *coherent*, while our beliefs in external bodies turn out to be unjustified, clearly false (at least in their naïve natural form), and moreover fundamentally *incoherent*. Hume's response to these concerns is also correspondingly different. In response to inductive scepticism, he offers plausible reasons to rest content with the uniformity assumption and to adopt a systematic inductive methodology. But in response to scepticism about external bodies, he falls back on "carelessness and in-attention", ignoring all the sceptical concerns and allowing our natural instincts to maintain beliefs that we would have to reject if we focused on them rationally.

Perhaps this slightly overstates the contrast between the two topics, because Hume's defence of the uniformity assumption occurs only in the *Enquiry*, while his appeal to "carelessness and in-attention" occurs only in the *Treatise*. There are, indeed, signs in the *Enquiry* that Hume sees belief in "uniform and independent" external bodies as potentially coherent after all, something that "no man, who reflects, ever doubted", involving the supposition of "a certain unknown, inexplicable *something* as the cause of our perceptions; …" (*EHU* 12.16). But any commitment to this as a positive outcome is at best muted, because the sentence finishes by describing the supposed notion as "so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it". And if Hume did indeed intend this approach to provide a resolution along the same lines as he later proposes far more explicitly in the case of induction (at *EHU* 12.22-23), then it would represent a fundamental move away from the *Treatise* account, in relying on "the obvious dictates of reason" and abstract reflection, rather than resorting to that "carelessness and

[41] Such a conception looks close to what Hume in the *Treatise* had called a "relative idea" (*T* 1.2.6.9). For brief discussion of the tantalising final paragraph of *Enquiry* Section 12 Part 1, see Millican (2016), p. 100.

in-attention" which allows our natural associative tendencies to continue seducing us into naïve acceptance of confused and incoherent fictions. Either way, the neat story of scepticism defeated by irresistible natural belief, as urged by both Kemp Smith and Strawson, fails to provide a convincing unified narrative of Hume's position on induction and the external world.

Moreover – as I shall now explain – any such unified narrative cannot easily embrace Hume's "scepticism with regard to reason" or his theory of personal identity, the other two topics that are most prominent in *Treatise* Book 1 Part 4, "Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy". Admittedly the first of these – in *Treatise* 1.4.1 – coheres closely with Hume's sceptical account of the belief in body as presented in the following section, and indeed his famous appeal to "carelessness and in-attention" at the end of the *Treatise* 1.4.2 apparently applies to both discussions:

> "'Tis impossible upon any system to defend *either our understanding or senses*; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. … Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy." (*T* 1.4.2.57, emphasis added)

The sceptical argument of *T* 1.4.1 plays a massive role in the *Treatise*, provoking the "very dangerous dilemma" that threatens Hume's entire project in the conclusion of Book 1, by supposedly showing "that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life" (*T* 1.4.7.6-7). As Hume goes on to explain (alluding here to *T* 1.4.1.10),

> "We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things".

So here it is the natural *weakness* of our rational ability that saves us from scepticism, which indeed conforms to the "nature defeats scepticism" narrative.[42]

But the problem with extending the narrative in this way is that Hume's "scepticism with regard to reason" entirely disappears from the first *Enquiry*, and I believe there is compelling evidence that this happened because he came to appreciate that the argument of *T* 1.4.1 is fundamentally flawed. One notable contrast between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* is the extent to which Hume illustrates his *Enquiry* arguments with examples, which are strikingly lacking in the *Treatise*. But if he tried to do this with his "scepticism with regard to reason", then he must have failed, because that argument retains plausibility only when expounded at a high level of abstraction, relying on a hand-waving "and so on" (*T* 1.4.1.6)

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[42] That narrative also fits well with the quotations from *T* 1.4.1.7 and 1.4.1.8 used by Strawson to make his case (and 1.4.1.8 also by Stroud), as quoted in §1 above. Despite quoting more from this section that any other, Strawson only briefly alludes to the argument it contains, as "that total skepticism which, arguing from the fallibility of human judgment, would tend to undermine all belief and opinion" (1985, p. 11). The argument is also downplayed by Kemp Smith (1941, pp. 357-63), and barely mentioned by Stroud in a footnote (1977, p. 268, n. 14). Yet one might reasonably expect it to feature strongly in any would-be overall account of scepticism in the *Treatise*, especially one that emphasises the "nature defeats scepticism" narrative. Another important section largely ignored by all three authors is the prominent and perplexing Conclusion of *Treatise* Book 1, which none of them addresses directly. Kemp (1941) merely quotes from it occasionally (1.4.7.1-3 at p. 10; 1.4.7.3 at pp. 211, 445, 459; 1.4.7.9 at p. 544; 1.4.7.11 and 14 at p. 131); Stroud (1977) even less (1.4.7.9-10 and 13 at p. 115-6; 1.4.7.12 at p. 249); but Strawson not at all.

to persuade us that an infinite regress is inevitable.[43] At any rate, there is no trace of this argument in the *Enquiry*, where Hume thus avoids entirely the "dangerous dilemma" which led to the extreme scepticism of the *Treatise*, giving us every reason to expect that his scepticism will now be far more "mitigated", as indeed turns out to be the case in Section 12 Part 3. The narrative of irrefutable scepticism defeated by nature and careless inattention thus loses one of its key exhibits.

Hume's account of personal identity (in *Treatise* 1.4.6) is also omitted from the *Enquiry*, though in this case his dissatisfaction with it is explicitly proclaimed in the *Appendix* to the *Treatise* which was published, along with Book 3, in 1740 (*T Appx*.10). This was another discussion linking closely with Hume's account of the belief in body, in that our concept of personal identity likewise turns out to be a confused "fiction" arising from the similarity of feeling between "That action of the imagination, by which we consider [an] uninterrupted and invariable object and that by which we reflect on [a] succession of related objects" (*T* 1.4.6.6, cf. 1.4.2.34). This would nicely fit the story of nature leading us into a belief with dubious credentials, but Hume does not seem to consider personal identity to be a comparably *sceptical* topic, for he says at *T* 1.4.5.1 that his account of "The intellectual world … is not perplex'd with any such contradictions, as those we have discover'd in the natural" (a hope to which he refers back when introducing his more pessimistic reassessment in the *Appendix*). So yet again we see that it is problematic to view the "nature defeats scepticism" narrative as a broad – let alone comprehensive – theme in Hume's philosophy.

Moving on now to causation and responsibility, the two remaining topics of the four that we have considered in relative detail, we saw in §4 and §5 respectively that Hume's treatments of these are constructive rather than sceptical, and hence present no role for *justificatory naturalism* of the anti-sceptical variety. But both – in their own way – exhibit *explanatory naturalism*, by highlighting the role of human nature in our thinking as revealed by Hume's empirical method. And his treatment of moral responsibility in particular also involves an element of *sentimentalist naturalism*, though I have suggested that strictly this does not play a role in the ascription of *responsibility* as such, but rather, in the ascription of *praise* or *blame*, both of which presuppose responsibility. Here our non-rational *moral sentiments* become crucial, but again, appealing to such sentiments is simply part of Hume's positive moral theory, and he exploits their *anti-sceptical* potential only as an afterthought, denying the power of theological speculation (which he does not endorse) to shift our natural reactive attitudes. This is not a case of naturalism defending Hume himself against a sceptical threat.

Overall, therefore, the idea that the central thrust of Hume's epistemology can usefully be characterised in terms of "nature" overcoming "scepticism" is fundamentally mistaken. There is no such consistent narrative to be found.

[43] See Millican (2018), especially §9, for a full account of these matters.

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