

Hume, Naturalism and Scepticism

Hume, Naturalism and Scepticism: Rejecting an Influential Narrative

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1. Humean “Naturalism”, from Kemp Smith to Strawson

Norman Kemp Smith “The Naturalism of Hume” (*Mind*, 1905); *The Philosophy of David Hume* (Macmillan, 1941)

Barry Stroud *Hume* (1977), ch. X, “Problems and Prospects of Humean Naturalism”

Paul Russell “On the Naturalism of Hume’s ‘Reconciling Project’” (*Mind*, 1983); *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume’s Way of Naturalising Responsibility* (OUP, 1995)

P. F. Strawson “Freedom and Resentment” (*Proc. Brit. Acad.*, 1962); *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (OUP, 1985)

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Norman Kemp Smith on Hume

- “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)
- “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. His 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).

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Barry Stroud on Hume

- “[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’ [7 1.4.1.8].” (1977, pp. 10-11)
- Hume is “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” (1977, p. 222).

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Paul Russell on Hume

- “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.” (1995, p. 58)
- “The overall resemblance between Hume’s and Strawson’s [‘Freedom and Resentment’] strategy in dealing with issues of freedom and responsibility is quite striking. ... they agree ... that we cannot understand the nature and conditions of moral responsibility without reference to the crucial role that moral sentiment plays in this sphere. ... 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 theory of responsibility. ... the problem of freedom is best understood through a naturalistic approach to the problem of responsibility.” (1995, p. 81)

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Peter Strawson on Hume

- “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.” (1985, p. 13).
- But reason still has 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. (Here we may recall and adapt that famous remark about Reason and the passions.) 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.” (1985, p. 14).

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Strawson's Quotations (underlined)

- On pp. 11-15, Strawson quotes from three paragraphs within Hume's *Treatise* to support his interpretation. Two of these are from *Treatise* 1.4.1, "Of scepticism with regard to reason":

– "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable 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)

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– "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)

- The other is from *Treatise* 1.4.2, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses":

– "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)

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

- **Inductive Scepticism:** Strawson sees "our inescapable natural commitment" as rendering this "idle".
- **Causation as a Natural Belief:** Kemp Smith takes belief in objective causality to be one of the two basic Humean "natural beliefs", grounded on instinct and "thus removed beyond ... sceptical doubts".
- **Free Will and Responsibility:** Russell understands Humean ascriptions of responsibility to be founded on our "reactive attitudes" rather than metaphysics.
- **Scepticism about the External World:** Also "idle", according to Strawson, while belief in external objects is the second of Kemp Smith's "natural beliefs".

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2(a) Explanatory Naturalism

- 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.
- This obviously combines easily with *ontological naturalism*, in the sense of scepticism about the existence of such exotic entities and powers.

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2(b) Biological Naturalism

- 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 with sections on "the reason of animals" (1.3.16), "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. And 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).

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2(c) Anti-Supernaturalism

- Several of Hume's works argue vigorously, albeit often indirectly, against the supposed evidence for "invisible intelligent powers", i.e. supernatural *agents* such as gods or spirits. 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", and many of his writings – both published and private – evince hostility to any such belief, and 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".

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2(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, by answering, avoiding or otherwise neutralising sceptical objections against them.
 - One example is Strawson's view, 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." (1983, p. 13).

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2(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).

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The Agenda of This Talk

- I take it to be uncontroversial that Hume's work strongly exhibits *explanatory naturalism*, *biological naturalism*, and *anti-supernaturalism*. But how far does Hume's treatment of the four itemised topics:
 - Inductive scepticism
 - Causation
 - Free will and responsibility
 - Scepticism about the external worldactually exemplify *justificatory naturalism* and/or *sentimentalist naturalism*, as claimed by Kemp Smith, Strawson, and Russell?

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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 a stage in his quest to identify the impression of necessary connexion (which runs from T 1.3.2.11 to 1.3.14.20).
 - At T 1.3.6.11, Hume stresses the inability of reason "to prove ... a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those [as yet unobserved]". But this is followed not by sceptical anxiety, but instead 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).

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Inductive Scepticism in the *Enquiry*

- In the first *Enquiry* of 1748, Hume's discussion of induction (in Section 4) is titled "Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding".
- In Section 12, the famous sceptical argument is put into the mouth of the sceptic:
 - "The sceptic ... seems to have ample matter of triumph; while he justly insists, ... 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 ... seems, for the time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction." (EHU 12.22)

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Outline of a Humean Strategy

1. We obviously cannot justify our faculties *antecedently*, as this would require use of those faculties (EHU 12.3).
2. Hence only *consequent* scepticism is worth taking seriously, when our researches reveal the fallaciousness of our mental faculties (EHU 12.5).
3. But the sceptical argument about induction does not show that induction is fallacious; it only shows that we cannot independently justify the fundamental assumption of uniformity that it presupposes (EHU 12.22).
4. It also shows that we cannot infer to the unobserved except by relying on that assumption, because non-arbitrary a priori inference is impossible (EHU 4.4-11).
5. So the rational course is to accept the assumption, and the sceptic cannot persuade us otherwise (EHU 12.23).

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Default Acceptance of Our Faculties

"There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. 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, that are self-evident and convincing: 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)

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Justificatory Naturalism in the *Enquiry*?

"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 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. [The] PYRRHONIAN ... will ... 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" (EHU 12.23)

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Inductive Bootstrapping

- If custom is our primary belief-forming mechanism, is irresistible (at least in "obvious" cases), vital to our survival and daily life, and if the sceptic can give no strong argument against it, then:
 - We can use induction to *refine* our own use of induction: to discover what more sophisticated methods actually work in practice (e.g. controlled experiments, careful measurement, confining our enquiries to some subjects rather than others).
 - All this is more sophisticated than Strawson's simple appeal to irresistibility. But perhaps it would count as a "naturalistic" justification of Hume's rules etc.?

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

- "[The] doctrine of natural belief is one of the most essential, and perhaps the most characteristic doctrine in Hume's philosophy." (1941, p. 86)
- Kemp Smith sees Hume as acknowledging two such *natural beliefs*, in:
 - "the continuing and therefore independent existence" of objects (1941, pp. 116 n., 222, 455, 490)
 - "causal connexion" (1905, p. 167; 1941, pp. 222, 486) or "causal dependence" (1941, pp. 116 n., 455, 483)

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What Exactly is the Supposed "Natural Belief" in Causation?

- A commitment to "the existence of 'secret' causes, acting independently of our experience" (1905, p. 152)
- That "bodies ... are causally operative upon one another" or "causally active" (1941, pp. 124, 543)
- "That nothing can come into existence save through a pre-existent cause" (1905, p. 167)
- "[T]he necessity of events always being caused" (1941, p. 409)

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Scepticism about the "Doctrine"

- Hume never uses the term "natural belief", despite Kemp Smith's repeated assertions to the contrary (1941, pp. 114, 120, 222, 447).
- Hume's treatment of causation, in contrast with his discussion of the external world, *is not sceptical*:
 - He seeks the "impression of necessary connexion" to clarify our conceptual understanding.
 - He positively identifies that impression, and thereby vindicates the corresponding idea (again, a contrast with our confused "fictions" of external bodies).
 - He draws positive conclusions from this identification (definitions, corollaries, rules etc.).

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Hume Is Not Sceptical about Causation

- “Since therefore ‘tis possible for all objects to become causes or effects to each other, it may be proper to fix some general rules, by which we may know *when they really are so*.” (T 1.3.15.2, my emphasis – this section presents the rules to which Strawson refers at p. 14)
- “philosophers ... remark, that upon an exact scrutiny, a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes, and proceeds from their mutual hindrance and opposition.” (T 1.3.12.5, copied at EHU 8.13)
- “all objects, which are found to be constantly conjoin’d, are upon that account only to be regarded as causes and effects” (T 1.4.5.32)

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What About the Causal Maxim?

- In *Treatise* 1.3.3, Hume considers the Causal Maxim, that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*, concluding that this cannot be proved either by intuition or demonstration. So might this be what Kemp Smith has in mind as Hume’s “natural belief” about causation?
 - But in correspondence, Hume more than once explicitly denied being sceptical about the Maxim.
 - Moreover, T 1.3.3.9 corroborates his claim that he had been intending to argue that the Maxim can be “supported by *moral Evidence*” (LFG 26).

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

- Hume (uncontroversially) takes moral judgements to be founded on sentiment. The question here is whether he takes *responsibility* to be so founded.
- His virtue-ethical theory maintains that we judge behaviour morally in terms of the *qualities of mind or character* that the relevant actions evince.
- And we judge these qualities of mind by their *general tendencies*, approving of beneficial outcomes and disapproving of bad. In the *Treatise*, this involves a mechanism of “sympathy”, whereby we come to share others’ pains and pleasures.

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- Paul Russell (1995) emphasises “The Naturalism of Hume’s Reconciling Project” (ch. 4), and draws close parallels with “Strawson’s Reconciling Project” (ch. 5).

- He contrasts Hume’s *sentimentalist* approach with the metaphysical approach of “classic compatibilists” such as Ayer, who have understood responsibility instead in terms of some account of free will, e.g.:
 - “it is not, I think, causality that freedom is to be contrasted with, but constraint. ... If I am constrained, I do not act freely. ... An obvious instance is the case in which I am compelled by another person to do what he wants. ... the compulsion need not be such as to deprive one of the power of choice. ... [But] if ... no reasonable person would be expected to choose the other alternative, then the action that I am made to do is not one for which I am held to be morally responsible.” (Ayer 1954, pp. 278-9)

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Hume’s “Hypothetical Liberty”

- Hume famously defines *liberty* within his compatibilist “reconciling project” in the first *Enquiry*:

“By liberty, ... we can only mean a *power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we chuse to remain at rest, we may; if we chuse to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains. Here then is no subject of dispute.” (EHU 8.23)

Hume is commonly interpreted similarly to Ayer, taking freedom to be absence of *constraint*:

“if the definition [of cause] above mentioned be admitted; liberty, when opposed to necessity, not to constraint, is the same thing with chance; which is universally allowed to have no existence” (EHU 8.25)

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“the idea of necessity [seems] to imply something of force, and violence, and constraint, of which we are not sensible ... the liberty of *spontaneity*, as it is call’d in the schools, ... [is] that which is oppos’d to violence [rather than] negation of necessity ...” (T 2.3.2.1)

“as actions are objects of our moral sentiment, so far only as they are indications of the internal character, passions, and affections; it is impossible that they can give rise either to praise or blame, where they proceed not from these principles, but are derived altogether from external violence.” (EHU 8.31)

- I agree with Russell that Hume’s position is very different from Ayer’s, but *not* that he is severing the link between freedom and responsibility, in order to replace it with a sentimentalist account.

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- When Hume speaks of “violence” in these last-quoted passages, he seems to mean *physical force acting on one’s body* to produce an involuntary movement (e.g. “he violently pushed my hand onto the lever”), rather than something *threatened to generate a motive* (e.g. “I had to push the lever, for fear of violence”).
- Likewise when Hume talks of “constraint”, he seems to mean a *physical constraint such as a straitjacket, chains, or prison walls*, which prohibits any voluntary movement, rather than a threat or a *non-physical limitation on one’s behaviour* (e.g. “I was constrained by the need for secrecy, and the fear of reprisal”).

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Hypothetical Liberty and Responsibility

- Hume’s description of hypothetical liberty ...

“a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is, if we chuse to remain at rest, we may; if we chuse to move, we also may” (EHU 8.23)

... with “power” interpreted in broadly *physical* terms, suggests an account of responsibility:

I am responsible for action A if my situation is such that, whether I choose to do A or to refrain from A, I shall be able to carry through that choice.

- Note that this says nothing about the causation of my volition – so it is entirely compatibilist.

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Responsibility Need Not Imply Blame

- Consider the case where a gangster threatens me with a gun and orders me to apply my thumb to open my employer’s digital cash register ...

Ayer’s view:

I am *not blameworthy* for complying with the gangster’s order, because I am acting under constraint, which removes moral freedom and thus moral responsibility.

Humean view:

I am *morally responsible* for complying with the gangster’s order, because I am acting according to the determination of my will. But I need not be *blameworthy*, because in the circumstances, *that action was (arguably) not wrong*.

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- So on a Humean theory, Moral *responsibility* – which depends on “hypothetical liberty” (what Russell considers a *metaphysical* account) – need not imply moral *virtue* or moral *vice* – which is judged on the basis of moral *sentiments*. Suppose we have an action which exhibits some quality of mind ...

<i>kindness</i>	⇒	approval	⇒	virtue
<i>sadism</i>	⇒	disapproval	⇒	vice
<i>caution</i>	⇒	indifferent	⇒	?

- It is one thing to be *responsible* for an action; another for it to have a *moral valence*, either positive or negative. Moral sentiments bear on the latter question, not necessarily on the former. Thus Hume’s account can combine both a “metaphysical” and a “sentimentalist” element, without the two conflicting here.

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Sentiment Defeating Metaphysics?

- Hume does, however, defend responsibility against metaphysical worries by appeal to *sentimentalism*:

A man, who is robbed of a considerable sum; does he find his vexation for the loss any wise diminished by these sublime reflections [about a divine plan etc.]? Why then should his moral resentment against the crime be supposed incompatible with them? (EHU 8.35)

- If morality is founded on *emotions* that naturally arise within us in certain circumstances, then we shouldn’t expect these emotions to disappear just because we reflect on the [divinely ordained] chain of causation that led to the criminal’s action.

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

- Hume implies that the belief in continued and distinct existence of body is clearly false in its vulgar form:

“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 ... is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion ... [which] is contrary to the plainest experience” (T 1.4.2.43-4)

“... the common opinion concerning the continu’d and distinct existence of body ... [supposes] 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)

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- The belief is nevertheless psychologically universal and almost irresistible in that form:

"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)" (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." (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)

"I ... take it for granted, whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is ... an external ... world" (T 1.4.2.57)

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- To be a Kemp-Smithian "natural belief", Hume must see this irresistibility as a *vindication*. But having started the discussion like this ...

"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)

- he finishes far more negatively:

"I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, ... But ... 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 ... 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)

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Carelessness and Inattention: A Naturalistic "Remedy"?

"As long as our attention is bent upon the subject, the philosophical and study'd principle may prevail; but the moment we relax our thoughts, nature will display herself, and draw us back to our former opinion." (T 1.4.2.51 cf. 53)

"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. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it aways encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy." (T 1.4.2.57)

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The External World in the *Enquiry*

"It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct ..., to repose faith in their senses; ... 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)

"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, ... 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)

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"It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them". But we never experience the requisite constant conjunction (as we have no direct acquaintance with the supposed objects), and hence cannot argue from one to another. So "The supposition of such a connexion is ... without any foundation in reasoning." (EHU 12.12)

However, nothing in this sceptical argument "represents [the] opinion [of external existence] as contrary to reason" (EHU 12.16)

So perhaps Hume is leaving open the possibility that we can maintain a coherent belief in material objects if we conceive of matter indeterminately, as "a certain unknown, inexplicable something [which is] the cause of our perceptions." (EHU 12.16).

Could this be part of what Hume is implicitly advocating at EHU 12.3 and 12.23, where (as we saw in the case of induction) he appears to recommend default acceptance of our natural faculties?

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7. Rejecting the "Nature Defeats Scepticism" Narrative

- Hume is *sceptical* about The External World, but not about Causation or Moral Responsibility, and about Induction only in the *Enquiry*.

- Sceptical concerns about External Body and Induction both arise from Hume's *explanatory naturalism*, investigating the foundations of the relevant belief, but the two are very different:

– Inductive beliefs are credible, coherent, and based on an equally coherent assumption of uniformity.

– Beliefs in external bodies involve *incoherent* "fictions" (in *Treatise*), and are clearly false in their vulgar form.

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- There is plausibly some element of *justificatory naturalism* in Hume's response to the inductive sceptic in *Enquiry* 12, but he also gives a *reasoned response* to the sceptic there.
- In so far as "nature" saves us from scepticism about the external world in *Treatise* 1.4.2, it provides no real cure, but just a distraction (or at best a sticking-plaster over a serious wound).
- Perhaps we should look elsewhere in *Treatise* 1.4 for sceptical discussions to support the narrative? If so, the two strongest candidates seem to be Hume's "Scepticism with Regard to Reason" and "Of Personal Identity" ...

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Scepticism with Regard to Reason

- A corrosively sceptical argument in *Treatise* 1.4.1, provoking the "very dangerous dilemma" in the Book's conclusion (1.4.7.6-7).

"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" (*T* 1.4.7.7, alluding to *T* 1.4.1.10)
- The famous appeal to "carelessness and inattention" applies to both *T* 1.4.1 and 1.4.2:

"'Tis impossible upon any system to defend *either our understanding or senses*; ... Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy." (*T* 1.4.2.57)

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- So does this give additional support to the "nature defeats scepticism" narrative?
 - Kemp Smith, Stroud and Strawson all quote prominently from *T* 1.4.1 for this purpose (especially paragraphs 7 and 8). But they virtually ignore or downplay the actual *argument* or *conclusion* of *T* 1.4.1, and also its upshot in *T* 1.4.7 (where it is massively disruptive).
 - The argument is entirely omitted from the *Enquiry* of 1748, probably [as I argue in *Hume Studies*, 2018] because Hume realized that it is flawed. Any plausibility derives from a hand-waving "and so on" that suggests an infinite regress, but when spelled out with examples, it falls to pieces.

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Personal Identity

- Discussed in *Treatise* 1.4.6, despaired of in the 1740 *Appendix*, and omitted from the *Enquiry*.
- Has some close affinities with *T* 1.4.2:

"That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable object, and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, are almost the same to the feeling, ... The relation facilitates the transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage as smooth as if it contemplated one continu'd object. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects." (*T* 1.4.6.6, cf. 1.4.2.34)
- Yet Hume does not seem to consider this to be a *sceptical* topic (*T* 1.4.5.1).

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Conclusion

- Hume's texts show a strong commitment to *explanatory naturalism*, *biological naturalism*, and *anti-supernaturalism*. In all of these respects, he is a thoroughgoing "naturalist".
- But there is little evidence of *justificatory naturalism*, so the overall narrative that interprets his philosophy in terms of "nature" overcoming "scepticism" is fundamentally mistaken.
- Certainly his moral theory is *sentimentalist*, but even his theory of responsibility does not appear to be founded on natural sentiment.

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Some References

- *Hume's Overall Vision*: (2016), "Hume's Chief Argument", in Paul Russell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of David Hume* (Oxford University Press), pp. 82-108.
- *Induction*: (2012), "Hume's 'Scepticism' about Induction", in Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien (eds), *The Continuum Companion to Hume* (Continuum), pp. 57-103.
- *Causation*: (2009), "Hume, Causal Realism, and Causal Science", *Mind* 118, pp. 647-712. (2024), "Hume as Regularity Theorist – After All!", *Hume Studies* 49, pp. 1-62.
- *Free Will and Responsibility*: (2023), "Hume on Free Will and Moral Responsibility", in Maximilian Kiener (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Responsibility* (Routledge) pp. 68-81.
- *Scepticism with Regard to Reason*: (2018), "Hume's Pivotal Argument, and His Supposed Obligation of Reason", *Hume Studies* 44, pp. 167-208.
- All may be found at www.davidhume.org, "Scholarship" link.

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